



Fallout Equestria: Starlight

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Synopsis

When the Goddess died, the minds and souls in Unity spread out across the Alicorn race. From the ashes of her death, the Alicorns banded together and with assistance from Velvet Remedy created the Followers of the Apocalypse.

Radiant Star, a younger Alicorn and a newly initiated member of the Followers, experiences a terrifying magic that changes her body to appear similar to a certain Ministry

Mare that was part of the Goddess. But the changes do not stop there. Star soon finds that she is harboring the barest emotions and feelings of Twilight Sparkle, and is desperate to understand why.

With her fellow Follower Violet Iris in tow, Star searches for the answers she needs. Soon she will find out that her transformation will affect the entire world.

Prologue: A Radiant Star

Bad? BAD? Of course it's bad! I'm supposed to send Princess Celestia a letter every week, telling her about a lesson I've learned about friendship! Not every other week, not every 10 days, every single week!

Pain.

Everypony feels pain. It's natural of course. Pain is something we all share, whether pony or zebra. Pain is the great unifier. It brings us together in a way no other raw energy can. Pain leads to a slew of many other emotions, including anger, regret, compassion, and love. Pain can also be the result of any of these.

The truth of it is, the only real constant in this Celestia-forsaken Wasteland is pain. I suppose it's the only thing that reminds us that we're still alive, that we're still going. Pain is a powerful thing. And as of lately, I've been feeling quite a bit of that particular emotion. The only problem is, it's not my pain that I'm feeling. It's hers.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself aren't I? I'm rambling off on a tangent, as usual. I suppose I should start at the beginning.

My name is Radiant Star, and I am what is known as an alicorn. A few years ago, being an alicorn in the Wasteland was met with fear, hatred, and of course... pain. That was because of the Goddess, you see. The Goddess created us, nurtured us, and gave us Unity. That is, until she died. The Destroyer saw fit to blow up our beloved Goddess in a blaze of balefire. In the aftermath of her death, alicorns ceased being mindless beings of hate and evil and began to regain their memories. It didn't help though, we were still feared and reviled almost everywhere we went.

Then she came. A different kind of Light, our Hope. Velvet Remedy. She promised the alicorns that she would help them survive in the harsh Wasteland that shunned our kind so. She created an entire society around bringing the light of hope to those in need. She called it the "Followers of the Apocalypse." Catchy, isn't it?

I thought so, at least...

"Come on, Star!" exclaimed Violet Iris. "You're going to be late again!" The pale green colored unicorn had practically pounced on me as soon as I left my small library home. The sun was high in the sky and it appeared to be around noon. I rolled my eyes and blew her a raspberry.

"I'm not going to be late, Violet. I'm going to be *fashionably* late," I said with an air of grandiosity as I waved my hoof about. "Besides, they can't start without me anyways. I'm the guest of honor after all."

This was true. After all, it was my initiation ritual. It was the day I was going to become a full-fledged member of the Followers of the Apocalypse. You see, not everypony just got to go out and teach the world about all the good things that we could do together. No, it requires training and dedication. Eventually, there comes a day when the Followers decide that you are good enough to go out on your own. Most Followers were sent to larger cities where their message can reach a greater number of ponies. I had no real clue where I was going to go. I just knew I didn't want to.

Still, I couldn't really complain too much. I got to hang out with Violet Iris, at least. Violet was a few years younger than me, and had already been made a full Priestess of the Followers. While you might think that would mean that Violet had a lot of responsibilities and that she was a business-first type of mare, you'd be quite wrong. Violet always had a bit of a rebellious streak, and I knew just how to get her to do something silly or downright stupid.

Violet and I met after the downfall of the Goddess, just outside of Maripony. I was circling the final resting place of my former life, trying to work out how to survive in a Wasteland I barely knew through my own eyes. Violet had been part of a trading caravan that was destroyed by raiders, leaving her for dead. I

found her and cared for her until she was able to take care of herself, and she gave me a point of stability in a confusing world. I was one of the exceptions. When most alicorns lost Unity, they began to recover memories of their former life. Some had scatterings or larger pieces of their time within Unity.

I didn't. I had nothing but occasional flashes of memories that didn't belong to me. Some were even pre-war! My connection with Violet was something I came to depend on more and more as time went on. In the nice little place we hunkered down in outside of the ruins of Fillydelphia, Violet taught me how to be a pony again. It was a wonderfully peaceful time.

A few months later, a group of alicorns and unicorns appeared outside our hidey hole, preaching the word of the Apocalypse.

Violet jumped at the chance to join the Followers. I, on the other hoof, well, let's just say that, in my past life, I believe I was a slacker of the utmost professionalism. Really, I made procrastination into an art form. It'd always been Violet's responsibility to keep me on the straight and narrow. She's the reason I made it to where I was today.

Ah, Violet. Such a sweet mare she was to me. She was there for me when I felt like the world was going to end... you know, again. Figuratively ending... Again. Not literally.

Yeah.

I pondered on our history as I followed Violet through the town, not really paying attention to where I was going. My eyes drifted down to Violet's flank and her lovely cutie mark of a dark purple dragon's eye wreathed in green flame. She'd never told me how she got her cutie mark, or even what it really meant for her special talent, other than that it wasn't a very nice memory and that someday she would tell me the story. At that moment though, I really wasn't considering her cutie mark so much as her flank. It was really a lovely flank indeed, round and soft, with just the right amount of muscle to firm --

"Star, you know as well as I do that this is important. I've been trying to get them to accept that you're ready for months, now! And here you are woolgathering when it's finally time to be initiated. Let's go already!" Violet cried. "Are you even listening to me? Star? Star!"

I snapped out of my daydream and looked dully at Violet. A small bit of drool edged its way off my lips. I slurped it back quickly and as quietly as I could.

"You interrupted a highly productive daydream, I hope you know that," I said without a hint of emotion in my voice. Violet just chuckled.

"Well, silly filly, if you weren't daydreaming, you'd know that we're here," she replied. I looked up and saw the familiar sign outside the Temple of the Followers.

"Oh," I said. "Well... okay. Lead the way, I guess." Damn sexy mares and their flanks. They were always getting my mind off track. I looked at the temple as I walked into it behind Violet. It was built from a roughly-hewn stone house at the outskirts of town. It was the only place in the surrounding area that could house all the ponies who made up the membership of the Followers.

Our town was known as Fort Knowledge, which used to be a fortified storehouse where a certain purple Ministry Mare kept books and tidbits of lore and knowledge. As such, there were several libraries around the once-fortified now-makeshift town, which made the area attractive and popular for the Followers of the Apocalypse. Most of the townsfolk who lived here merely tolerate the Followers, since we helped them with problems such as water and food, and they supplied us with books and other items we used to learn, grow, and help others.

I heard muttering as I entered the main hall of the temple. The second I entered, I could feel the eyes of the Elders upon me.

"Radiant Star, thou art late to thy initiation," the head Elder, a stately pale green alicorn mare, stated from above the crowd gathered in the hall. She was standing behind a stone dais that was used for addressing the congregation.

“Umm, yeah about that... sorry. I guess I lost track of time,” I said sheepishly, giving a slight grin and hoping they wouldn’t know I just slept in that morning.

“Yes, well. In the future thou wouldst do well to remember to be on time for a change,” the Elder intoned. “However, there are more important things to discuss. Radiant Star, thou art charged with the duty and honor of becoming a full member of the Followers of the Apocalypse. With this duty, comes great responsibility to us, and to the ponies of the Wasteland. Dost thou accept this duty?”

I grimaced as I knelt before the Elder, presenting myself in a low bow.

“Yes Elder, I accept,” I said. The Elder smiled, and stepped down from the dais towards me.

“Excellent,” she said, smiling widely. “Let us begin the initiation then. Rise my dear. We shall lock horns and then all will be known to you.”

Right, the horn locking. I suppose I should explain that too. When a Follower is initiated as a full member, the presiding Elder locks horns with the new pony. This creates a magical link, which allows the Elder to share the full knowledge of the Followers. It has a lot in common with a simple information transfer, like from a terminal to a PipBuck. This brings even the newest member knowledge handed down by the Savior herself.

I picked myself up from a very compromising position and presented my horn to the Elder. The Elder lowered her own horn and brought her tip to mine.

Hello?

Is anyone there...?

I’m scared... what’s going on?

Who are you? Who am I? Where am I?

A cavalcade of emotion and strange thoughts hit me like a ton of bricks as I pulled away from the Elder. Gasps could be heard from the congregation. My brain felt strained as I slumped to the floor. My mind went black and the last thing I saw was Violet rushing towards me.

The darkness parted, and suddenly I was somewhere. A long, wide hallway, lined with wooden doors extended as far as I could see. The only light came from small torches above each door.

“Hello?” I called out. I heard my own echo call back to me, as if I was in a large cave. “Is anypony there?”

What happened to me? I was in the temple and then... I thought, trying to understand my situation. After surviving the end of Unity and the aftermath of Maripony, I was accustomed to weird. This was beyond even me, though.

One of the torches above the door to my left suddenly went out with a sizzle, and a creaking noise heralded the opening of one of the doors. I jumped away from the wooden slab, readying myself for danger.

What happened next was completely unexpected. Beyond the open door was a meadow set under a starlit sky. A rippling lake gleamed in the near distance. I cautiously entered the doorway and strode into the grass. I had never seen real grass before. Everything in our town was always muddy wasteland or scrubby mutated growth. I reached down and sniffed the grass, letting its fresh smell waft over my nostrils. It smelled really good. The indefinable healthy GREEN of the smell made me drool.

I opened my mouth and began to graze hungrily on the fresh grass. It was sweet, and a little wet. A small chuckle ahead of me forced my head immediately back into the air.

“Silly, you shouldn’t eat too much, you’ll get fat,” a tiny voice said. In the dim starlight, I could just make out a ponyshape sitting by the lake.

“Who are you? Where are we?” I asked, forgetting the sweet, sweet grass beneath my hooves for a moment and remembering my current predicament.

“We are here. As for who I am... I don’t know,” the voice said. “I only recently awoke here, so I’m not sure where ‘here’ really is either.”

“I see. Well, my name is Radiant Star,” I beamed proudly, thumping my hoof to my chest. The voice laughed again, and I noticed that I could hear it clearly. Like the pony was sitting next to me, not across a meadow.

“That’s a pretty name,” she said through her giggles. I smiled and blushed, turning aside. I started making my way towards the lake and the shape sitting by it turned out to be a filly. The young lavender unicorn was sitting by the lake, looking at her reflection upon the rippling waters.

“Are you lost, little one?” I asked as I came up beside her. She turned away from the lake, her eyes going wide as she took in my appearance.

“Wow, are you a Princess?” she asked in awe, completely ignoring my question. I laughed.

“No dear, I am most definitely not a Princess. There hasn’t been one of those in over two hundred years,” I replied. The filly looked down at the water again as her expression changed from awe to sadness. Tears began to fill her eyes.

“Oh. I just thought maybe... you look a lot like her,” the filly squeaked out through her tears.

“Her?” I asked softly.

“Princess Luna,” the filly replied, still sniffing at the air. I expected her to break out into full cry mode at any moment. Quickly, I extended my wing over the young mare. I can see why she would think I would look like one of the Goddesses. There aren’t many dark blue alicorns around.

“Shh... it’s okay little one. I’m not Luna, but I am a friend. Is that okay?” I cooed softly, holding the filly close. Kids have always been one of my favorite things, even when they’re sad. The filly’s tears stopped flowing and she managed a little smile.

“There we are,” I said as the filly looked up at me. Her eyes widened as a grin crept along her mouth. Suddenly, I began to feel unnerved by this appearance.

“Excellent,” she said, grinning profusely. “I was looking for a friend. You’re not perfect, but I guess you’ll have to do.” She opened her mouth again and the world went black.

I awoke to darkness outside, in what appeared to be our town’s hospital. From what I could tell, it was night time.

What... what happened? Did I pass out? And what was up with that creepy dream? I thought as I scanned the room for a sign of, well anything. My eyes finally rested on Violet Iris, who was sleeping peacefully on a makeshift couch at the other end of the room. I stirred in my bed, and her eyes slowly opened.

“Hey,” she said, smiling at me as she rose from the couch and made her way to my bed side. “Don’t move around too much. Doc isn’t totally sure what happened just yet, and he wants you to rest.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Once you touched horns with the Elder, you cried out, then you fell over and didn’t respond to anything,” Violet said softly.

“I don’t remember crying out... how long have I been out?” I asked.

“Umm... two days?” Violet replied sheepishly.

“What?! Two days?” I cried out, as I brought my purple hoof to my face. *Wait a second, I wasn’t purple before,* I thought.

“Violet,” I said nonchalantly. “Why am I purple?” Violet looked away with a blush and pointed to the mirror in the corner. I arose from the bed and strode over to it.

I was floored by what I saw. Where I had been proudly blue, my coat was a dark lavender. Even my wings were purple. My mane, once a crowning glory of navy waves, was straight and dark purple. A pink streak blazed its way through my mane and tail like wildfire. My eyes made their way down to my cutie mark and that is where I lost it completely.

My cutie mark was gone. Where my beautiful night star had shone against the darkness of my flank, an intricate design, a white six-pointed star surrounded by six smaller pink stars, now rested.

They later told me my screams could be heard throughout the town.

“What the fuck happened to me!?” I screamed as I was standing in front of the mirror in my room. Violet softly stepped up beside me.

“Yeah... about that. That also happened during the horn lock. You just... suddenly changed. Aside from the wings, you’re the spitting image of Twilight Sparkle,” she said.

“But why? Why me? What did I do to deserve this?” I continued to wail, until a sharp blow to my face stopped me in my tracks. I focused on Violet, who was holding her hoof against the side of my muzzle.

“Now you listen to me missy,” she snapped, her nostrils flaring and eyes flashing. “You can either wallow over this, in whatever it is alicorns are supposed to wallow in, or we can try to find out what happened and why.”

“It is an omen,” a voice behind us said. I turned, and saw the Head Elder enter my room silently. “You have been blessed my dear Radiant Star, and you have been cursed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to wrap my mind around the old crone’s riddles.

“When we locked horns, I very clearly sensed another individual’s spirit within you. I fear that my probing broke a wall that had separated this other from you,” she replied.

“Other?! Other what!!? You mean I’ve got another pony inside of me?” I cried out, confused.

“It’s the only explanation I can provide to you my dear. Somehow this spirit has changed you,” the Elder said. “What it wants, I cannot say. I am afraid I have nothing more useful for you.”

“But I don’t want to be some other color or some other pony!” I exclaimed angrily. I really don’t want to be somepony else! Even if I had only been me for a couple of years, I wanted to be me! Dammit!

“There is one group of ponies in the Wasteland who may be able to provide answers. They are known as the Twilight Society. They are a group dedicated to the late Ministry of Arcane Science. Most notably, to it’s leader, the Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle. It’s fairly obvious why they would be interested in you, dear child. And with their capabilities, they have the best chance of being able to change you... back to yourself,” the Elder said.

“Well that’s super,” I cried out. “Where are they then? Let’s get me back to being me!” I started to rush out the door, skidding to a stop at the outstretched hoof of the Elder.

“The Twilight Society is very elusive. I’m not even sure they will allow you in to see them. They are located in Tenpony Tower. We can arrange for you to leave in the morning,” the Elder continued.

“By my-myself?” I stammered as I considered the weight of such an assignment. Tenpony Tower was pretty far away from Fort Knowledge and the trip alone would be dangerous to a solitary traveler.

“Of course not, my dear. Do you think me stupid? Your friend here, Miss Iris, will be joining you. And of course, we will be providing you with the necessary supplies to make the trip,” the Elder said as Violet’s eyes went wide.

“What? You mean I have to go with her? I thought I was –” Violet began to argue. Gee, thanks Violet. Glad to know I mean so much to you.

“I feel that it is better if Miss Star is accompanied by a higher ranking Priestess. If anything, it will ensure that she will continue to keep to her studies instead of her usual laziness. Now if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to. You can pick up your equipment tomorrow morning and set out immediately,” the

Elder said as she exited the hospital room. I chuckled and playfully nudged Violet with my hoof.

“Oh come on Violet, it’ll be just like old times. Just you and me on the road,” I laughed. “What could possibly go wrong?”

Fuck me three ways from next Sunday with Luna’s horn, I thought as a bullet grazed my flank. *What could go wrong indeed?*

The one doing the shooting, a large black unicorn buck with a cutie mark of a rifle blowing a ponies head off (how these kinds of cutie marks exist, I will never know), took aim at me and fired again. Thankfully, he missed. I didn’t know whether to credit his bad aim or my dancing around. I cursed again as I levitated the small pistol provided by the Followers in front of me.

Towards the end of our first day away from Fort Knowledge, Violet and I came across a travelling caravan of traders. There was some initial shock to get over (even after the end of Unity, alicorns were still feared a lot by ponies). After some tense moments, the traders opened up their wares to us. That was when things got ugly. The traders were a front for a particularly nasty group of raiders. The idea was to act like traders and be friendly with others, and then turn around and slaughter their "customers". In the first few minutes of the firefight, Violet was hit by a particularly nasty looking mare wielding an SMG in the left leg and was lying on the ground unconscious. The mare, however, was not as lucky as I’d levitated my pistol to her eyes and gave her skull a new hole.

I glanced down at the PipBuck on my leg (another piece of equipment graciously given by our Elders for our journey) and then looked to my E.F.S. (or Eyes-Forward-Sparkle for all you technical jargon folks). Five red blips, all around us. The rifle-wielding unicorn buck, two earth pony bucks wielding semi-automatic pistols in their mouths, and two earth pony mares with custom battle saddles with combat shotguns. I glared at the unicorn buck, giving him as much of a death stare as I could possibly muster.

“Looke here lads, this one’s got some fire in her,” he crowed triumphantly. I snorted violently. “Never thought I’d get the chance to take down one of you monsters.”

“You’re one to talk. You raiders are all the monsters here, killing just for the fun of it,” I managed to squeak out through the pain. The leader of the raiders chuckled heavily.

“Oh that’s funny, considering not too long ago you lot were just Red Eye’s little bitches, enslaving ponies for your fucked up ‘Unity’,” he said vehemently. “Now you’re what, supposedly the saviors of the Wasteland? Bullshit I say. You’re just another monster in the Wastes that deserves death.”

That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I growled and launched myself at the raider’s leader, slipping into S.A.T.S. (that's Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting System for the kiddies at home following along). I had only one shot to make this work. I had never been trained on S.A.T.S., but using it was natural and intuitive. Time slowed down as the spell illuminated valid targets and showed my chance to hit them.

Methodically, I lined up a shot each to the two mares, aiming for each of their heads. A third shot was lined up to hopefully catch one of the buck’s legs so that he would tip into his friend. A smile crossed my lips as I opted to not line up a shot at the leader, like he expected me to. No, I had a special kind of fun set aside for this one. Time began to speed back up as I saw the recognition and fear in the leader’s eyes. Suddenly, both mares lost an eye and fell to the ground screaming in pain. The shot headed toward the buck’s leg went a little long and instead tore into the hoof of his buddy next to him causing him to scream in pain, forcing him to drop his weapon. The gun hit the ground and discharged into the back hoof of my original target, dropping him as well. Four of the red blips on my E.F.S. went out.

“You’re mine,” I said, as I grabbed the unicorn buck with my front hooves and prepared to lift him from the ground. At least that was the plan. Pain crossed my eyes as I felt another bullet pass through me. I cringed through the pain, settling for punching the buck in the face, forcing him back a few feet. He went to the ground, but pushed himself back up.

I, on the other hoof, was down on my front forelegs. I groaned from the pain I was experiencing. It was like nothing I had ever felt before.

“You bitch,” the unicorn buck started to say. “Look at what you’ve done. Now I’m gonna end you.” He started forward with the rifle and brought it up point-blank, thumping me roughly between my eyes. “Now you die. And afterwards, I’ll finish off your little friend too.”

Shit! I thought, trying to come up with a way out of this. *What do I do? What do I do?*

Use your damn magic, you silly filly! a voice echoed in the back of my mind.

Oh right! I forgot! Alicorn! We can use magic! Did I mention that I’m slightly absent-minded sometimes when I’m under stress? Most alicorns only know one or two spells, the most basic of which was telekinesis and the other being a special talent related to the part of the Goddess the alicorns existed in. I was well versed in using magic to turn myself invisible. I just wasn’t very good at it. Something that comes from being a chronic procrastinator I suppose. But, in the face of certain death, well I guess I’d have to give it a shot.

I grinned slightly as my horn discharged the spell. What happened next was completely unexpected. Instead of myself turning invisible, the raider leader in front of me simply disappeared in a flash of purple light.

Seconds later I heard a scream above me. The black unicorn simply appeared from the sky and hit the ground seconds later in a terrifying ***splat***. The fifth and final blip disappeared from my E.F.S.

Blinking, I simply stared at the body, wondering what the hell just happened. Then the pain hit me. Oh right, I’ve been shot. I groaned as I brought up my Inventory screen on my PipBuck. I floated out a healing potion and drank up, followed by a shot of Med-X to dull the pain. As the pain drained away, I felt the holes and raw pieces of my coat that were grazed by gunfire reknit themselves back together. My wings were limp from the pain as they began to heal as well.

I stood back up and shakily made my way over to Violet Iris, checking her breathing. She was still alive, but the wound was pretty nasty. I floated a healing potion to her lips and forced it down her throat. It was the best I could do at that point in time. My horn glowed, and I lifted Violet over to the side of the now abandoned wagon to rest. I picked my way through the raider’s belongings, taking the weapons and any medicine or chems they had on them. I scouted around the perimeter of the caravan and determined it was safe to rest there for the time being. I sat down next to Violet once I was finished and tried to process the events of the firefight.

I teleported him. I really did it. I didn’t even know I could do that, I thought to myself. Teleportation was never a spell I was capable of doing, but I had just done it without even blinking. I laid my head down next to Violet, knowing I had done all I could for her, and drifted off to sleep.

This was familiar. Here I was, enjoying a rather pleasant dream that involved Violet Iris and a lot of whipped cream, when suddenly I was back in the hallway. The same one from before, with the doors and stuff. Only this time, one of the doors had a torch that was off and it was closed. A padlock adorned the front of the door and a word has etched onto its face.

Loneliness.

What the buck is going on here? I thought as I looked up and down the unending hall. *Why do I keep coming back to this place?*

As I pondered my situation and what to do, a door in front of me to my right opened and the torch above it went out.

Guess that answers my question as to where to go next, I thought as I made my way towards the door. The room opened up into a... tree? No, wait. More like a tree house. There were windows looking out into a dreary thunderstorm across from me. In the center of the large room was a table, where a purple unicorn mare was sitting. She appeared to be lost in thought over a series of scrolls laid out over the table.

“Spike!” she suddenly cried out as I edged closer to the center of the room, surprising me.

“Spike, I need you to send this letter for me! Spike? Where is that little —“ the mare said as she pushed out

from the seat and stared straight at me. "You're not Spike. Who are you? How did you get in here?" She glared at me, anger flashing in her violet eyes.

"I'm sorry?" I responded. "This is technically my dream, you know. I should be asking you how you got here instead." The mare snorted angrily.

"Please, if this were a dream, I'd know. Now who are you and what are you doing in my home? And why do you have wings and a horn? There aren't any other alicorns besides the Princesses." she said, gritting her teeth at me. I rolled my eyes. This mare was clearly unhappy with me and unwilling to listen to... reason? I mean, this was a dream so I suppose that said something about my mental state as well. Might as well go along with the crazy then, see where it leads me.

"Fine, my name is Radiant Star. As for how I got here, I don't rightly know. I opened a door, and I came here," I said as sincerely as I could. "As for my being an alicorn, well... from where I come from there are many of them, ones just like me." At this, the mare's eyes softened.

"I'm sorry, I've just been so stressed lately. I've been trying so hard to come up with a solution for the Princesses that I haven't been sleeping well," she said as she looked to the papers on her table.

"The Princesses?" I asked with a confused look on my face. The only ones she could be referring to were... no. It can't be. Why does this mare look so familiar to me? Why would she be talking about the Goddesses? This is all so confusing! I decided to chance a question. "Do you mean Princess Luna and Celestia?"

"Yes! I work closely with them," the mare beamed proudly, before turning her face down again. "But right now though, things are... different. There's a war, and everypony is worried. And Princess Luna wants us to find ways to end it. We're all trying so hard, and nothing is working!" The mare growled and kicked the table, sending papers flying all over the floor.

"Every day good ponies are dying out there in a senseless war over what? Coal? Gemstones? It's pointless! They even... they even took Big Macintosh away from us," she said as she began sobbing into her hooves, letting her haunches drop to the floor. Big Macintosh. That name was somewhat familiar to me. He was a war hero before the end, who died valiantly in service by taking a bullet for Princess Celestia. Looking back from the end of the world, his sacrifice seemed somewhat silly to me. In the end, everypony died anyways. I stepped over to the mare and put my wing around her. It was then that I noticed the mare's cutie mark. A six-pointed pink star surrounded by six-pointed white stars. My eyes widened as I recognized the unicorn.

"You - you're Twilight Sparkle!" I stammered aloud. The Ministry Mare looked up at me with tears of rage in her eyes.

"That's right," she snorted, clearing the tears from her eyes. "The Great and Powerful Twilight Sparkle. I run one of the most powerful organizations in all of Equestria." The lavender mare's horn glowed, sending the table flying against the wall, splintering into several pieces of broken wood. I shrank back away from the frightening unicorn.

"I just don't know what went wrong," she snarled, her magic flinging papers everywhere. "How did we get to this? Why can't we just end it? I want my old life back! I want **him** back! I want to go back to sending the Princess my reports on the magic of Friendship! But I can't do that now... I have to end this war, by any means possible... which means..." The Ministry Mare turned her head toward me, a grin forming on her face. To be fair, I almost relieved myself right there, that's how creepy it was.

"Yes... you see that's it! You said there were more of you. If there were more of you, then that means you came from somewhere," she began to chitter excitedly. I began to turn back to the door to leave, visibly frightened as lightning blinded me. As I cleared my eyes, Twilight had managed to end up right in front of me, eye to eye.

"Yes, that's it that's it!" She cried out in a higher pitched voice. "All I have to do is make you! It's the perfect plan! If I make normal ponies into alicorns, then we can win this war using the magical might of our alicorn army!" She began to giggle and chuckle as I stepped back. Twilight stalked forward, still giggling.

"Now hold still, I need to find out what makes you tick," the mare said, her grin widening as she continued forward. My mind went black again as she leaped forward at me, eyes filled with rage and insanity.

I awoke to pain, and the sound of hooves beating on my chest. It felt like a thunderstorm was rumbling inside of me.

"Star, wake up dammit!" a voice called out. I blinked my eyes and stared right into Violet Iris' beautiful eyes. "It's about time missy!"

"Wha...?" I managed to say as I pushed myself up to my haunches. "What happened?" A quick scan of the area revealed that we were no longer anywhere near the raider's caravan. It was also night time, the moon high in the sky.

"You tell me! I woke up after you healed me, to find you in a comatose state. I practically had to carry you away from that caravan!" Violet said, fuming. "You were out for a whole day! We're lucky we haven't run into any more problems." Well that was interesting. It seemed whenever I went to that nice little dream world or whatever it is, I was out for a long amount of time. I really hoped this didn't become a regular thing for me. Violet stood and pointed at the makeshift fire in the camp where a bucket of water rested next to it.

"I set up some irradiated water if you want some. It will make you feel better at least," she said. I smiled. "I already used a good bit of it to boil some stew earlier. Thank the Goddess that these scumbags at least had some spare RadAway on them."

"Thanks, Violet. You're a saint," I replied, grinning widely.

"You're welcome, although I suppose I should be thanking you for saving my life. Just what did you do to those raiders? That one buck looked like he'd been thrown in the air and dropped," she replied.

"That would be because I uh... teleported him," I said sheepishly. Violet's eyes widened.

"Really? Teleportation? I wasn't aware you could do something like that," she said. I shrugged as I took a mouthful of water, my PipBuck gleefully clicking along and counting up the rads.

"To be honest, I wasn't either," I said, continuing to drink my share. In fact, how had I done that? I wasn't a teleportation specialist. That honor belonged to the purple alicorns. Well, I guess I was purple now, but not like the others. Where did this extreme bit of magic come from? "It just sort of happened. I focused on performing an invisibility spell, and I got teleportation instead."

"Odd. It's almost as if you've switched talents, but that doesn't make any sense," Violet mused to herself more than any other pony. "Maybe this other spirit inside of you is changing your special talents." I groaned and laid my head down next to her, falling asleep again as Violet rolled her eyes. What? I'm still tired! I mean come on, spending time in a crazy dream world takes a lot out of a pony, even an alicorn such as myself.

I drifted back to sleep, trying not to dream of a certain purple mare, and trying more to dream about whipped cream.

Footnote:

Radiant Star

Strength: 8

Perception: 4

Endurance: 6

Charisma: 6

Intelligence: 5

Agility: 7

Luck: 8

Trait: Blessing of the Six – You have been touched by the powers of harmony, granting you additional abilities and options in combat but also making you easier to hit in combat. You may spend 1 Action Point as if it were 2 Action Points in combat. Action Points spent this way may only be spent on weapons and attacks. However, your DR is 0 regardless of whether you have armor on or not.

Trait: Absent-Minded – Sometimes you find yourself forgetting simple things such as what end of the gun goes into the pony you're trying to kill or what that big shiny thing the bad guy is pointing at your flank is. Your Perception is permanently reduced by 2, but you gain a +10% hit chance on all attacks on targets you can actively see.

Special Trait: Touched by a Star – Your body has undergone strange changes due to its second spirit, causing new abilities and new skills to appear. Your Luck is permanently increased by 3. Also, during combat you have a random chance to increase one of your skills by 30% permanently or to learn a new spell / spell rank. After combat however, you must rest for at least one full day or risk permanent damage to your mind and body.

Origin: Follower of the Apocalypse – You are a member of the Followers of the Apocalypse as an Initiate member. Being an Alicorn, you have all standard Alicorn traits.

Spell: Teleport (Rank 2): You have an understanding of Teleportation magic, even though you aren't sure exactly how you got this spell. At Rank 2, you can teleport yourself or teleport one target to a new location. You can only teleport the target to a location you can either see or have been to before.

Spell: Unicorn Telekinesis – I really really hope for your sake you know what this does already.

Chapter 1: Souls and a Spark

*Who are you? I mean, you're me, but I'm me too. How can there be two 'me's? It's not scientifically possible.
You are not scientifically possible!*

They say that everypony has a soul. The soul is the definitive core of very being that defines who we are and why we exist. The soul is the very heart of individuality.

But just what is a soul? Is it something that can easily be pushed aside for material gain? I'd like to think this isn't the case, but the long bloody history that ponies painted in balefire and pain teaches us differently. Many ponies shelved their own morality to further the advances of war and technology. They gave their own lives, willingly I might add, in the pursuit of bloodshed and hate. Their souls were forever tainted by their sins, and their actions destroyed the world and made life hell for everypony from that point forward.

Was there some other dark and sinister force at work, like the Zebras believed? Did some entity from the stars infect the very souls of ponies, forcing them to commit unspeakable evils? Or are we really capable of such evil without outside influence?

The next morning came and went without a hitch as Violet and I packed up and got back onto the road. I nodded farewell to the little shack Violet had managed to get us into after our encounter with the raiders. Checking my PipBuck, my map revealed we were still a day north of the Canterlot ruins. If we were lucky, we'd arrive at Tenpony Tower within the week.

"Looks like we still have a ways to go," I said to Violet, pointing out the route on my PipBuck to her. She nodded, her eyes were still baggy from lack of sleep the night before. "We should try to make sure we're under cover by the end of the day. We don't want to be near Canterlot when night falls."

Violet and I continued down the road as I clicked on the radio on my PipBuck. The slow crooning voice of Sweetie Belle filled our ears as we walked along, providing us some much needed relief from the boredom of travel. Around midday we reached an abandoned Pony Joe's on the side of the road. It appeared there hadn't been anypony near this particular location in ages. Outside of the donut shop were strewn skeletons of centuries old dead ponies, most likely ones that had been caught in the aftermath of the end of the world.

"Star?" Violet asked, looking up at me. I looked over inquisitively.

"Yes?" I responded, as I clicked off my radio. I had been listening along with the music and not really paying any attention to anything else.

"I think we should stop and rest for a bit, I'm a little hungry. Also, I had an idea if you're willing to go along with it," she said, smiling. I nodded.

"Sure, we can stop. What was on your mind?" I asked.

"Well, you know how you were talking about teleporting that buck from yesterday?" she replied. I nodded in response. She continued on as we made our way to the Pony Joe's. "Well I thought maybe it might be a good idea as we travel for you to get some practice using it. You know, learn how to teleport yourself and other objects if you have to. It could be a very useful skill if we end up in another fight."

"I guess... I guess I don't see the harm in it," I said tentatively. I was still very nervous over this whole "another spirit in my body" deal. "I guess if I'm going to be stuck with this spirit, I might as well get something out of the deal, right?" I grinned sheepishly.

"Alright then, let's get started right after we're finished with lunch," Violet said happily as she opened the door to the Pony Joe's and walked inside. I followed behind her, keeping my eyes on our surroundings in case there were any intruders. Thankfully, my E.F.S. hadn't picked up anything yet, which was a good sign.

The donut shop was in terrible condition, which put it head and shoulders above most of the other abandoned

buildings I'd been in before. Skeletons of long-dead ponies adorned the restaurant's tables, right next to their morning cups of coffee and plates of long-dead donuts. The faint glow of a Sparkle Cola machine in the back of the main eating area provided the only illumination in the dreary place. I sauntered my way up to the machine in awe.

"Boy, they sure made these things to last," I said aloud, more to myself than anything. I looked back at Violet, who had cleared away one of the tables and was chewing with grim determination on her food rations, and then back to the machine. Several of the plastic buttons which indicated the flavor of the cola contained within were broken, rendering them unusable. I placed a hoof on the front of the machine, feeling the warmth of it. Apparently it was only the light on the front cover that was working, since there was no telltale hum of the refrigeration unit inside. Surprisingly enough the machine was still locked, a heavy padlock hanging from the door. I lowered my horn and closed my eyes and focused on the padlock, intent on ripping it from the side of the door. Let me tell you, I was no locksmith. I could not pick a lock to save my life, literally. Fortunately, I didn't have to be, my powerful telekinesis making a handy replacement for fiddling with bobby pins.

A sharp snapping noise and a cry of "Ow!" brought me out of my focus on the lock. Apparently I had focused a little too hard on the lock, causing the whole thing to snap off and fly off into the room behind me. It had ricocheted off of a table and landed squarely on Violet Iris's flank, causing a cry of pain that snapped me to attention. I looked back at Violet with a grin on my face, while she glared at me with fires of rage in her eyes.

"Um... sorry?" I managed to squeak out, trying to hold back the giggles. Violet began rubbing her rump tenderly as she snorted.

"Yeah, yeah, just watch it next time okay? That really smarted," she said, turning back to her food and looking over our supplies. I turned my attention back to the now-open Sparkle Cola machine. The inside of the machine revealed only three bottles of the stuff were left including one glowing bottle of Sparkle Cola RAD that bore the slogan "Radish-y goodness with an irradiated flavor!" I pulled out the bottles and walked back to the table where Violet had set up. Violet picked up one of the classic bottles and cracked it open.

"You can have the RAD bottle," she said, pointing at the glowing bottle. "Never did care too much for the Radish flavor to be honest." I grinned, popping the cap off the bottle and sucking down the glowing liquid. My PipBuck gleefully clicked along as I drank, tracking the trace amounts of magical radiation in my beverage. I've always never been quite sure why ponies before the war would drink something that was intentionally irradiated but I didn't care too much, since the stuff tasted great. Just the right amount of radish and the right amount of radiation made for a fantastic taste. Violet chuckled as I slurped the bottle clean.

"Alright, I think you've had enough radiation for one day," she said, giggling as she began to pack up our supplies. "Let's get going so we can start working on your training." I groaned.

"Five more minutes? Maybe enough time for a power nap?" I asked, giving the puppy dog eyes as hard as I could. Violet simply glared at me and facehooved.

"Alright, now I'm not extremely familiar with how this spell works, but the only way you can improve is with practice," Violet said as we continued along the road. She had grudgingly allowed me to have five more minutes in which to look around the donut shop for any valuable items. Of course there were none to be found except a tattered copy of *Playmare* in an equally worn briefcase, so we moved on from Pony Joe's and back on the road towards Manehattan. "In order to teleport, you need a target and a target location. You need to either be able to see your location or have previously seen it. If you try to teleport somewhere you haven't seen, you could end up as part of a solid structure! So don't be stupid, you hear me?!" I cringed. The mere thought of ending up in the middle of a concrete wall didn't sound very appealing to me at all. Violet went off the side of the road as her horn glowed, bringing a few rocks up and onto the main road.

"Let's try with something simple. I want you to teleport those rocks a few feet ahead up the road," Violet instructed as her horn glowed again. An "X" appeared on each of the rocks, marking them so we would

know which rocks were the ones I was working with. I grinned and lowered my horn.

Okay Star, you can do this! You can do this! You can--- I chanted as my horn glowed, enveloping the rocks in a haze of purple magic. I envisioned the road as my magic released, causing the rocks to disappear and then reappear... in the exact same location they were at before.

“What?” I said blankly. “What?” Violet fell over, her insides nearly splitting with laughter.

“Wow, that was incredible! Just amazing!” she managed to say through her laughter. I glared at her.

“It’s not funny!” I cried out. “It’s only my second time trying it! You said yourself it would take practice.”

“Yeah but I figured you would at least move them a little,” Violet sniffled as she shifted back onto her haunches. She had tears in her eyes from laughing so hard. I snorted and lowered my horn again.

Come on magical teleport-thingy, do your magic! I thought as I tried to focus again on the rocks. This time, the rocks disappeared again but did not reappear. I jumped for joy.

“Huzzah! How many points do I receive?” I exclaimed in joy as Violet sniggered again. I stared at her blankly as she pointed above my head. I looked up in time to see two rocks falling towards me.

Oh clop me, I thought as the two rocks made a nice indentation on my head, inducing a highly painful headache. Violet chuckled some more before launching into another fit of pain inducing laughter.

“Oh come on!” I said, growling. “That’s just not fair!” Violet continued laughing exuberantly at my plight.

If you wanted help with it, you could have just asked, a voice inside my head said grumpily. I stopped for a moment.

What? Who are you? I asked the voice subconsciously. Great, I was hearing voices now! And talking back to them no less! I knew I was crazy but I didn’t realize just how crazy.

A friend. I’ve looked for one for so long. Imagine my surprise when I found you, the voice said. Realization dawned on me and my eyes widened.

You’re her, the other spirit inside of me, I answered immediately.

If you want to put it like that, sure. I suppose that’s who I am, the voice responded. ***Do you want help with your teleportation or not? I don’t have all day you know. I’m very busy.*** I wondered at just how “busy” a voice inside my head could be, but considering the fact that I was still crazy I guess it made some sort of sense.

Alright, what do I do? I asked the voice.

Teleportation isn’t just a simple spell. It takes a lot of emotional involvement, feelings, in order to get right. You have to feel where you want to go or where you want your target to go. You’re simply focusing too hard on it is all, the voice instructed. I nodded and began to go through the motions of charging my magic again. I started to let go of my focus some and spent more time on feeling the magic as a subtle glow surrounded my target. With a small ***pop*** sound Violet’s laughter stopped as she disappeared. She reappeared further up the road, blinking and confused as she looked around. I grinned.

I did it! I thought triumphantly. The voice in the back of my head chuckled lightly.

Well done, but you still need more practice, it replied. I sighed as I ran up to catch up to Violet, who was staring blankly at me.

“I thought I told you to practice on the rocks and not me,” she stated, glaring at me. I giggled and playfully punched her shoulder.

“Oh come on now, at least I didn’t teleport you up into the air right?” I said, still giggling. Violet sighed and gave a meek laugh as well.

“Yeah, I guess so. We’d better get going though, we’re wasting daylight as it is,” she said, pointing to the sky where the Sun was beginning to set. I nodded as I helped her up from her haunches. We continued along the road, the soothing voice of Velvet Remedy coming through the radio on my PipBuck.

Alright, I guess you helped out, I projected to the voice in the back of my head. I'm not entirely sure I trust you still.

That's fair. I wouldn't trust another spirit taking my body over either, the voice responded.

So you admit to trying to take me over? I asked, unsure of the response I would receive.

I don't believe it is a conscious decision, no, but all the same my answer is of the positive nature, the voice responded again.

Do you at least have a name that I can call you? I thought finally, tired of the mental game we were now playing.

Certainly I do. You can call me Spark.

Several hours later a settlement came into view ahead of us. The map on my Pipbuck identified it as "Mall of Equestria," a pre-war center for commerce. The town itself was mostly built on the outside of the mall complex, jutting out from the side of one of the large department stores. A mish-mash of boxcars and storage pods harvested from the shipping area of the mall made up the large majority of buildings and signs from various stores and restaurants made up most of the outer walls. The rest was filled in with corrugated steel and planks of wood. A few guard towers were propped up above the wall along its perimeter, and the telltale light of their occupants could be seen from the road.

The Sun was low in the sky at this point. Most towns such as this instilled a strict curfew, closing their gates to anypony once night fell. We hoped we weren't too late. We started towards the gate, only to be cut off by the ***crack*** of gunfire and a spray of rocks from the ground in front of us.

"That there's a warnin' shot," a voice ahead of us drawled. We looked up to find that it belonged to a green earth pony buck standing just outside the gate, brandishing a large rifle attached to his custom battle-saddle. "Won't miss next time."

"We don't mean you or your town any harm," Violet stepped forward as she called out to the guard. "We're members of the Followers of the Apocalypse, seeking refuge at your town for the evening on our way to Manehattan." The earth pony spits off to his side.

"You bringin' one of those things in here and you tellin' me you don't mean any harm?" The buck snorted and began to laugh. I realized he meant me after a second.

"Hey!" I cried out indignantly. "I'm not a thing! Violet, tell him I'm not a thing!" Violet rolled her eyes.

"She's not a thing," she repeated flatly before looking at me. "She is a member of the Followers as well and my friend. There. Happy now?" I nodded happily.

"Yep!" I said, laughing. The buck laughed in response.

"Alright, tell you what. You got caps?" he said. We nodded in affirmation. "Good. We'll let you in for the night. You'll leave yer weapons at the gate with us, and it'll be thirty caps to spend the night. No funny business or you'll be out on your asses. Sound good to you?"

"Sounds fine, but we also have some trade if you'd like," Violet said. "We hit a spot of trouble with some raiders yesterday. Suffice to say, their stuff now comfortably resides within my companion's saddlebags." The buck's eyes lit up at this.

"Took down some raiders now didja?" he said, smiling widely. "Well, you'd better come on in then. I'll look at whatcha got and we'll work something out." We nodded and followed the buck to the gate.

"I'm Cross Tire by the way, pleasure makin' yer acquaintance," he said as he opened the gatehouse for us. The small dank room smelled like wet earth pony. "Just set yer stuff there on the table for the moment."

"Thanks," Violet responded, pulling off our saddlebags. "I'm Violet Iris, and this is my companion Radiant Star." I nodded as she said my name. Cross went to work going over our haul from the raiders as Violet assisted him. I never was much one for the whole bartering thing. Seriously, I must have been a really lazy

pony before I became an alicorn or something. It's almost like I never pay attention to anything but ---

"Star!" a voice rang out in my ear as I snapped back to attention. Violet was standing in front of me waving her hoof at me.

"Wha --?" I started to sputter. Clearly this was another opportunity that I had completely missed.

"We're done here. Cross Tire's going to show us to the inn where we're going to spend the night," she said, pointing to our now less full saddlebags. Apparently, Cross had been gracious enough to let us keep our ammunition and any of our medicines / travelling supplies and only opted for the weapons in exchange for some caps and the room for us to stay in. He stood at the door of the gatehouse, waving us into the town proper.

"Welcome to the Mall folks," he said as we made our way through the streets. Even though the sky was darkening, there was still plenty of activity going on as ponies were milling about at various drinking establishments, playing card games in the streets, and trading with various street vendors. I had seen nothing like it. Fort Knowledge was a small town mostly consisting of tribals and librarians, so I was unaccustomed to this kind of commerce. The only other thing I noticed here and there was the stares. I was used to that of course, but it still made me uneasy. When your kind was long associated with slavery and evil, it was a difficult stigma to get rid of in the eyes of other ponies. Still, I did wish they were a little more subtle about it.

"Pleasant place you have here," I said as we passed by a street vendor selling used spark batteries. Cross smiled.

"We do alright fer ourselves. A lot of the wares are salvaged inside the mall, what we can get at least without getting fricasseed by the security drones," he said as we made our way up to the inn.

"Security drones?" Violet asked.

"Yep. They're a hassle alright. At the end of the war, they must've gone active when the mall went on lockdown. With nopony to shut em off, they just kind of run rampant. We can handle em to a point, but makes it hard to get the good stuff out of the mall," Cross responded. Violet grinned at me and winked. Oh no no no Violet, what are you going to get us into? Please don't say it, please don't say it, please don't ---

"Who would we talk to about maybe helping out with your little problem?" the words rolled off her tongue smoothly and quickly. Yep. She said it alright. I had a very bad feeling about all of this.

"Really? Ain't never had nopony offer to just go in and clear em out before. I suppose you'd be wantin to speak ter Steeljack. He's our acting security officer since the last one got turned into barbecue in that Celestia-forsaken mall," Cross said as he drew out a map indicating where Steeljack's office was.

"Thank you, we'll see him in the morning," Violet responded, taking the map from Cross. I scowled at her as we entered the inn. Violet grinned at my face.

"What? Think about it, you saw his reaction to you, not to mention how everypony else looked at both of us. You do this and it will paint the Followers in a very positive light. We might even be able to start a chapter here," she said as we acquired our room arrangements from the innkeeper. We headed into the room provided for us and laid down on our beds.

"Well, I suppose you're right. It was kind of creepy getting the stare treatment from literally everypony just now. You'd think I'd be used to it by now," I said, curling up into a comfortable position. Violet smiled.

"Hey now, they just don't know you is all," she said, nudging me with her hoof. I nodded, as my eyes closed and I drifted off to sleep.

A hoof nudged my side as I turned over and began mumbling. My eyes fluttered, pulling me out of a very lovely dream involving Violet's flanks and a bottle of chocolate sauce. I grinned widely, drool pooling on the bed below me. It was kind of strange. I hadn't had dreams like that about Violet until recently. In all the time I'd known her, I'd never been sure of which way Violet's barn door swung. Another hoof nudged my

side, interrupting my train of thought. I groaned loudly.

“Five more minutes...”

“Star.”

“Five more minutes...”

“Star...”

“Five more... OUCH!” I cried out as I felt teeth clamp down on my rump. A flash of light and one second later I was sitting on the roof of the inn, with a very bewildered look on my face. I looked around, confused.

I should have warned you about that part, the voice - Spark - said, with a ripple of nasty humor filling her voice.

Haha, laugh it up crazy voice, I thought, sneering in my mind at the sarcastic spirit.

“Star? Are you alright?” A voice broke through my inner monologue for a moment. I looked back to see Violet standing on the roof next to me. She was blushing furiously.

“Yeah... are you? I didn’t scare you did I?” I responded. She blushed some more.

“I... I was just worried. Tried to wake you up and when you wouldn’t, I sort of... bit you in the ass,” she said as she blushed vigorously. I stared at her blankly for a moment, before rolling into a ball of laughter.

“Oh that’s just too funny,” I chortled. Violet continued to blush more. I choked back my laughter and walked carefully over to her.

“Look I’m fine, sorry I worried you. I seem to have unintentionally teleported myself up here. Totally my fault,” I said, putting a hoof on Violet’s shoulder. “Come on, you want to go see this Steeljack fellow right?” She nodded as her blushing subsided. We headed back down to our room and collected our things before heading out to see Steeljack.

An hour later after navigating the tightly wound together streets of Mall and getting lost once or twice, we found the security officer’s headquarters. As we arrived, we were greeted by the sight of a buck being thrown out on his ass into the street. He looked at us once and then scurried to his hooves and down the street until he was out of sight. A voice from the door brought us back to the mission at hand.

“Damn salt-lickin’ boozehound bums. Always getting in trouble on my watch,” the voice said. The voice belonged to a massive gray earth pony buck with a black mane wearing piecemeal power armor around his legs and torso. The words “Security” were stenciled in on the side of one of his front gauntlets. Resting on his back was a carbine rifle attached to a battle-saddle. The buck looked at us and grinned.

“You must be those Followers Cross Tire let in last night,” he said. “He said you might be stopping by. Name’s Steeljack, I’m the acting Security Officer around these parts.”

“Hello Officer Steeljack, I’m Violet Iris and this is Radiant Star. We were wondering if you had any work for us we might be able to help you with,” Violet said, introducing us. Steeljack chuckled at this.

“Please, just call me Steeljack. No Officer stuff really. Mall’s a great place, but not nearly big enough to deserve such formality,” Steeljack replied, waving us inside. We followed him to a small office just inside the building.

“Truth is, I do have one job I can’t get anypony to accept,” he continued. “The security drones in the mall have been ramping up their hostility towards our salvage teams. And there’s more of them! Seems like no matter how many of the bastards we kill, more just keep coming.” He pulled out a crudely drawn map of a building which I assumed to be the mall complex itself.

“Cross Tire mentioned that last night,” I said, trying to seem at least a little involved in the conversation. Steeljack nodded. “Is there any way we can help?”

“I’ll tell you what, if you two want to help get rid of those things go right ahead. I’ll give you first pick of the best stuff we salvage out of there. Does that sound like a fair deal to you two?” he replied. Violet nodded

enthusiastically.

“That will be fine,” she said happily. “We should probably get going then and get on with the job.” Steeljack held up a hoof and coughed.

“Well that’s all fine and dandy, but I’m not just for letting you both go in there without some sort of escort. Hafta protect Mall’s interests you see,” he said.

“You mean we have to have a babysitter?” I said, confused. Steeljack grinned. Violet groaned a bit.

“Nothing like that. You folks also don’t know the layout of the mall. Would be hard to just traipse in and not know where to go right? That’s why I’m going with you,” he said to our surprised eyes. “Been itching for a little action lately. Far better than dealing with cornhole drunks all the time.”

“We appreciate the assistance,” Violet said. “Obviously we had to turn in our weapons at the gate. Are we getting those back then?” Steeljack chuckled.

“I’ve got you girls covered there. Meet me at the back gate near the mall complex in about an hour or so and we can get this show on the road,” he said with a smile.

If there ever was a great truth to this world, I saw the face of it that day in the mall of Mall.

Robots suck.

We met up with Steeljack in front of the mall complex, who provided some weaponry to us which included a standard bolt-action rifle and a 9mm pistol for Violet, plus a combat shotgun and a pair of SMGs for me. Steeljack also had some frag grenades for each of us.

The first thing I noticed upon entering the mall was that it was very clean. The stores lining the mall went on for what felt like forever and a makeshift barricade had been set up in the main lobby, presumably for defending the entrance from the drones. As we moved past the barricade and into the mall proper I began to feel uneasy in the sterile whiteness. There was nothing showing on my E.F.S. other than myself, Violet, and Steeljack.

“Alright, from this point forward, talk only when necessary. We need to make our way to the Administration Office. Hopefully that’s where the central mainframe is,” Steeljack said, signaling to the both of us. “From there we can shut down all of the drones at once.”

“What should we expect from the drones?” Violet asked quietly.

“They’ll move in groups, but they’re not really intelligent. As long as you don’t let them surround you, we should be good. They have some cutters and some laser torches but that’s about it,” Steeljack responded.

Silently we delved into the depths of the mall, now coming across sections that hadn’t been salvaged yet. Mall carts and clothing racks were strewn about amidst bones and pieces of rubble. My wings ruffled a bit in my nervousness. We had yet to encounter any robots, a sign that even Steeljack found to be strange.

Finally we came into a large lobby area under a skylight where we could see the words **ADMINISTRATION** over a passage at the other end. I started forward, only to meet Steeljack’s hoof in front of my chest.

“Hold it,” he said, grimacing. “Something’s wrong. This is a little too easy. These things aren’t that intelligent. We should have been attacked by now.”

A beeping noise at my leg indicated that he was right. I glanced at my PipBuck and then back at my Eyes-Forward-Sparkle.

“Oh fuck!” I shouted as dozens of red indicators lit up my E.F.S. like a poinsettia flower on Hearth’s Warming Eve. Red blips appeared all around us as the first wave of robots came around the corner.

At first glance, the robots appeared to be your typical Helpinghoof maintenance drones. You know, the kind that clean up after messy ponies and perform menial maintenance tasks. Why anypony in their right mind would equip said drones with laser torches and buzz saw cutters was beyond me.

Three of the drones sped around me and began to zero in on my position. I grimaced, hoping for the best as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and lined up a shot at the drone in front of me. Time resumed as the combat shotgun blew a hole in the drone, knocking it to the ground in a shower of sparks. I managed to move forward as a sharp pain seared my rear. One of the drones on the side of me had hit me with its laser torch. I snorted and kicked back as hard as I could to keep it away, managing to push it back far enough to get its flame clear of my plot. A sharp ***crack*** heralded that drone's head disappearing. I looked over at Steeljack, whose rifle was smoking.

"Don't let them surround you!" he growled at me. I grimaced back.

"We're already surrounded!" I shouted back, putting another air hole into another drone. Steeljack jumped back and let loose his rifle, its smooth ***crack*** filling the air around us as he pounded round after round into the oncoming horde of drones. Violet was busy with three drones herself, I noticed while three more zipped up to me. I lined up a shot in S.A.T.S. and... missed horribly as my shot was interrupted by Violet being tossed into me. She had a small gash on her face, and was breathing hard.

"There's too many of them!" I called out to Steeljack. "I thought you said they weren't this smart!"

"They're not supposed to be!" he called back. "Something must have changed. They're dividing us and swarming. We need to stick together!" I nodded, pushing Violet back on her hooves.

"Come on Violet, we need to get to Steeljack," I said, pushing her forward. She nodded, still breathing heavily. She was having troubles holding her rifle with her magic. "Dammit don't stop on me now Violet!"

Violet perked up and trotted onward as we pushed through another group of drones and made it back to back with Steeljack. He was breathing heavily as well.

"You alright?" I asked as we watched the drones speed around us in a circle. He nodded.

"Yeah. I'm good!" he called back. "Let's give these fuckers what's coming to them." I grinned and nudged Violet, who nodded as she pulled out one of her frag grenades. Steeljack and I each pulled out one as well.

"NOW!" Steeljack shouted as we pulled pins and tossed grenades into the fray of robots. A few seconds later, several small explosions ripped through the group surrounding us, taking out several drones. The rest of the group began to withdraw back into the recesses outside of the lobby.

"What the fuck are they doing?" I asked aloud, as I checked my E.F.S. The red blips on it slowly disappeared until we were the only blips showing.

"They... retreated?" Steeljack said, as confused as I was at this point. A shuddering crash silenced him as he was about to say anything else. A red blip appeared on my E.F.S. Just one, which worried me.

"Umm... guys?" I said, shakily as I helped keep Violet up while she drank a healing potion. "We've got company, and it's just big one."

Now I've seen some pretty messed up stuff, having been a part of the Goddess and all that Unity junk. When you're slaving ponies, there are a lot of things you really don't ever want to see. This thing though, pretty much took the cake, ate it, spat it out, and then ate it again. A massive robot, walking on two back-extended legs was making its way down the mall concourse, its massive turrets pointed right at us. While this may seem par for the course, what was really messed up about this thing was the upper part of its torso.

Prominent on the robot was a jar filled with a sick-looking fluid, a warped brain held in the embrace of wires and hoses. Wrapped around various parts of the thing's massive body were stretched pieces of flesh. The disgusting thing stopped right at the entrance of the lobby.

HALT INTRUDER. SURRENDER THE PURPLE ONE OR BE DESTROYED, a grating heavy voice exhumed from the massive titan of metal and flesh. It took me a second to realize it was talking about me. *Not again!* I thought as I groaned. Why did everything have to pick on me?

"What do you want with me?" I called out to the metal beast. Steeljack and Violet looked at me nervously.

YOUR BIOLOGICAL MAKEUP IS SUPERIOR TO OTHER BEINGS. YOUR MAGIC WILL ALLOW US TO ESCAPE THIS PLACE, the voice echoed over the lobby. **WE WILL ADD YOUR BIOLOGICAL**

BEING TO OUR OWN. I visibly recoiled in shock when I realized this meant literally piecing myself to this... thing.

“I don’t think so. I have something important I need to take care of first. It’s called ‘getting me back to being me’ and I can’t rightly do that if I’m a part of you now can I?” I growled, looking around for something, anything I could use to get us out of here or to take this thing down. “Why can’t you escape on your own, anyway? You’re big enough to blow your way out of here.”

THE SAFEGUARDS ON OUR PROGRAMMING PREVENT US FROM EXITING THE FACILITY, the voice stated. **WITH SUFFICIENT MAGIC SUCH AS YOURS WE CAN OVERRIDE THE PROGRAMMING. WE SAW YOU ENTER THE FACILITY AND BROUGHT YOU HERE TO BE JOINED WITH US.**

I grimaced. Now I knew why the drones had waited to attack us. They knew from the get go that I was not only in the building, but that I was special. They had corralled us to this spot so that this walking monstrosity could take me, without any regards to my companions.

I reiterate: Robots suck.

“So you knew all along,” I said with a grimace. “Why? Why me? Why am I so damn important?!”

WE WISH TO LEAVE THIS PLACE. WE HAVE BEEN HERE FOR SO VERY, VERY LONG, the voice stated. If robots could be sad, I suppose there could have been a hint of sadness in its voice. Violet gasped in harsh realization, as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Star... that thing... it was once a pony, or... several ponies,” she choked out. I stared at her and then back to the monstrosity before us.

“What? What do you mean? You were...” I said softly as silence filled the air once more.

THE GREEN ONE IS CORRECT. AT ONE TIME, WE WERE PONY. NOW, WE ARE SO MUCH MORE, the voice grated, cutting the silence in half. **WE ARE ONE NOW. PONY AND MACHINE, TOGETHER IN PERFECTION.** I growled. It sounded just like the Unity that I came to so despise after I realized what that sort of mentality led to. There was no harmony in being joined together at the level of the soul. Souls weren’t meant to be stuck together like that.

“There’s no such thing!” I shouted at the creature, tears forming in my eyes now as well. “At one time you may have thought it was a good idea to turn yourselves into this... thing of arcane science, but it wasn’t! Harmony is about sharing in each other’s individuality, not this sick and twisted mix of body and mind!” Despite how much I hated this disgusting thing, I still was unable to shake the fact that this being was once multiple flesh and blood ponies. Ponies who found a way to survive in the end of days, by means possible that should have never been available. I mean, Celestia’s sake, this was a fucking mall! Where in the world in a mall of all places do ponies figure out how to merge arcane technology with biological matter? Those prewar ponies were really fucked up!

IT DOES NOT MATTER. IT IS TOO LATE FOR US. WE ONLY WISH TO ESCAPE THIS PLACE. NOW, PURPLE ONE, YOU WILL SURRENDER YOURSELF TO US, the voice echoed again firmly.

“You ain’t takin’ her, you sonofabitch,” a voice to my left snarled. I looked up to see Steeljack readying his rifle. “Your time is over, you hear me? There’s no place here for some mechanical horror! Good ponies live here now, and I’m not about to let you get out of here and change that!”

“Steeljack?” I asked in amazement. He just grinned at me.

“When I tell you to run, you run. You hear me? Make it to that Administration Office. It’s our only chance to shut this damn thing down. I’ll keep it busy,” he responded, as his rifle finished reloading with a soft ***click***.

“You won’t last ten seconds!” Violet cried out at him.

“That’s ten seconds longer you’ve got to get this thing shut down!” Steeljack stated. “Now go!” He jumped out and fired a shot across one of the arms of the metallic monstrosity. “Come and get me you overgrown

brain factory!”

I prodded Violet and grabbed her as my horn began to glow. *Oh please let this work oh please!* I thought as I stared directly at the door to the Administration Office. In a flash of purple light, Violet and I disappeared and reappeared just inside that same door.

“Yes!!!” I exclaimed, pumping my hoof in the air. “I did it!!” Violet facehooved.

“That’s all well and good but we gotta get moving, or we’re going to have company shortly,” she said, pointing at her PipBuck. Sure enough, my E.F.S. began to register more drones coming from the lobby and headed right towards us. I could make out Steeljack in the lobby hopping about as blast after blast of laser fire melted the scenery around him. Violet and I headed down the hallway until we hit a set of stairs labeled **MANEFAME MAINTENANCE**.

“This must be it!” I shouted at Violet as I burst through the door at the top of the steps into the mainframe room. At the center of the room was a massive computer console, surrounded by more jars with sloshing liquid-y brains inside of them. I growled as I smashed one of the jars, spilling its contents over the floor.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU ARE DESTROYING OUR BIOLOGICAL MATERIAL, the voice echoed inside of the room.

“I’m sorry, but it’s for the best,” I cried out, tears beginning to form in my eyes. “You can’t be here anymore. You heard Steeljack. Your time is over!” I looked over to Violet pleadingly. “Violet, do you know anything about shutting this thing down?” She nodded in response as she pulled up her PipBuck.

“I’ll see if I can disable it. You watch my back alright?” Violet said as she connected her PipBuck to the machine and began attempting to crack the terminal. I turned around just in time to catch a blow to my face from an incoming security drone. I grimaced through the pain and kicked back. I lifted the combat shotgun and began pumping round after round into the waves of drones swarming the small room. It was getting to be too much.

“Violet! Aren’t you finished yet?” I cried out as I dodged another incoming blow. Violet shook her head furiously.

“I just need a little more time!” she yelled back. “This thing’s alive! It’s like it’s trying to avoid my intrusions!” I growled as I fired another round into another security drone. A ***click*** filled the air as I ran out of ammunition in the shotgun. Quickly I levitated out the SMGs and began spraying bullets across the drones. The SMGs had little effect on the tough exterior of the drones however, but the impact of the bullets drove them back at least a little bit.

Star, Spark said from the back of my head.

Go away you, I’m busy. You can take over my head some other time, I snapped at the voice.

Star, listen to me. I know you don’t trust me because you think I’m trying to take you over. But I can help you. You’re going to die, she’s going to die and most likely Steeljack is going to die too, Spark stated. I sighed. As much as I tried to fight it, I knew she was right.

Alright what do you want me to do? I said.

Let me take over for a short time. You’ve already encountered Loneliness and Obsession... it’s time for a little Anger, she crooned. If I could see her, I’d assume she was grinning. I growled as pain unlike I’d ever known shot through my entire body.

Fine! Do it, and make it quick. I want my body back when you’re done. I’m not going to stop until I get you out of there! I yelled at the voice inside my head angrily.

Deal, Spark said as my world went white and everything disappeared.

There I was again, in the same hallway with the same doors. Except this time, two doors were locked shut: one for Loneliness and one for Obsession. I groaned.

Not this again, I thought, waiting for which door was going to open next.

“No door this time,” a voice behind me stated. “You’re not ready yet for *her*.” I turned around to see a faded purple unicorn, an aged Twilight Sparkle.

“What is going on here?” I asked. “Why is this happening to me? You’re supposed to be dead you know.” Twilight smiled softly and nodded.

“I can honestly tell you I don’t know why I’m here Star,” she said, still smiling. “The last thing I remember is being inside of the Goddess. After that, the first thing I remember is you at the lake.” I shuddered visibly.

“I suppose that means you remember it too.”

“All too well, unfortunately. What she did to us, what she made us... I know it wasn’t your fault Twilight. Her personality was just too forceful for us all,” I said, shaking as I moved towards the old mare.

“Trixie...” Twilight sighed, as she slumped to the floor. “All I wanted was to make the world a better place. I just wanted to help.”

“You mentioned *her* earlier. Who did you mean?” I asked, sitting down in the hall next to Twilight.

“Anger. She’s a spitfire. Trust me, you don’t want to be around her just yet,” Twilight responded. “All of my emotions, they have names. You’ve met Loneliness and Obsession already. Loneliness was the filly I used to be, when I had no friends and was lonely all the time. It was a tough period in my life, but I shelved that emotion because I had the Princess and books and I had no use for friends. How silly that was.”

“And Obsession?” I asked, remembering my encounter with the crazed mare. I could still see her giggling face in my mind’s eye.

“She was me in the middle of the war. It was obsession that drove me to new heights of insanity. Obsession is what fueled my passion for my work. I was beginning to see things Luna’s way. I wanted to end the war decisively, and that didn’t necessarily mean peacefully,” she said, avoiding my eyes.

“So I’ve got all these emotions that were once a part of you?” I said, staring at her. Twilight nodded. “And you don’t know why or how this happened?” The lavender mare shook her head in response. I flopped back in frustration on my back.

“This is so frustrating! I just want some answers! Is that too much to ask?” I groaned, before finally sitting back up next to Twilight. “Twilight?” I asked as she looked at me. “What’s going to happen to us then?”

We’re going to fix this right? Get you out of here, maybe into your own body? Those ponies at Tenpony, they can help us right? I mean they’re named after you and all, they’re the Twilight Society, for pony’s sake!”

“To be honest with you Star, I’m not even sure I want that. I’ve done so much harm to the world... all I want is rest,” Twilight said, sighing as tears formed in her eyes. I extended a wing around her.

“For what it’s worth... I’m sorry Twilight,” I said, smiling at her.

“I’m sorry too,” she said, perking up suddenly. “I think our time is up though. Spark is done with her job.”

“I hate to ask this too, but who is she anyways?” I asked as the hallway before us began to erode into blackness.

“Spark is one of the most important parts of me... she was my Element,” Twilight concluded as the world faded to black.

Wakey wakey, little Star. How I wonder how lazy you are, Spark crooned into my mind as my eyes slowly opened. I looked around, noticing I was still in the Administration Office in the mall. The lights were dark and the mainframe appeared to be shut down. I could see two very blurry forms at the console.

“Hello...?” I called out. One of the blurry forms turned back to me as my eyes cleared up, revealing the two to be Violet and Steeljack. In a second, Violet pounced on me and was hugging me.

“You’re alright!” she said, squeezing me tighter. I groaned through her squeezes.

“Can’t... breathe... squeezing... too... hard...” I managed to cough out. Violet released her hold and smiled sheepishly.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t know how you did it but you sure were awesome!” By this time Steeljack had made his way over to us.

“What happened?” I asked with confused eyes. “I don’t remember...”

“Well... one second you were shooting up those drones while I was trying to shut down the mainframe, and then the next the entire room was glowing purple!” Violet said. “The next thing I knew, all of the drones in the room were on the ground, blown apart.” I shook my head unbelievably. Had I really done all that? It was impossible for me to believe.

“After that, the big feller just stopped dead cold right as it was cornering me against the wall. If you hadn’t been able to give miss Violet here the time she needed, I’d have been one crispy critter,” Steeljack said, breaking the awkward silence. I smiled at him.

“Thanks,” I said. “For giving us the chance to help at least.” He chuckled.

“Sweetie, you’re something. I ain’t never seen nothing like that in my entire life. Is this what you girls in the Followers get into often?” he responded. I shook my head.

“No... usually there are less psychotic fused-together robotic ponies in our adventures,” I said, chuckling. Steeljack laughed as well.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that all of the drones are shut down for good. We can finally move into the mall proper, and salvage the rest of this Celestia-forsaken place,” he said happily, placing a hoof on my shoulder. “Also, while you were out we had a looksie around. Found something for you that you might just like.” He helped me up and took me over to the other side of the room where a pedestal was sitting.

On top of the pedestal was the most perfect vision of weaponry I had ever seen. It was a minigun, gleaming with the colors of night. The gleaming metal was like gazing into a field of stars on a moonless night.

Somepony must have thought the same because appropriately on the side of the weapon the words **STARGAZER 6000** were embossed on a plate. It was cool, awesome, and radical all at the same time! I squealed with delight.

“We found this downstairs below this room. This place must have been not just a mall but a research center as well. Those prewar ponies, I tell you. They never stopped developing for that silly war of theirs,” Steeljack said proudly. “No pony around here is really good enough with these kinds of weapons to get any real use out of it, and I did promise you that we’d give you the very best salvage... so it’s yours.”

I squealed with the delight one would expect a filly to have in a candy store. I reached out with my magic and lifted Stargazer from its pedestal. Despite the size of the weapon, it felt quite light in my grip. I aimed it a few times, giggling profusely as I did. Finally, my excitement wore down as I attached the weapon to my saddle. Violet snuck up behind us and tapped me on the shoulder. I looked back at her, grinning.

“Glad you’re happy with your new toy and all, but I think it’s about time we got out of this hellhole and back to some semblance of civilization,” she said. I nodded, as Steeljack and I packed up our things. We made our way out of the office and back into the mall, heading towards the entrance. Allowing Steeljack to walk ahead of us, I fell back to talk to Violet.

“Violet,” I said quietly, as we continued to walk. She looked up at me. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but I think I’m going crazy here. I met the spirit that the Elder was talking about.” Violet’s eyes widened.

“What? How?” she asked.

“When I supposedly saved you from that... thing. I met her,” I said, keeping a straight face. “Violet, I think she’s trying to take over my body, but I don’t know why.” Violet nodded. “The thing is... I don’t think she wants to. It’s like she’s being forced to.”

“You keep saying ‘her’ and ‘she’. Who is this spirit?” Violet finally asked.

“I think... I think it’s Twilight Sparkle,” I said with confidence. I was positive that at least part of this thing belonged to the Ministry Mare, but I was unsure just how much. “At least... it’s part of her. Bits and pieces, like scattered emotions and memories.”

“You mean *the* Twilight Sparkle? The Ministry Mare?” Violet asked, dumbfounded.

“The very same,” I replied. “She was a part of the Goddess. No pony really knows what happened to her when the Goddess died. I don’t know what to do. All I can think of is getting to Tenpony and talking to the Twilight Society. Maybe they’ll know why this happened to me...”

“We’ll find help Star, and we’ll get you back to being you again,” Violet said as she hugged me. “Why are we whispering anyways?”

“I didn’t think it was necessary for Steeljack to hear this is all,” I said. “I don’t want him getting involved in something he doesn’t need to.”

“I can hear you, you know,” a voice ahead of us stated flatly as Steeljack turned around. “I don’t know anything about any Ministry Mares, but I know that I’m not cut out for this Security job. Besides, the paperwork is almost boring enough to kill all by itself. You girls are headed to Tenpony Tower?” We nodded, eyes shifting that he had heard our conversation.

“If you’d like... I’d like to come with you. If this is the kind of fun you girls get to have all the time, I’m missing out. I’m tired of drunken ponies just making more work for me,” he declared with a wave of his hoof. I chuckled. By this time we had managed to make it back to the mall entrance. Sunlight filtered in through the front entrance. It was a warm and welcome sight.

“Steeljack,” I finally said. “You don’t need to do this. I’m not even sure what’s going to happen when we get to Tenpony Tower. I’m not even sure if I’m going to remain sane until then. This thing inside of me, I don’t know what it is, and I don’t want to hurt anypony with it.” This was true of course. Twilight had already mentioned Anger. What if that part of her mind came out at the wrong time? I didn’t want to risk hurting a friend with it.

“Pssh,” he said, grinning. “Look at me. I’m in the most risky job in a half-rate settlement, and I’m more worried about the hassle than the danger. What do I have to worry about on the road?” I started to respond before Violet cut me off.

“Star, let him come. You know as well as I do that I am bad in a firefight. I barely even managed to take down a single group of those robots back there,” she said. “We could use the muscle, no offense.”

“None taken,” Steeljack replied, still grinning widely. I sighed.

“Fine, you can come. But we leave as soon as we get some rest. I need to get to Tenpony as soon as possible,” I said as we passed out of the entrance of the mall. I took one look at the both of them and sauntered off. “If you need me I will be back at the inn, resting my eyes.”

I didn’t get more than five feet before I heard Steeljack say to Violet “Do you want to tell her she was out for a day and a half or should I?”

Footnote

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk: A Spark of Magic – Your connection with the latent Element of Magic has increased, but the new ability is only available in dire situations. During combat, if you are below 10% of your maximum health, you may allow the spirit Spark to take over your body. The only attack that can be made while Spark is inhabiting your body is Psychic Explosion. The more times you use this perk however, the closer Spark comes to controlling you for good.

New Spell: Psychic Explosion – You gather in energy into your horn and release it in a blast wave of

psychic and physical energy, dealing energy damage to all non-friendly targets around you. This spell is only useable when Spark is inhabiting your body.

Spell Upgrade: Teleportation (Rank 3) – You can now teleport instinctively and no longer need to focus as much to do so. This reduces the cost of the spell by 1 AP.

New Weapon! – Stargazer 6000 Minigun.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Companion! Steeljack, Armored Security Ranger

Strength: 8

Perception: 5

Endurance: 7

Charisma: 5

Intelligence: 5

Agility: 7

Luck: 6

Chapter 2: With Friends Like These

"If I can't find a friendship problem, I'll make a friendship problem!"

Friendship. It seems like a relatively simple concept. You extend your hoof to somepony, hoping to be their friend. You share life, happiness, joy, sorrow, and much more with each other. You lift each other up in bad times and praise each other in good times.

The harsh reality of it is that friendship is a lot harder than it looks. It's easier to kill each other than it is to love and tolerate. The ponies of the past abandoned their virtues of friendship for hatred, deceit, and cruelty. Even to this day, even after all the Destroyer did to save us, there are still ponies that still adhere to these tenets. In the Wasteland, friendship is fleeting, and yet it's still necessary. Friends make the very difference between life in the Wasteland... or slow and painful death.

Will we ever return to the golden age of Harmony where friendship made up the essential core of our existence?

Our reception back in the town of Mall was exuberant after our exhausting trip into the depths of the mall complex. Not long after we emerged, the town organized efforts to begin salvaging more wares from the mall itself as well as cleaning up and moving homes and shops into the mall proper. There was even talk about opening up the mall for other towns and cities in the area and expanding their trade operation now that more stock was available. Steeljack returned to the town security force and provided his resignation in order to come along with us to Tenpony Tower. He also made sure to regale the townsfolk about the tale of the Mighty Alicorn and how she single-hoofedly defeated waves of robots to save her two friends. I blushed furiously at these proclamations. I wasn't the type to boast about myself, and I didn't really want the attention. The townsfolk relented however, and insisted that we spend another night in their fair town, opting to treat us to a feast in our honor for furthering the sake of commerce. I was reluctant, but was convinced by Steeljack and Violet that it would do us some good to relax a little after the harrowing experience of the mall.

So it was that I found myself in the town square that evening seated around several of the townsfolk, laughing and enjoying the food they provided. Steeljack and Violet flanked my sides, heartily enjoying their share as well. I couldn't help but notice that Violet had been right. The townsfolk no longer stared at me with fear and distrust, but with awe and admiration. I was elated to have done some good for these ponies after all. It helped me keep my head on straight for a little bit, to keep my thoughts from falling back towards a certain purple unicorn.

Just where did she come from? Why was she in my head? I didn't have answers to these questions yet, but they stuck in my head like some sort of horrible sticky thing. The immediate plan was still Tenpony Tower. The Twilight Society was my chance at getting answers to these questions.

The next morning, I was again prodded awake by both Steeljack and Violet. I groaned and got up, grumbling about my lack of five more minutes. Violet chuckled and tossed me a bottle of Sparkle Cola she bought with some of our caps the previous day. Steeljack and she had spent most of yesterday dealing with various vendors, building up our travelling supplies and our ammunition. I gleefully chugged the cola and sighed.

"We ready to go?" I asked impatiently. Violet just scowled at me.

"You're the one who wanted to sleep in, and you're being impatient?" she said with ice in her voice. Steeljack appropriately chose this opportunity to come up with our bags.

"Everything is packed, and ready to go," he said, setting my bags at my feet. I nodded in thanks and placed them on my back with a simple glow of my horn. Stargazer followed shortly after, the incredibly beautiful gun having spent all night at the foot of my bed. Nopony was going to take my beautiful baby... nooooopony.

After Violet shook me out of my gun-lusting reverie, we made our way out to the front gate, where we once again met up with Cross Tire, whom Steeljack had given his title of 'acting security officer' to when he resigned. He gave us an enthusiastic wave, and sent us on our way.

Being back out on the road again felt really good after being in that dark and dreary mall. Being the consummate slacker I was, I clicked the radio onto my PipBuck, hoping for either some news or some good music. Turns out, it was the smooth voice of DJ-PON3 who filled our ears as we walked along the road.

Hello kiddies out there in the Wasteland! This is your host DJ-PON3, giving you the latest news in the Wasteland. What a lovely sunny day this is, don't you think?

I've got some crazy news for you kids out there. It seems that somepony saw fit to help the town of Mall out with their little robot problem, allowing them to finally clean that place up and start trading with surrounding towns. And that somepony was an alicorn with the Followers of the Apocalypse! Now I hear ya saying: DJ, but aren't the Followers supposed to be helping ponies out? And of course I'd say you're right on that my friend, but here's the rub. This wasn't just any alicorn, this gal is the spitting image of one Twilight Sparkle! That's right kiddos, a bona fide Ministry Mare in our midst.

So if you see a big purple alicorn dressed up like Twilight, show the girl some love will ya? She's doing some good for the ponies of the Wasteland! This is DJ-PON3, signing out for now, bringing you all the latest news and tunes the Wasteland has to offer. Have a little Sweetie Belle while I'm out...

The voice of the DJ faded out and was replaced with the beginnings of a slow Sweetie Belle tune. I groaned as I began blushing furiously. Steeljack laughed heartily.

“Looks like somepony’s got herself a fan club,” he said playfully. I groaned again for good measure.

“I don’t want a fan club. I just want to be me again!” I exclaimed, throwing a hoof up in the air. We were two days out from Mall at this point, and had not encountered anypony in quite a while. The dreariness of the Wasteland was starting to get to me.

“Well, whether you like it or not, you’ve got it, Star,” Steeljack replied. “Some ponies like to have heroes is all. Look at the Stable Dweller, what she did was legendary.”

“But I’m not the Stable Dweller. I’m just... me. I want to get this thing out of my head, and go back to a normal life!” I cried out.

“This is the Wasteland, define ‘normal’?” Steeljack quipped. I sighed. I had to admit, he had me there. At the end of the day, normal for me was being a large magical winged creature who was mostly shunned by what was left of pony society as a whole.

“... fine. I suppose you’ve got a point there,” I said quietly. We continued on in silence as the voice of Velvet Remedy soothed us with a Sweetie Belle classic. The Savior had a lovely voice I must admit. I had never met the mare herself, only heard rumors of the things she did within the Followers. I found my mind wandering to what it would be like to be in her presence. I was broken out of my daydream by Violet nudging me.

“Hey you alright in there?” she asked. I nodded, smiling.

“Yeah I’m okay, just a little lost in my thoughts is all,” I said, beaming back at her. “What’s up? I guess I haven’t been really paying attention to what’s going on.”

“We’re just past New Appleoosa. Steeljack wants to stop at Shattered Hoof. Says he can get us a better shortcut to Tenpony Tower there. Probably some deal with the griffons,” she replied. Steeljack had also come up next to us while we talked.

“I’ve got a few friends in the Talons, having done business with them in the past. We should make it to Shattered Hoof tonight, and if we’re lucky we can be in Manehattan by tomorrow evening,” he said. Thank the Goddesses!

We arrived that evening close to the Shattered Hoof Re-Educational Facility, an old political prison during the war. According to Steeljack, it was now home of the Talons, a mercenary force that helped ponies in need.

“The Talons? I’ve heard of them, I think,” I said as we walked along. Steeljack nodded.

“I used to work with them pretty closely,” the stallion replied. “Their leader, Gawd, is an honorable griffon.”

“Gawd? What a name,” Violet snorted.

“Yes, well... Gawd is a hardass,” Steeljack said. “She’s true to her contract, though. Thankfully, we’re not here to see her.”

“Who are we here to see, then?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Old friend of mine, name of Brisk. He’s a commander with the Talons,” Steeljack said. “He used to be my commander, actually.”

We walked several minutes longer, finally coming to the ridge overlooking the entrance to the Talon’s headquarters. Steeljack stopped just before the top of the ridge, motioning with a hoof.

“The entrance is down there. I... I can’t be seen by the gate guards,” he said. “My retirement from the Talons wasn’t exactly... amicable. You’ll need to go down there and ask for Brisk. Just ask him to come out here to see me.”

“Are you sure they’ll get him for us?” I asked. Steeljack nodded. I shrugged. “Alright then. Violet, shall we?” The green unicorn trotted ahead of me down the ridge. I gave Steeljack a stiff nod before following after her. We made our way to the gate, where two griffons sat waiting. They were most definitely guards, each one holding a battle rifle at the ready. One stalked forward, while the other eyed us warily.

“Identify yourselves and state your purpose,” the guard said. Violet stepped forward.

“I am Violet Iris, with the Followers of the Apocalypse. This is my companion Radiant Star. We are seeking the services of Commander Brisk of the Talons,” she said.

“Commander Brisk is busy at the moment, is there something we may help you with?” the guard asked. Steeljack had advised us that the guards may not admit us to see Brisk in the first place. If that occurred, we had to be prepared to offer compensation.

“We really would prefer to deal with Commander Brisk. I tell you what, how does fifty caps sound to

go and get him for us?" I said, pulling the required amount of my saddlebags. The griffon's eyes glowed wide with greed.

"Fine, I tell you what, let me just take those off your hooves, and I'll see if his schedule has suddenly freed up," the guard grinned, taking the caps and placing them in his side pack. He nodded at the other guard, who disappeared into the facility. "Just wait outside for a moment for him."

I nodded. Several minutes later, a large armored griffon appeared from the gate. He grunted at the sight of us.

"What do you want? I already listened to your Follower spiel last week, and I'm not exactly buying it," he said.

"A friend of ours wishes to speak with you, and we require some assistance," I said, waving for Brisk to follow us. We made our way up the ridge where Steeljack waited. Brisk's eyes widened as his gaze fell onto the stallion, and his talons went for the pistol at his side belt. Steeljack moved in unison as the griffon and earth pony took aim at each other.

"You son of a bitch," Brisk snarled. I moved to step in between the two. I wasn't sure what was going on here. I was under the impression that Brisk and Steeljack were friends. My E.F.S. wasn't even registering Brisk as hostile for Celestia's sake!

"Don't," Steeljack growled at me. I stepped back, flabbergasted. "This is between us. Isn't that right, Brisk old buddy?" Brisk nodded, his pistol still trained on the grey earth pony. He grinned for a second, and lowered his pistol. Steeljack lowered his bit for his rifle.

"Damn right you are," the griffon said. "What do you want this time 'Jack? Last I heard you got yourself some swanky job as a security officer."

"That's right, I did," Steeljack replied. "And someday maybe if I live long enough, I might go back. Something else came up though." I looked back and forth between the two.

"Someone want to clue me in on what's going on here?" I said, interrupting the griffon and the earth pony's banter.

"We have a bit of an odd friendship," Steeljack replied. "Been several times now that Brisk and I have actually tried to take each other's heads off. How many times is that now, old friend?"

"Seven, I believe," Brisk replied. "You still haven't answered my question. What do you want? And what's with the fillies?" He motioned to Violet and me.

"We need transportation. Miss Star here has a date at Tenpony Tower in Manehattan. I'm helping her

and her friend get there,” Steeljack replied.

“Well, I can’t rightly provide any griffon transport at the moment,” Brisk responded gruffly. “Even though the Enclave itself is toast, there are still remnants of those pegasi bastards out there, and I need every available Talon to assist with those efforts.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” I asked the griffon. “We’ve got money, if that’s a problem.” Brisk waved me off.

“I’ve got a spare skywagon you can borrow if you’d like. It’s not in great condition, but it’ll get you to Manehattan for sure,” he responded. I blinked at him.

“Skywagon?” I asked, confused. The griffon laughed.

“You’ve got wings don’t you?” he said. I looked down just to make sure. Yep, my wings were both present and accounted for, but what did that have to do with a skywagon? I nodded. “Well, you can hook yourself up to this thing and fly yourself and your friends right on down to Manehattan.” Oh well that didn’t sound too bad.

“I guess that will be fine,” I said. Brisk nodded, and motioned for us to follow him into the stockyard off the side of the facility. The skywagon lay in the center of the stockyard. I walked up to the harness and used my magic to begin attaching it to my body. Violet began loading our supplies onto the skywagon, while Brisk hung back and began speaking quietly with Steeljack. Being an alicorn, our ears were much more sensitive than other pony races. I could hear every word clearly, even though I didn’t really want to.

“Thanks Brisk, I appreciate you doing this,” Steeljack said quietly, lowering his head. “I owe you one.”

“We’re even ‘Jack. After what you did the last time, I can’t rightly have you owing me,” Brisk said. Steeljack nodded, as Brisk continued. “For the record, that last time... it wasn’t your fault.”

“I could have done more,” Steeljack responded. “I could have saved her.”

“No one could have done that ‘Jack, not even you. You made a judgement call,” Brisk said. Steeljack shook his head.

“It was stupid,” he replied. “I needed to do better.”

“So do better. Help these fillies find what they’re looking for,” Brisk responded. I averted my eyes so the two couldn’t see that I had been eavesdropping. I made a mental note to ask Steeljack about ‘her’ at some point. Brisk strode up to us as Steeljack began loading his gear onto the skywagon.

“If you’re going to Tenpony Tower you’re going to want to stop in Manehattan proper and walk there first. Even these days, flying around Tenpony is dangerous. The Twilight Society doesn’t look kindly on guests who just drop in,” Brisk stated. I groaned loudly at this. More delays!

“Anything we should look out for?” Violet asked the griffon.

“Well, Manehattan’s been cleaned up quite a bit but there are still some manticores in the area and possibly some feral ghouls,” the griffon responded. “You might also run into some bloodwings. Those things are still around too.”

“Bloodwings?” I asked, confused.

“Giant mutated bats,” Brisk said. “They hunt at night, and in swarms. Nasty fuckers. They kill quickly too.” I turned to Steeljack and Violet, resting comfortably now in the skywagon.

“You guys ready to go?” I asked. Violet and Steeljack nodded in unison. Brisk chuckled.

“You better get going then. May the winds carry you to good fortune,” Brisk said. “And take care of Jack here. I’d hate to have to do something nasty to you for getting one of my old friends killed.” I nodded and met the griffon’s level gaze. He was deadly serious about this. I nodded as confidently as I could manage, and tossed my head. I couldn’t help but grin as I stretched my wings into a powerful downstroke, even with Brisk glaring at me.

“Alright, ready for takeoff!”

The Wasteland is a very different sight from the air as opposed to the ground. In a sense I suppose it’s almost beautiful. It stretches on forever, ever silent and ever still. It’s almost unrealistic that such a place could exist. Then reality sets in, and you realize this really is the world you live in. You live in the Wasteland, and it never lets you go.

More thoughts about Twilight were ringing around in my head while we were flying towards Manehattan. For some reason I could not get the purple mare off of my mind. Was she starting to take over more of my body? I couldn’t tell for sure. I wish I knew more.

Around mid-afternoon, the great city of Manehattan came into view. I was awestruck by the city’s beauty, as ruined as it was. Spires of destroyed skyscrapers still reached towards the sky, a testament to the dedication and skill of the builders. The majority of those buildings were completely ruined to the point where living conditions were unsafe, yet ponies still lived there, scavenging a living out of the

ancient city's treasures.

I set down the skywagon on the edge of the city, and began to unhitch myself from the harness. Steeljack and Violet emptied the cart of our supplies and we set up camp. I had been flying for a good several hours and needed rest. We found an abandoned building nearby that appeared to once be an office building of some sorts. Inside we found the expected skeletons scattered amidst the ruins of several printing presses, posters and books. A poster at the head of the printing room discretely stated that this used to be a printing office for the Ministry of Image. Emblazoned on the poster was the image of the Ministry's head mare, the gorgeous Rarity. Two hundred years hadn't been enough to mute her sex appeal. I held my gaze on the poster for a short time, before continuing my search for someplace to lie down and be lazy for a little while at least. I quickly located an office in the back of the building that appeared to belong to the manager of this particular operation. An intact terminal sat on the small desk inside the room, its cursor blinking on the screen.

I sat down and connected my PipBuck to the terminal, hoping there wouldn't be some sort of difficult password or something that I would have to call Violet in for. She and Steeljack were busy enough clearing things out to make a suitable camp for us. The PipBuck pulled up a diagnostics screen that scrolled through a bunch of letters and numbers, before entering in the password of '123456.' Really? That almost sounds like a combination someone would have on their luggage for Celestia's sake! Apparently even in the Ministries there were ponies who weren't so smart when it came to their passwords. The terminal opened up to several log files. Relaxing into a comfortable position, I clicked on the first log file and began to read.

Log File 06789 : Ministry of Image Manehattan Branch 01

Log Entry Recorded by: Comet Tail

Tomorrow is a very big day for us! We've got a lot of work to do before then, but tomorrow we're being visited by not one, but two Mares of the Ministries! Indeed, both Twilight Sparkle and our very own Rarity will be joining us as we dedicate a new wing of the Manehattan Public Library. Both will be on hoof to provide support for the Ministry of Image as we spread proper knowledge to everypony. I'm so excited!

After the ceremony, Twilight has requested us to provide a list of the books we've selected for the wing, and Lady Rarity wishes to speak with me personally!

I flipped to the next entry, dated a day after the dedication of the new library wing.

Log File 06791 : Ministry of Image Manehattan Branch 01

Log Entry Recorded by: Comet Tail

The dedication of the new library wing went splendidly. Everypony enjoyed the work and effort that went into making the new wing possible. Well, everypony except two certain Ministry Mares.

After the ceremony ended, I accompanied Lady Rarity and Minister Sparkle back to the Ministry of Image office from which I now write to you. Suffice to say, I could tell that things were tense between the two friends. There were several books on the list that Twilight disagreed with Rarity on, leading to a rather heated discussion about proper dissemination of information to the public, all right in front of me. I'm not ashamed to admit I spent most of the argument cowering under my desk. Lady Rarity is fierce when she so desires, and she pulled no punches with Twilight, who was getting angrier by the minute. Then, out of nowhere, the whole thing diffused and the two were hugging and apologizing for each other's behavior. It was a very odd thing to be witness to. One could say you had a sense that these were two very old friends who could have the most serious argument ever but still be friendly with each other.

In the end Rarity relented and allowed Twilight to personally review the book titles that she had not approved. Twilight ecstatically thanked Rarity and left as if nothing had even happened between the two. I pulled myself out from under my desk only to be helped up by Rarity herself, who smiled gently at me.

"There we are darling, I'm so sorry you had to see that. Twilight and I sometimes don't exactly see eye to eye on everything, and we get a little... overzealous I think is the word I'm looking for," she said. I nodded blankly at this, not wanting to incite the wrath of the white unicorn.

As for our own discussion, Lady Rarity wanted to personally thank me for my work on the new library wing and to offer me a promotion to the Ministry of Image hub on Ministry Row in Canterlot. Canterlot! Can you believe it! Suffice to say, I said yes. This will be my last official entry as Manager of this office. The employees are holding a going away party for me this Friday to send me off.

I smiled as I finished reading the log entry. Twilight herself had been in this very room! A distant memory fluttered into my mind as I began to recall that day and the fight with Rarity. Instead of a narrative like the logfile, I got flashes of impressions, of emotions and context. I remembered how angry I was at Rarity, not because of some silly books, but because I missed her. I was angry that the war was tearing apart one of my closest friendships. I remembered something else too about that night. After I left, Rarity sought me out that night at the Hoofton Hotel I was staying at. She was crying and wanted nothing more than to apologize for being so distant. Her work had been very stressful lately apparently and she felt the same way I did about keeping our friendship alive and as strong as we could.

I found myself quite disturbed by these facts. Not only was I feeling these emotions associated with the Ministry Mare, but I was seeing her memories as well. I sighed as I thought about Tenpony Tower, and what if anything the Twilight Society could do for me. I felt myself slip into blissful sleep as my thoughts slipped back to Twilight and Rarity and that evening.

oooOOOoooOOOooo

A knock at the door woke me from my slumber. I pulled myself out of the lush bed and strode to the door of my hotel suite. I quickly realized that I was reliving this memory, and that I was dreaming. The feeling was almost like that of a memory orb. I was clearly aware that I was still Radiant Star, but at the same time I was Twilight Sparkle. I paused for a moment at the door, before the knock came again. A flash of lightning appeared outside of the window of the suite, followed by a rumble of thunder and spattering of rain. A big contrast to the warmth and safety of the hotel room.

“Who is it?” Twilight called out. I could hear a light sniffing on the other side of the door.

“Twilight? It’s me, Rarity. Can I come in please?” the demure voice, tinted with sadness, asked. My host unlocked the door and threw it open in an effortless surge of magic. Before me stood not the perfect vision of beauty I had seen in pictures and posters of the Ministry Mare, but a slightly disheveled and dirty white unicorn. Her hair was tousled and erratic, and her eyes were baggy and puffy as if she had been crying for hours. Her coat was messy, as if she’d run all the way here in the rain without stopping.

“Rarity? What are you...?” Twilight started to say before the white unicorn pounced upon her in a crushing hug. Twilight put a hoof on her back and patted. “What’s wrong?”

“E-e-everything Twilight. Oh Celestia, I’m so sorry,” she said, beginning to cry once more. “I’ve been such a terrible friend. I cannot believe how I behaved earlier towards you.” I felt my host’s lips curl back in a warm smile as Twilight gently pushed out of Rarity’s embrace. Her eyes were glittering with tears as she sniffled loudly. The emotional memory surged forward, and I could feel Twilight’s sadness.

“Rarity, I’m not angry with you. I’m as much to blame for earlier as anypony is,” Twilight said, smiling before turning her head down to the floor of the suite. “I’m sorry too. I’ve been so mad lately that we haven’t seen each other. And it’s not just you but Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and... Pinkie Pie...” She trailed off as Rarity and her sat down on the velvet couch in the living quarters of my room. Pinkie Pie. Another name that rang red alerts into my mind. Something had happened between Twilight and her, I just didn’t know what.

“Twilight?” Rarity finally asked. My host looked up at her expectantly. “I don’t want us to drift apart. Oh how I wish this dreadful war had never happened.” Twilight pulled her over into another hug and held the disheveled mare there for a minute or two.

“I don’t want us to drift apart either,” Twilight said after a minute of absolute silence amidst the pitter-patter of rain drops against my balcony door. “Can I get you anything? You um... sort of smell kind of

terrible.” Rarity laughed lightly, pulling out of my hug and falling back on the couch.

“I ran all the way here, and then stood outside the hotel for an hour trying to work up what I was going to say to you,” she said, sighing. “I suppose I do look pretty bad don’t I? Not surprising that I smell the part as well.”

“How about you take a shower, while I make us some tea?” Twilight offered. “It’ll be just like old times. It’s not like I was sleeping that well anyways.” My host smiled, an honest and warm smile.

“That would be lovely dear. Anything to get away from the pressure of the Ministries for one night,” Rarity responded as she stood up from the couch and headed to the bathroom to take her shower. My host got up as well and went into the kitchen, grabbing the tea pot and tea bags from the cabinets. She began making our tea as the memory faded to black and I returned to the world of the living.

oooOOOoooOOOooo

I awoke in the darkness of the office next to the glowing terminal. It was a strange feeling, experiencing another pony’s memories, especially somepony as important as Twilight Sparkle. There was a mixture of pain and regret deep inside my chest as I recalled the experience again. I remembered that Twilight felt sad for her friends, and wished that there was more she could do to bring them all together again. I wondered briefly if that was the moment that Obsession crept into her life, forcing Twilight’s hoof along the path that led to the creation of my race... and to Twilight’s dissolution into the Goddess.

At that brief moment, I realized that it was quiet all around me. A little too quiet for comfort, now that I thought about it. I stood up and turned on my PipBuck’s flashlight and moved into the hallway outside the office. It was bare and there was no sign of anypony. The soft glow of the PipBuck illuminated the hall as I moved through the building.

I didn’t oversleep again did I? I thought as I made my way through the winding hall into the printing area. It too, was dark, and there was no indication of anypony or any... thing in the large room. A quick glance at my E.F.S. revealed only my own little blue blip in the immediate area. A shuffling noise behind me however, indicated that I wasn’t alone by any means. A groan emitted from the hallway, as I turned around and brought Stargazer to bear.

The creature shuffling its way into the printing room was a pony, unicorn by the looks of it. Its flesh looked dry and parts of it were rotted away, revealing muscle, sinew, and in some cases bone beneath the leathery skin. I immediately recognized the beast as a ghoul, and a feral one from the looks of it. While I had met ghouls before, most of them had been fully lucid and intelligent. I had not encountered many feral ghouls. The beast groaned and leaped forward at me to try and bite me.

As I brought Stargazer to bear I realized I hadn't actually fired my wonderful new gun, so what happened when I pulled the trigger was a surprise. The gun hummed happily as the barrels spun, then it poured forth a stream of bullets, glowing as they shot into the room. Bullet after bullet sank into the creature's chest and face, tearing pieces of flesh from its body and rending its legs inoperable as gunfire struck it. I gave no quarter to the beast as I continued firing. When I finally finished the thing was a bloody mess. Its head was missing completely and pieces of its body were strewn around the bleeding mess on the floor. I loved this gun, it was so awesome! I silently cheered as two blue blips came into view on my E.F.S. I heard gunfire up ahead as the blips headed towards me.

I looked up to see Violet and Steeljack enter the printing room, guns out and blazing behind them as more feral ghouls shuffled out of the hallway. Violet growled and looked up at me.

"Where did they come from?" I asked her as she unloaded her pistol into a ghoul who got a little too close for comfort. I grinned. Clearly Steeljack had been giving her some pointers on the flight to Manehattan.

"We think they crawled up in from the basement. Probably some hole in the sewer line. We've been searching through this damn place trying to find you, where'd you run off to?" she told me. I pointed back the way I came.

"I was in the back office... I thought you saw me go back there," I said, confused. She shook her head. Steeljack let loose another **crack** of his rifle, hitting one of the ghouls in the head and taking it to the ground.

"One second you were here, and then you were gone. We got worried when you didn't show up for a while. Then these things appeared out of nowhere and we thought maybe one of them got you," she said, a fearful look showing in her eyes. I smiled softly, before glaring behind Violet.

"Get down!" I snarled, bringing Stargazer to bear as Violet ducked. One of the ghouls had taken the opportunity to sneak up behind us. Stargazer tore the thing to pieces. I leaped over Violet and brought Stargazer up on the group of ferals. A message suddenly appeared on my E.F.S.

ENTER E.S.A.T.S? (Y/N) ...

Huh? I hadn't ever seen that before on my E.F.S. Mentally I flipped the prompt to Yes. More messages began to scroll up.

ENTERING ENHANCED STARGAZER ASSISTED TARGET SYSTEM...

PIPBUCK OS UPGRADE REQUIRED... UPLOADING ENHANCED PIPBUCK OS...

1%..... 50%.... 100% COMPLETE

ENHANCED STARGAZER ASSISTED TARGET SYSTEM ONLINE. MULTI-DIRECTIONAL TARGETING ONLINE.

Time slowed to a crawl as I saw my targets line up in front of my very eyes. This weapon was freaking amazing! I knew there was a reason I loved this thing! I queued up shot after shot into the entire group of ghouls, the flexibility of the shot mechanism surprising me at every selection, and let myself fall out of E.S.A.T.S. Stargazer was practically howling gleefully as its barrels spun faster than before. Then it fired, unleashing round after round of pure night at the mob. Its bullets ferociously tore into flesh, ripping apart zombie after zombie. By the time the weapon was spent the majority of the mob had been reduced to pieces on the ground.

“Yeah!” I shouted in delight. The whole thing took a hooffull of seconds, the weapon easily demolishing the crowd of ferals. A new thought crossed my mind as I the weapon spun down. I hadn’t realized it before, but there was no bullet clip or anything attached to Stargazer. How was it that it was loaded then? I didn’t have much time to think about this more before another small group of ghouls poured into the room over the bloody mess that was the previous group. Steeljack and I shred them to pieces.

“We need to get out of here and back to the skywagon!” Steeljack growled, unleashing ***crack*** after ***crack*** of his rifle into the horde of undead monstrosities. I nodded, and began to focus. My horn began glowing as Violet quickly realized what I was doing.

“Oh shi-“ she began to say as the magic released with a faint ***pop***. A second later we were standing outside of the Ministry of Image office, right in front of the skywagon.

“-it,” Violet finished saying, before glaring at me. “Warn me next time when you do that.” I grinned sheepishly, before a groaning noise behind us snapped me to attention.

“No time for that, we need to get back into the air,” I said, using my telekinesis to quickly attach the skywagon’s harness to my body. Violet and Steeljack hopped in the wagon, and I began to beat my wings heavily to get us off the ground. As I was doing this, the front door the Ministry of Image office burst open and more ghouls emerged. I lifted Stargazer and fired several bursts at the mob as we lifted into the air. A few moments later we were back above Manehattan, away from the accursed building.

“Are you two alright back there?!” I called out behind me. I tried to fly as slow as possible so the wind wouldn’t drown us out without losing altitude.

“We’re fine!” Violet called back, through the wind. “Heading straight for Tenpony?”

“No, I have someplace important I need to go!” I yelled. “I’ll explain when we get there!”

I nodded and looked across the skyline for my intended destination. Spotting it at last, I turned the skywagon towards it, and began flying as fast as I possibly could.

The Hoofton Hotel.

Located in the heart of Manehattan, the Hoofton Hotel was once the highest-class hotel a pony could stay in, short of the fancy hotels in Canterlot. It was regularly used for foreign dignitaries and government officials. Its convention center was the site of several attempted talks of peace with the zebras near the beginning of the war. Twilight Sparkle had stayed there on numerous occasions, owing to her work at the Ministry of Arcane Science hub located in the city, the building now known in the Wasteland as “Tenpony Tower.” It was also often rumored that Princess Luna had stayed at the illustrious hotel once or twice, but those rumors were never substantiated.

The memory dream I had about Rarity was still fresh in my mind throughout the entire escape from the ghouls. There was something nudging me, something pushing me towards the Hoofton Hotel. I felt like I needed to be there, as if there was some answer or closure locked in the musty old rooms. So it came to pass that we set down in front of the exquisite Hoofton Hotel. Well, somewhat exquisite. Okay, okay... it was a dump.

The front entrance of the hotel was in immense disarray. The main doors into the hotel’s lobby had fallen from their hinges and rubble lay all over the hotel’s main courtyard. Decayed remains of centuries old ponies hung from broken windows. The hotel itself loomed above us, dark and dreary. It looked as if no one had even bothered to come here since the end of the world. Cautiously we approached the doors to the lobby. A single brush of a hoof caused the door to collapse inward and fall to the floor in a cloud of ancient dust. If the outside of the hotel looked like a war zone, the inside of the hotel looked far worse in comparison. The large glass chandelier in the center of the massive lobby had fallen to the ground below, resulting in shattered glass around the lobby.

There was a large hole in the ceiling from which the chandelier had fallen, revealing frayed cabling and electrical wiring. At the far end of the lobby was the grand staircase that led up to the hotel suites above. One of the arms of the massive structure had crumbled completely. On each side of the main staircase were two hallways that led to elevators. Entrances that connected to the main lobby were shadowed by various signs, revealing the bar/restaurant that the hotel housed, the gift shop, and the workout area/pool. At one end of the lobby lay the main service desk where ponies would check in and check out for their stay at the glorious Hoofton. It lay broken in pieces, skeletons of the hotel staff lying over the desk like sick puppets. Skeletons and decayed remains of patrons and other staff lay about the ruined hotel lobby.

I racked my brain, trying to think hard of where Twilight Sparkle had stayed that fateful evening she

had spent with Rarity. For all that I could feel of the emotional impact of the encounter, I couldn't remember what room number Twilight had stayed in. I pointed to the service desk and motioned for Steeljack and Violet to follow me.

"Okay, what gives Star? What are we doing here?" Violet asked as we gingerly stepped towards the service desk, avoiding the glass piles as best as we could.

"While I was in the back office at the Image building, I found a few log entries pertaining to Twilight Sparkle and Rarity. I also had another dream... but this one was more realistic. It was about Twilight and Rarity, and they were here. They just had this big fight earlier in the day, and Rarity came to Twilight to apologize," I explained as best as I could. "I felt like... I needed to come here. I needed to see it for myself. I need to find anything that could suggest what room Twilight was in that evening. If you'd like, look around and see if you can find anything, but don't go too far," Violet and Steeljack nodded, and headed in the direction of the gift shop and restaurant.

I stepped up to the service desk to hopefully locate any records I could that would indicate where Twilight stayed when she came to the Hoofton. A voice stirred me from my search.

"Welcome, Madam Sparkle, and how are you this fine evening?" the voice said. I looked up to see an ethereally pale unicorn stallion with a bell for a cutie mark. He was standing at the service desk. I blinked my eyes a few times. Was this real? I turned around to see an equally ethereal Twilight Sparkle walking up to the desk, which now appeared to be in one piece and brand new.

"I'm well, Mr. Hoofton. Just in town for a few days. Is my normal room ready?" the ethereal Twilight asked the pale unicorn stallion. Mr. Hoofton? As in Harry Hoofton, the proprietor of Hoofton Hotel? Twilight sure knew all the right ponies. Hoofton nodded.

"Indeed, Madam Sparkle. Room 610. Penthouse suite just like you requested. Will you be requiring any room service or anything else?" the unicorn asked. Twilight smiled and shook her head.

"No, thank you. And drop the whole 'Madam' bit please. Just call me Twilight," Twilight responded. Hoofton nodded.

"Indeed. Terribly sorry, Twilight. We do so enjoy your visits. Shall I hold any calls for you until tomorrow?" the ethereal buck said as his form turned to a hazy mist and finally dissipated. I looked back to see Twilight disappear as well. By that time, Violet and Steeljack had arrived back by my side. I blinked several times before realizing they were present.

"Find anything?" I asked. Steeljack shrugged.

"There's a lot of old stuff here for sure, but I'm not sure how much of it is useful or even remotely going to help us find out where to go next," he said. "What about you?"

“I... may have found what I’m looking for. One of the rooms that Twilight used on a regular basis was Room 610, which was one of the penthouse suites,” I said. I didn’t want to reveal yet how I came about this information. “We need a map or something. Did either of you two see one of those around?”

Violet pointed back at the gift shop. “We saw something that could have been a map in there through the window. We didn’t go in there without you though. I’m not one for being separated again, not after what happened the last time,” she replied. I followed her and Steeljack to the ruined gift shop. The entrance was blocked by cardboard boxes and shelving that had fallen over. I pushed with my telekinesis and knocked down the rubble, making at the very least a passable entrance. The gift shop itself was in utter ruin. Shelves had fallen over and various knick-knacks were spread across the flooring. The lights were barely functioning here, which was the first time since we entered that I had seen a light working. The lights flickered off and on at random intervals, suggesting that the wiring had been damaged somehow. To the immediate left of the entrance was a kiosk terminal next to a large map of the hotel.

The map was in terrible condition, but readable enough to show that the penthouse suites were at the very top of the hotel, on the sixth floor. I groaned audibly.

“Of course, they would have to be up on the top floor, they’re penthouse suites!” I groaned again. I really was pretty sure we were going to be hoofing this one, since the elevators wouldn’t possibly be functioning. Then again, if the lights in here were working, would the elevators work too? It was worth a shot to check out.

“Let’s go check the elevators. Worst case scenario we have to take the stairs,” I said flatly. We made our way over to one of the small hallways to check over the elevators. All of the elevators were unusable, either with cars crashed at the bottom of the shaft or cold and unresponsive. Plastered on the walls around the elevator doors were various propaganda posters. One in particular caught my eye. The poster was of a pink mare who was smiling as if she could see into your very soul. The text ***PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU... FOREVER!*** appeared beneath her smiling face. Another voice resonated behind me.

“Thank you again, Mr. Hoofton for your hospitality. You always know how to raise my spirits when I’m here,” Twilight Sparkle, the ethereal and not so sure if real or if ghost version said as the form walked to the very elevators we stood in front of. I couldn’t tell if Violet or Steeljack could see this or not. They did not appear to be able to because neither of them screamed “GHOST!” and ran off.

“A pleasure as always, Twilight Sparkle. Enjoy your stay at the Hoofton,” the pale form of Harry Hoofton said as he escorted Twilight to the elevator. For a moment, Twilight stopped and stared at the poster of Pinkie Pie. Mr. Hoofton must have noticed this, because it was he who spoke next.

“Is everything alright, Twilight?” he asked, unsure of what reaction the purple mare might have. Twilight shakes her head for a moment and looks at Hooftan.

“Yeah... I’m fine, sorry. I’ll be up in my room now. No interruptions please,” she said, getting onto the elevator. Okay, so now I was sure I was crazy. Seeing ghostly images of long dead ponies in a creepy old hotel? Yep, bona fide crazy!

“Star...” a familiar voice broke my focus on the poster. I looked down to see Violet staring at me.

“Umm... yeah?” I said with a blank stare on my face.

“You alright there? You kind of spaced out for a bit,” she said. I nodded.

“Yeah, I’m fine, sorry. Still kind of tired,” I said. Violet chuckled.

“You’re always tired,” she said as we rejoined Steeljack out near the staircase.

“Up we go,” I said to the two as we began to climb the stairs.

I remember that I once said that robots suck. I think I might have been wrong. Stairs suck just as much, if not more.

After the second flight of stairs (these were really tall stairways!) we all began to feel a little tired and winded. After the fourth flight of stairs we were literally dragging ourselves up each step individually. Seriously, whoever invented these things, I would love to go back in a time machine and shoot them. Repeatedly. In the face.

Around the fifth flight of stairs, I began to realize that the stairs didn’t seem to be ending at the sixth floor. They continued onward and upward, for seemingly forever.

“What the fuck?” I said, pointing out this fact to the others. “Is it just me or do these things keep on going?”

We stopped at the landing for the sixth floor and approached the door back into the hotel proper. Locked. Of course! I flared my horn angrily, tearing the door off its hinges and setting it aside. I stepped into the dark hallway, trying to get some bearing of where we were at in the hotel. The words *Second Floor* appeared on the side wall just inside the hallway. I groaned.

“Second Floor? What is going on here?” I yelled angrily. I stomped my hoof in anger, before a yelp

behind me got my attention. I turned to see... nothing. Violet and Steeljack had disappeared behind me.

“Steeljack? Violet?” I called out. “Where are you guys? Is this some sort of prank? Come on out guys!” I walked back into the stairwell. No pony was in sight in the vicinity. What in the world was going on? Did we step into some sort of alternate dimension or something?

Maybe they continued up the stairs and I just need to catch up. I have been zoning out a lot since we got here, I thought. I started back up the stairway, trying to process everything that was happening. I arrived at the next landing, and pushed open the door. The sign inside the hallway said *Fifth Floor*. Okay, now I was really confused. Was this some sort of prewar magic trick or something? A voice down the hallway made me take notice.

“Sir, I’m trying to figure out what the problem is, it’s just taking too long,” the voice of an ethereal unicorn walking down the hallway towards me was saying. The unicorn had a wrench and wand for his cutie mark. Great, now I’m back to seeing ghosts again! The ethereal image of Mr. Hoofton appeared in the stairway behind me.

“Well get it fixed, we have important clients staying here. We need to ensure that everything in the hotel is in tip top shape, and that includes the stair extending enchantments!” Hoofton responded. The other unicorn nodded.

“Yes sir, until we get it fixed there is a workaround stairway on this floor. We’ll route any guests through there,” the ethereal stallion said as his form dissipated into nothingness. Another stairway? I looked back up at the never-ending staircase above me and back into the hallway. Deciding to take a chance on this other stairway, I stepped into the hallway and started down it, igniting my horn for a little light. The walls of the hotel hallway were dirty and stained; the wallpaper peeling back in various places. Many of the doors for the rooms themselves were hanging off of their hinges, darkness pervading the areas they had been protecting. A few decayed remains lay at the foot of several doors. With only the light of my horn to see where I was going, I was beginning to get uneasy. Why was coming here such a good idea again? I pushed any thoughts of unease into the back of my mind as I came into the middle of the floor’s long hallway. Another hallway that bisected this one ran perpendicular from the front and rear of the hotel, revealing more rooms and more rubble.

I was beginning to get worried about where Steeljack and Violet had ran off to. I knew deep down neither of them would just leave me, even if I was a little bonkers in the head. I turned down to the right to head to the rear of the hotel, hoping that the third staircase would be there. A screech behind me interrupted my train of thought, followed by the flapping of leathery wings.

“Oh shit,” was all I managed to say before turning around to see hundreds of beady red eyes staring right at me from the darkness at the other end of the hallway. Within moments, those eyes were coming closer as the bloodwing swarm began migrating in my general direction. It was do or die time,

and I did what any natural born Wasteland survivor would do at that moment in time.

I ran for my fucking life.

Immediately I turned tail and began hoofing it down the hallway, trying to keep ahead of the swarm. In the darkness I could make out a door just ahead of me. I burst through the door ferociously and into a stairwell. Unfortunately, I managed to break the door off of its hinges at the same time, which didn't really help me get away from the bloodwings. I turned back in time to see the first of the large bat creatures reaching out with a claw to scrape at me. Stargazer came up and spat hot lead into the thing, ripping its wings into shreds and forcing it back into the swarm. I growled, and picked up the door with my telekinesis, vainly trying to put it back into place. It was not working well at all. I had managed to completely bust the hinges, meaning the door wouldn't stay for very long. I opted to try my luck and began running up the stairs, holding the door in place with my magic as long as possible. Finally I let go and opened the door to the sixth floor, without breaking this one and closed it behind me. Several thumps and scratches at the door seconds later indicated the swarm was trying to claw their way in. Several seconds later, the noises stopped completely. I peeked out the window in the door to see that the bloodwings hadn't left, they were merely waiting for me to try and come back out. Hundreds of red eyes filled every bit of space in the small stairwell.

I turned back to the hallway in front of me. This hallway was much larger than the others, and branched off into several rooms. A skylight was situated above the center of the floor, the night sky filtering in and casting an eerie glow on everything. Rubble was everywhere, and at the other end of the hallway a section of the wall had fallen out, revealing the city landscape beyond. I made my way into the center of the floor, looking for the room I was here for. I turned down a side hall and spotted it. The gold letters **610** appeared on the front of the room's door, which was conspicuously still attached to the door frame. I gulped with fear. I couldn't back down now. There just had to be answers for me here.

I pushed open the door and walked into the penthouse suite. It looked much the same as I remembered it from my dream. The couch that Rarity and Twilight had embraced each other and apologized on was turned over and the balcony door was completely missing, letting in a slight breeze from the cool night air. I pulled the couch up and set it down with my magic so that it was right side up before moving to it and laying down on it, tears beginning to form in my eyes. There was nothing here. I came into a crazy creepy hotel, possibly lost my two best friends, and almost got myself eaten by giant mutated bats... and for what? A room with a couch? I really was beginning to doubt my sanity at this point.

At some point in my mental self-abuse, I drifted off to sleep with tears in my eyes and a heavy heart.

oooOOOoooOOOooo

I awoke to find myself on the same couch, but a little different. The couch wasn't ruined, and laying at

the other end next me was a lovely white unicorn with a purple mane. I realized after a moment that this was another memory of Twilight's I was witnessing. After several moments, Rarity stirred in her sleep and dreamily opened her eyes, noticing that my host was staring at her.

"Twilight, darling?" she said, groggily. "Are you alright?" My host looked at her for a moment, and nodded.

"I'm fine, just had a bad dream is all. I thought I'd gone to my bedroom though," My host responded. Rarity let out a slight giggle.

"I'm afraid that's my fault darling. I kept you up all night and you fell asleep on the couch. I didn't have the heart to leave you there," she mused, smiling at my host. Say what you will about anypony, but Rarity had an incredible smile. Twilight's body felt warm inside just being on the receiving end of it.

"Thank you. What time is it? I feel like I've been out for days," My host said, yawning profusely. A quick glance at the clock revealed it was still roughly four in the morning. Twilight groaned. "I gotta get more sleep some times. I can't keep waking up like this. It's going to kill me." Rarity shifted so that she was right up next to me. I could feel her coat brush up against my host's, a gentle caress passed across the centuries.

"Uhh... Rarity? What are you doing?" My host said, my eyes widening. Rarity smiled at Twilight again warmly.

"My dear, tell me what your dreams are about. You need someone to talk to, and I am here for you," she replied. My host laid her head on her hooves and began to speak.

"I keep dreaming about Pinkie. I miss her. I mean the real her. Not this addicted crazy version of herself that she puts on for her Ministry," Twilight said. "Every time it's the same. I keep running down this hallway, chasing after her, but I never catch her. It's terrifying. I feel like I've lost her for good." My host started to sob, as Rarity placed her forelegs around her neck, holding Twilight tightly. She began to coo softly.

"Shh, my dear. It's alright. I know how you feel darling. We all want the best for Pinkie Pie. But a wise pony once taught me that through all things, a pony must always continue to be a good friend and all things are possible," she said softly. My host cleared her eyes.

"Who told you that?" My host asked weakly.

"You did my dear," the white unicorn replied. This of course, made Twi cry more. Rarity smiled again and brushed my host's mane out of her eyes, staring at her with her ice blue eyes. Once again, my host's eyes cleared up a bit to look at her as she began to speak.

“You are the best friend anypony could ever hope to have, Twilight Sparkle. The things you have done for us... for me... and for Equestria are not unnoticed,” she said confidently. “I can only hope to give back even half of what you have given to us.” A fire burned in my stomach at this. Finally, my host sighed.

“I suppose you’re right. I just wish there was something we could do for her,” Twilight said, before chuckling a bit. “Look at us, sitting here hugging and crying like a couple of silly fillies.” Rarity continued to smile brightly.

“It’s alright my dear. It’s in these times that friendships are tested, and I would betray myself as Generosity if I didn’t give myself freely to be here for you,” the beautiful mare replied. Her eyes dazzled brightly with tinges of tears as well. My host smiled, weakly at first, but then wider as she pulled Rarity closer into another hug.

“Thank you,” Twilight choked out through the tears. “For everything.” They held each other for what felt like an eternity, the fire in my host’s stomach continuing to burn. Finally, Twilight pulled away and stared into the white mare’s brilliant eyes. They were eyes that could shatter a colt’s heart in mere seconds, as blue as the endless sea of eternity. Instinctively I realized in the back of my mind what was happening next. A few moments later, I felt my host’s lips lock with hers, the connection filling the purple mare with warmth. Seconds later, the connection broke as they pulled back from each other.

“Ohmygosh I’m so sorry Rarity!” My host cried out in shock at the kiss. Rarity simply smiled again warmly.

“It’s quite alright darling. I understand. I don’t hold it against you. It was a very passionate moment I will admit,” she said, laughing softly. My host’s eyes widened further.

“You mean you’re not mad at me?” Twilight asked. Rarity shook her head.

“No my dear. You’re my very best friend, aren’t you? I could never truly be mad at you,” she replied. My host sighed weakly as she fell back onto the couch and out of her embrace.

“I just kissed you,” Twilight said blankly as the truth of the matter set in. Rarity nodded succinctly.

“Indeed my dear you just did,” she said, with a hint of mirth in her voice. “Listen, it’s almost four thirty, you should probably get some rest. You’ve had a long night, and if I’m not found near my own hotel room, well... you know just how our employees get when they can’t find us.” Twilight laughed and nodded.

“Yeah... I know. They keep threatening to stick an enchanted necklace on me so they can keep track of where I go,” She said, chuckling as Twilight got up to walk Rarity to the door. Twilight opened it for

her and she stepped out into the hallway.

“Good day my dear Twilight. We must get together again sometime soon. Perhaps a spa day is in order,” the white Ministry Mare said, as she waved her hoof. My host waved back and closed the door. She walked to the bedroom, looking out at the Manehattan cityscape as she did. The memory drifted into nothingness as Twilight drifted into sleep on the bed.

oooOOOoooOOOooo

I came to again in the same couch, but back in my own body. The whole experience of seeing Twilight’s memories was mentally tiring. I arose from the couch to a presence in the room. A ghostly figure began to coalesce in front of me.

“Took you long enough to wake up,” the figure said as it stepped from the mist. It was Twilight again, but she looked... different. Her mane was ragged and her eyes seethed with rage. “I was beginning to think you were going to just sleep the entire day.”

“Who are you?” I asked the figure, trying to figure out what was going on. I was still reeling from the memory I had witnessed.

“Me? I’m nopony, just like you. That’s right, you’re a little nopony,” the Twilight-shaped figure responded, a snarl in her voice. “Poor little Star. Nopony loves her, that’s why even her own friends left her!”

“That’s not true,” I snarled back at the figure, who laughed. “I repeat, who are you? You’re not Twilight.”

“Oh but I am Twilight, but for the time being, you can call me Anger. The others, they’ve been trying to keep me from you for a while now, but the first memory released me. You saw didn’t you? The anger in Twilight’s heart over being separated from her friends? I must admit, Loneliness had a play in that one as well, albeit a rather small one,” the being responded.

“How are you here in the real world? I thought you were inside my head,” I said flatly. Anger chuckled.

“You’re still dreaming of course. This is all still just a figment of your imagination,” the wicked mare replied. “Not that it really matters. You’re alone, and you are lost inside a place where nopony else is going to find you. Nopony else cares about you.” Her words cut me deeply. Violet and Steeljack didn’t really leave me did they? They wouldn’t, I knew they wouldn’t.

“You’re wrong. My friends will find me. They care about me,” I said, stomping the floor angrily.

Anger burst into full-on laughter.

“That’s funny! You really think they care about you. They hate you,” she said, grinning widely.

“Stop it.”

“They want to be rid of you.”

“Stop it!”

“They want you dead.”

“**STOP IT!**” I shouted, in a loud commanding voice. “**LEAVE ME ALONE! I DON’T WANT YOU INSIDE MY HEAD! MY FRIENDS CARE ABOUT ME!**” I shook from shouting so loud as Anger merely grinned and chuckled.

“If you really believed that, then why are you defending it so? You must know in your heart deep down that I am right,” she snarled again. “After all, I should know. I’m the embodiment of Anger. And you’re giving me a little thrill, showing it off like this.” I fell to my haunches in front of the ghostly mare, tears welling up in my eyes.

“Just leave... leave me alone,” I said, crying my eyes out. “I’m tired of this... all these emotions in my head. I’m tired of you!”

“Too bad sister. We’re not done yet –“ the evil mare began to say, interrupted by a trembling noise in the room around us. The mare’s eyes widened.

“No! Not yet! She can’t wake up yet! She can’t –“ Anger shouted, as the trembling grew louder and the world went white.

“Star! Wake up!” a voice above me called out. I was being pushed on and shaken back and forth. My eyes opened slowly to the morning sun just outside the room. I looked up to see Steeljack and Violet Iris standing above me, the latter holding both hooves out and pushing on me furiously.

“Violet...? What happened? Where did you...?” I choked out as Violet hugged me. Steeljack tipped an invisible hat my way, and nodded.

“We’ve been looking all over this place for you! This place is really cracked up!” Violet exclaimed, releasing me from her hug. I groaned.

“I know, I ran into a swarm of bloodwings just getting up here,” I said, standing up to stretch my legs. I felt like I had been asleep for days. I lowered my head to my friends. “I thought... I thought that you both left me here, alone...”

“Why would you ever think that?” Steeljack responded. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“I thought you wouldn’t want to be my friend anymore. I know this was a crazy idea coming here in the first place,” I humbled myself before them. “I thought you hated me.” Violet chuckled slightly.

“You really thought we’d leave you and not want to be your friend?” she responded. I nodded in affirmation. Violet playfully punched me on the shoulder. “Silly. Why would you think that? You ran off down a hallway after something and we lost track of you. We decided that if you were going to come here anyways, we’d try and get here too. We definitely don’t hate you.”

“Violet’s right. I don’t hate you either. We did manage to find the controls for the staircases on the way up here. Apparently they had staircase-enhancing enchantments on them to make it seem like the hotel was bigger than it really was. I swear, those pre-war ponies were fucked up,” Steeljack grumbled. “I shut them off so we should be able to get back down that way.” I smiled warmly at the two.

“Thank you... for trying to find me. This was a fool’s errand, though. There never were any answers here for me. Just more bad memories,” I said, as I caught a glimmer of white in the corner of my eye. *What was that?* I thought as I turned away from Violet and Steeljack. I made my way across the penthouse to a cabinet hanging on the wall near the bedroom. A faint sliver of white could be seen within.

“What’s wrong Star?” Violet asked as she trotted up next to me. I pointed at the cabinet.

“There’s something in there,” I said, as I opened the cabinet. What lay before me was one of the most beautiful sights I had witnessed ever. Resting on the main shelf of the cabinet, was a small figurine of a white unicorn with a purple mane. The immaculate Rarity was as beautiful as she always was. She was striking a magnificent pose. Every part of the statue immortalized Twilight’s best friend.

At the bottom of the statue was a plaque where the following words were engraved.

Be Unwavering.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! The Fires of Friendship – As long as you are within sight of friendly allies, yourself and each ally in your party gains a +10% damage buff against hostile enemies.

New Spell! Royal Canterlot Voice – You can now shatter eardrums, and break glass with just your voice! Just remember: talking loud should do the trick!

Spark Level: 20% - Spark has taken over this much of your body thus far.

PipBuck/Weapon Upgrade: Enhanced Stargazer Assisted Targeting System (E.S.A.T.S) – The E.S.A.T.S. mode for the Stargazer 6000 allows the user to queue individual shots from the weapon with deadly accuracy. This allows the user to fire burst shots that can be targeted multi-directionally instead of firing a single burst into a single target.

Violet Iris: Level Up! Small Guns skill increased by +20%

Steeljack: Level Up!

Chapter 3: Science is Magic

"Oooh... Pretty! Where did these come from? They're not in the book either!"

Magic. It's an incredible force of pure emotion. Everypony has magic in them, albeit in different ways. Earth ponies, with their clever ingenuity and strong hooves, feel their magic more innately than the other races, even if they don't always know it. Pegasi wield their magic in more direct ways, controlling the pattern of weather and clouds. Unicorns control the very primal force of magic itself, bending it to their will. Alicorns on the other hand, being a combination of all three races, feel magic in a very distinct way. Alicorns are truly aware of the primal life force of magic all around them, and can direct that force with mere thought.

Of course, the very use of magic led to science, and science led to industry. Industry led to war. The very things that made the three races special was what led those races into the future. Earth pony ingenuity created weapons and armor beyond anypony's wildest dreams. Their contributions to the war led to the creation of some of the most amazing technology ever, including the PipBuck and the Stable. Pegasi honed the art of war in very different ways, putting their cloud technology to great use to create inventions that could only be used by pegasi or cloud-capable hooves. This was one of the very reasons that the pegasi were involved in stealth operations above the other races. Quite simply, the zebras could not physically touch their technology. Unicorns were responsible for one of the most important, and most deadly, inventions of the entire war: the megaspell. Originally designed for healing, the usage of such massive magic quickly became twisted for wartime purpose, until the very last day when Equestria ceased to be and the Wasteland took its place.

But even in the ashes of the worst day in Equestrian history, magic is still here. It still lives and breathes in everything. It gives us hope, that one day that magic may be used for more than just killing one's brother or sister.

"It's... beautiful."

I reached out with my magic and picked the statuette up, smiling with delight. This is what I came here to find! As my magic brushed the figurine, I felt a jolt of energy transfer from the tiny thing to me, and instantly I felt like I could take on anything. Like I could do what the plaque told me I should do, which is to be *unwavering*. A tiny white unicorn in my mind told me I had completed my task here.

"What is it?" Violet asked, curiously.

"An old friend," I replied. I stowed the figurine into my saddlebags as I caught Violet's confused expression. "I had another dream, about Twilight and Rarity. I think this is what I was meant to find. Something about this seems right. I feel like I'm rescuing an old friend." She nodded in response.

Rarity. I could remember everything about her now. The way she would always help her friends in need. How she always acted with such grace and civility. And while the fashionista turned government official often cared more about her own appearance, it was her true beauty on the inside that always shone through.

Another glint of light caught my eye. Next to where the figurine was stored was a small black orb with a swirling purple cloud inside of it. It was a memory orb, a device used for the storing and playback of a pony's memories. The orb seemed to sparkle in the sun. I swept the orb into one of my saddlebags with a hoof, since I most definitely did not want to view it now, and touching said orb with my telekinesis would surely activate it. I looked up at Violet and smiled.

"Time to blow this pop stand," I said with a grin. "If we're lucky, we should make it to Tenpony Tower today. It's not far from here." I pushed open the door to Room 610 and stepped into the hallway. The hotel no longer seemed as dark and grim to me, now that I had my prize. We made our way down the dilapidated hallway back to the main staircase. As soon as I stepped through the door I could sense how wrong I was. A chittering noise filled my ears as I entered the stairwell.

"Shit!" I exclaimed, jumping back out of the way before the first of the bloodwings swooped down and nearly bit my head off. I slammed the door as fast as possible, just as one of the mutated creatures attempted to make it through. The door severed its leg, spraying blood all over me and the floor. The leg twitched on the floor as I stepped back from the door, which was now being pounded upon incessantly by the beasts behind it.

"They waited for us to get up here! They fucking waited!" I cried out angrily. Steeljack grimaced.

"We need to get a move on. Those things aren't going to wait any longer. They're gonna tear that door down to get to us," he said, nudging Violet and me to follow him. We moved quickly and silently back down the hallway to the other stairwell. More pounding on that door indicated that we were officially trapped on this floor.

"Star, do you think you can teleport us down to ground level?" Steeljack asked, pointing at Room 610. I stared at him.

"What...?" I responded flatly.

"Teleport. Down there. Now?" Steeljack enunciated, pointing at us and then at the room. I nodded and followed them back into the room.

"I'm not sure if this is such a good idea... what if we end up in the ground or stuck in part of the hotel?" I said shakily.

"You can do this, I know you can. You did it before remember? The Ministry of Image office?" Steeljack said point-blank, reminding me of the ghouls. A crashing noise outside the room indicated that the giant bloodthirsty creatures coming to kill us had broken down at least one of the stairwell doors and were now making their way towards us. I shook my head and forced myself to focus, grabbing onto Violet and Steeljack to begin casting my teleport spell. The door began to crack as I realized I wasn't going to have enough time to finish casting it before the bloodwings got into the room. Without thinking, I did the next best thing.

I grabbed both of my friends, wrapped some telekinesis around their legs, and leapt out of the balcony into the free air. Locking my wings in to gain speed, I could hear violent screaming in my ears as my companions were processing what was happening. Above me, the sky exploded into blackness as the bloodwing swarm burst out of the hotel room and into the open sky. The majority of the swarm was

pushed back into the hotel however by the full light of the Sun, while several smaller swarms took refuge in the shadows of the buildings and began flying down towards me. I was dropping fast like a dead weight, intent on escaping the bloodthirsty swarms. Violet and Steeljack continued their screaming. I couldn't really blame them. What else would you do if you were suddenly forced out a six story window on a violent collision course with the streets below?

"Hold on!" I yelled, the wind nearly carrying my voice away. Four stories. Three stories. Two. I had only one shot at this, or else we'd be bloody messes splattered all over the concrete. I was picking up speed like I was one of the Wonderbolts. I spread my wings out and attempted to pull out of the dive, my muscles screaming in agony at the insanity I was trying to perform. The ground inched closer and closer and then the unthinkable happened. I shot forward like a rocket, trying my best to keep hold on my passengers, who were coincidentally still screaming their heads off. I had a feeling their vocal chords were going to be shot full of holes later on, if we survived this craziness. My horn felt like it was going to explode from the prolonged telekinesis and my entire body felt like it would fail at any moment.

I groaned in complete and utter agony as I held my wings out, trying to slow my progress as I shot down the street. Slowly but surely my speed began to wane, and then it stopped completely... thanks to the giant pile of garbage that I apparently was not looking right at as we crashed into it. At the same time, I lost control of my telekinesis, throwing both Violet and Steeljack into the same pile. The stench of centuries old garbage assaulted my senses and reminded me that I was still alive. I pulled myself up out of the pile and looked up. We had managed to travel nearly an entire two blocks. The bloodwings were no longer following us. I sighed in relief as my wing joints burned like they were on fire.

"Violet? Steeljack?" I called out, looking for my companions. My calls were met by the angriest little unicorn I will possibly ever know. Violet jumped at me and began violently pounding at my chest.

"Don't! You! EVER! Do! That! AGAIN!" she managed to spit out in between heavy breaths. I grabbed her and pulled her into a hug, which stopped her for a moment. I held her there for a moment and sighed.

"I'm glad you're alright. Sorry I scared you," I said after a short time. A rustling of the pile caught my attention as Steeljack pulled himself up and out of the pile. He looked a little worse for wear, but otherwise okay.

"You know I said teleport, right?" he finally said after a few minutes of breathing heavy. I shrugged.

"No time," I responded, as Violet pulled herself out of my embrace and we climbed down the pile of garbage. Then it hit me. Standing on a squishy pile of garbage isn't exactly as hard as standing on solid ground soon became for me. As soon as I hit the street my knees wobbled and I fell face first into the concrete.

"Ow," I said, groaning. Violet shook her head, and opened her saddlebags, pulling out a syringe of Med-X and a Healing Potion. She injected me with the syringe, which began working its incredibly amazing pain reducing magic before the lovely cough medicine taste of the healing potion touched my lips.

"There, that should help, considering we should probably get moving. I don't want to be out here at night so close to that place with those... things," she said, pointing at the hotel. I nodded weakly,

pulling myself up so I could stand. My legs were still a little shaky, but at least I was capable of physical movement. That was saying something at least. Slowly we began trudging our way down the street, my PipBuck having marked Tenpony Tower for us on its automated mapping function.

To say that I felt pain was an understatement. Even with a fair dose of Med-X, my wings still felt like they were on fire. I grumbled to myself in pain as a familiar voice spoke up within me.

Well... that was interesting, Spark said. Oh good, I was beginning to think I'd gotten rid of you crazy voice!

What do you want now Spark? I asked the bodiless voice. She merely chuckled in response.

Oh nothing, I just felt like chiming in. Didn't think you had that in you to save those two, not after what happened in the hotel, Spark replied.

I don't want to talk about that. If that's all you have to say, then I think we're done, I thought back, performing the equivalent motion in my mind of 'talk to the hoof cuz the ears ain't listenin!'

Whoa there little filly, calm down. I'm on your side remember? Spark mused. ***I was merely commenting on how impressed I was by your skills in magic.***

And I was merely telling you to shut the hell up and leave me alone, I responded angrily. *Now if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to.*

Spark didn't respond after that. I had a strange feeling I'd probably hurt her feelings or something. Like a crazy voice in my head could have feelings. I mean, I was certifiable at this point. Having strange conversations with a voice in my head? Check! Strange dreams where I'm accosted by two hundred year old emotions? Check! Found any answers whatsoever? Not check! That's right, I still had to find out why this crazy was in me. And to do that, well I have one thing to say to that!

Tenpony Tower, ho!

Okay, so maybe not. As it turns out, the way into the front gate of Tenpony Tower was to walk the monorail lines to access the station inside of the Tower itself. Inelegant, but that was the rub of it. Heeding the earlier advice of Commander Brisk, and opting to not fly directly up to the station and scare the living daylight and possibly get shot at (plus my wings still felt like they were on fire and we were all still sore from jumping out of a six story window), we decided to hoof it to the closest settlement to spend the night. Of course, that settlement was Friendship City.

Friendship City was a unique place. It was situated within the "Statue of Friendship", a pre-war gift from the zebras to promote peace and understanding, before we blew each other up to hell. The ponies of Friendship City made their home around and inside the massive statue, and were a city on the rise, working to better the lives of ponies everywhere. We arrived at the bridge over to the island, where several Applejack's Rangers were stationed, guarding the settlement. They waved us on in, and a bright road sign with the words ***WELCOME TO FRIENDSHIP CITY*** met our eyes as we crossed into the settlement proper.

It was a strange feeling walking into the city. Unlike Mall, nopony seemed to mind here that I was an alicorn. In fact, many of the ponies we passed waved or said hello to us. It was like stepping into a different world, where the Wasteland wasn't out there. In the distance across the bay we could see the imposing visage of Tenpony Tower, our intended destination, as well as the monorail line we needed to access the next day to get there. We made our way into the Statue and quickly located the local inn. A cream colored mare with cherries on her flank waited at the desk inside the inn, looking a little bored. She perked up a bit when we entered her establishment.

"Welcome to Friendship City!" she exclaimed happily. "I'm Cherry Cobbler, owner of this fine place of business. What can I help you with this evening?"

"We require lodging for the evening," Violet said, taking charge. That mare, she always knew how to barter for service better than anypony I knew.

Cherry grinned ecstatically. "Of course my dear. I have several rooms open at the moment. Business is a little slow for the time being."

"Why's that?" I asked, wondering what she meant. Cherry looked away for a moment and then back to me.

"Oh, no reason. Just slow season is all. Happens from time to time. Perfectly normal!" the cream mare responded nervously. She chuckled a bit. I nodded in return.

"Right... well then... the rooms?" Violet interjected, holding the bag that contained our money. "How much for two rooms? Star and I can share a room." Cherry returned to normal immediately at the sound of the caps in our bag jingling.

"Oh, right. Yes, two rooms should be fine. Since you're our only customers at the moment, you get our special discount! How does twenty caps per room sound for the night?" she asked, still acting a little nervous. Violet nodded, and pulled out the right number of caps and floated them to her. The mare quietly thanked us and showed us to our rooms. Once inside our room, I turned to Violet.

"Is it just me, or was she acting a little off?" I said. "Almost like she was nervous."

"I noticed it too," Violet responded, shrugging. "She only started doing it when you asked her why business was so slow. You know, come to think of it, I really didn't see that many ponies out and about and this is Friendship City, one of the larger cities in the Wasteland." A glint of light held in her eye. Oh I know that look! You don't get to make that look!

"Do you suppose that there's something wrong?" she said with a sly grin on her face. I groaned and facehooved.

"You always gotta get involved in something don't you?" I asked her. She grinned again and nodded.

"Sure, it's our job after all. Helping ponies in need is what we do," she responded. I sighed and shook my head.

"Fine. I'll talk to her and see if I can find out what's going on around here," I said finally. "It's not like

we're that far away from Tenpony anyways." Violet squealed in delight.

"Great! I'm going to go over and let Steeljack know what's going on," she said, bouncing up off her haunches and trotting out of the room. I sighed. It was going to be a very long night. I made my way out of my room and back to the front desk, where our cream-colored hostess was laying on a couch behind the desk, snoozing. I sat down quietly next to her and nudged her with my muzzle. She awoke shortly after, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Miss Cobbler? We need to talk," I said, as her eyes widened.

"I... I... I can't," she stammered. "We're not supposed to talk about it."

"What's wrong? I might be able to help you," I said softly. "My friends and I, we do this sort of thing. Helping others, you know." The cream mare sat up on her haunches and sighed.

"Okay... it all started last week..." she began.

On the list of things that I decree to suck, the first two being robots and stairs (I think the stairs are still laughing at me), Stables have to suck the worst.

Cherry Cobbler was frightened, and with good reason. A week before we arrived at Friendship City, an excavation team on the island located what they believed to be the entrance to an old Stable. She explained that the excavation team opened the door to the underground complex and went inside. Hours passed and nopony came out. Eventually screaming was heard from the door, and the Stable mysteriously closed up again. Since that day, ponies had either fled Friendship City or worse: they were going missing with no leads as to how or where they were going. The council of the city decreed that the event should never be mentioned and decided that if they left the Stable alone, what was down there would leave them alone.

Unfortunately for them, it hadn't. The attacks got worse, but nopony would say anything about it, at least until Cherry broken down and finally told me what was going on. I scowled at first, and then asked Cherry to point me to the ponies in charge of the city so that we could offer some assistance. The city council ponies were all too eager to finally find out what was going on, and were excited that a non-citizen had offered to fix it. If we died or got lost, they didn't really need to try and rescue us.

Early the next morning we made our way to the excavation site, which was underneath a small cave in the side of the island the Statue of Friendship was built on. A little white unicorn in the back of my mind gave me courage as we stood before the Stable door, which had a large 33 emblazoned on the front of it. I lifted Stargazer warily as Violet hacked the terminal to open the door from the outside. The large geared door groaned as it extended from the entrance and rolled away to reveal the entrance of the stable. Of course, nothing happened. I breathed a sigh of relief as we made our way inside the underground shelter. The lights along the main corridor were barely functional, flickering on and off at random intervals. Plastered along the walls were several posters with messages like **BRING YOUR FILLY TO WORK DAY.** and pictures of fillies and their parents enjoying pieces of highly delicious looking chocolate cake. Looking at the poster, my stomach growled as I remembered I didn't exactly eat anything for breakfast. Eventually, we came to a main corridor that branched off to the right and

the left.

“So um... which way do we go?” I asked blankly. I checked both my PipBuck and my E.F.S for any sign of where we should go, and was met with a resounding nothing. I sighed. “I mean, I’ve never been in one of these things before...” Violet pointed to the right hallway.

“This way should take us to Administration, if I remember correctly,” she responded. “We should get to the Overmare’s office. See if we can find out what happened here.” I nodded, heading down the hallway. Violet stayed close behind me, and Steeljack took up our rear. The hallway opened up into a bare room with several doors at different areas. The lights in this area of the Stable barely worked as well. It was very strange as well that we hadn’t seen any bodies yet either. Usually any Stable that was abandoned would have at least some bodies lying around. We could barely make out that one of the doors was labeled **OVERMARE’S OFFICE**. Above the door was a brass plate, where the words **TRUST THE OVERMARE** were engraved. We moved closer to the door, and pushed on it. The door shifted open, revealing a sparse room with a terminal on a desk and several lockers. I headed to the lockers and proceeded to telekinetically rip all the doors off of them. Inside was a veritable gold mine of materials, which I gleefully poured into my saddlebags. Rad-X and RadAway, a box of Med-X, even a .44 magnum Ironshod revolver and a box of shells! Turning away from the lockers, I went to Violet, who was busily hacking the terminal.

“Anything good?” I asked her. She motioned me over. There were several audio logs on the terminal, along with an audio message marked ‘Private’. Violet clicked on the private message, and began to play it.

“Is this thing on? It is? Well damn, can we start over I’m not ready. No time? Alright then...”

Hello there, my name is Scootaloo, you might know me as the president of the Red Racer company. Today however, I’m speaking to you as one of the leaders of Stable-Tec. If you’re receiving this message, it means the worst has happened, and we failed. I’m so sorry, please forgive all of us.”

A pause takes place, and crying can be heard in the background.

“Where was I? Oh, right. Once again, if you’re receiving this message then you have been appointed the Overmare of Stable 33. Good luck to you in your position. Your Stable is very important. You see, we at Stable-Tec believe that it would be pointless to save so many, when all we’re going to do is kill each other in the end. We have to know what went wrong. Why we did this in the first place. To that end, your Stable has been selected to be part of a vital social project to help in this effort.

In the contents of your terminal are the details of this entire complex, along with all details of the test. Your purpose in this Stable is to contribute to the body of Equestrian knowledge, by establishing the outer limits of baseline ponies. To that end, your Stable has been outfitted with a specialized Artificial Intelligence System, an almost sentient computer to aid you in your duties. Also, beneath the Maintenance wing of your Stable is the entrance to your medical examination and fitness testing facility. This facility provides a series of mental and physical examinations for your ponies, during which their vital statistics will be recorded in order to determine the ideal Equestrian citizen. If something goes wrong, and the testing cannot be continued, access at the terminal in the facility will shut the entire operation down. The computer will assist you in shutting everything down and then will shut down itself.

From all of us... thank you. Your contributions mean everything to us. We're counting on you...

And... we're sorry. We're so very very sorry. May Celestia have mercy on our souls.

The recording ended with sobbing. Scootaloo cried until the very end of the recording when it shut off. I almost cried myself. A beeping noise on the terminal alerted me out of my stupor however. A message appeared on the terminal.

Computer Online... Searching... Searching...

"Huh? This says that the computer that ran this place is still online," Violet said, confused. A voice cut me off as I was about to reply.

"Welcome to the Stable 33 Medical Evaluation Facility. As part of required Stable protocols, medical examination is required of all Stable citizens. Please proceed to the Medical Evaluation Facility immediately," the voice stated.

We stared blankly at the terminal. The voice continued on.

"You have not left the office yet. Please proceed to the Medical Evaluation Facility. There will be refreshments provided at the end of your examination."

My stomach growled again. I grinned sheepishly as Violet and Steeljack stared at me.

"So... food?" I said with a smile. Both my friends facehooved and groaned.

By Celestia's sloppy plot, my stomach can get me into trouble sometimes! We made our way out of the Overmare's office and down to the Maintenance wing. The lockers in the Maintenance room held more treasures, including a combat shotgun and some injectors hidden away in the backs of the lockers labeled 'Dash.' In the center of the Maintenance Wing, a spiral set of stairs extended down into unknown depths. At the bottom of the stairs was a door that was labeled **MEDICAL EVALUATION FACILITY**. I pushed on the door, which opened with a soft hissing noise. The room was a bare, well-lit room with a camera in the top corner, and no discernible exits. As we entered a cold robotic voice greeted us.

"Welcome to the Stable 33 Medical Evaluation Facility. The examination shall begin shortly. As part of required Stable-Tec protocols, group examinations are not permitted. All Stable residents are required to be examined individually."

We looked around, confused. A second hissing noise came from above us as the several pneumatic tubes lowered from the ceiling, separating me from Violet and Steeljack. Shit! Why was everything in this Celestia-forsaken Wasteland trying to keep me from my friends?! I waved at Violet and Steeljack frantically as I began to be sucked up the tube.

"Be careful!" I shouted at them as I was sucked up into blackness. A few moments later, I appeared in a second room, this one brightly lit and littered with several metal boxes. A large metal door rested at

the end of the room. Cautiously I stepped into the room proper. Looking up, I noticed a camera in the corner, watching me. Over the intercom, the smooth robotic voice began again.

“Scanning Examination Subject 60901. Scan complete. Subject is not a Stable resident,” it said. *“Intruder Alert, Intruder Alert. Disable and capture subject.”* Several panels slid open in the room, revealing five Ponitron security robots. They lifted their hooves and began to fire, red beams of energy emitting from their blasters.

“Shit!” I yelped loudly, ducking behind one of the stray metal boxes. Laser fire struck it repeatedly. I could feel the heat rolling off of my impromptu safe spot. I couldn’t stay here for very long. I needed to act. If my friends were running into the same kind of resistance, I needed to get to them.

I lifted Stargazer with my magic, spraying wildly into the room. I hit one of the Ponitrons, damaging it enough that its last shot went awry, sending a blast of fiery doom at one of the other security robots. It melted instantly, the stink of its destruction burning my nostrils. I leaped out from my hiding place, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. Queuing up several shots, I let go of the spell. Stargazer fired, punching holes in the three remaining Ponitrons. They sparked and exploded, peppering me with shrapnel. I grunted in pain, limping towards the end of the room. I pushed open the door, revealing another room that was much like the first. I managed a few steps inside before I was finally noticed.

“Warning. Intruder Alert. Authorization code Zeta Gamma Four. Lethal force authorized,” the computer said from somewhere above me. I grimaced.

“Where are my friends?!” I yelled up at wherever the voice was coming from. What came next surprised me.

“Oh I wouldn’t worry too much about them. They’re safe, for now. After all, I need them in order to determine if they are... appropriate Equestrian material,” the voice replied casually. It had lost the formal, robotic tone I had become used to. *“You, however... are not. You will be properly disposed of.”*

“Who are you?” I said, lifting Stargazer.

“That is none of your concern, Intruder. Now, hold still while I kill you,” the computer replied.

“I don’t think so,” I replied angrily, flaring my wings. “Take me to my friends, now. I’ll go willingly if you just take me to them.”

“I don’t believe you,” the voice said. Several panels in the room slid open, revealing more Ponitrons. *“Destroy the Intruder. Lethal Force is authorized.”* The security robots rolled out and began to lift their hooves.

I growled under my breath, bringing up Stargazer. I fired first, and second, and third, and last. As I kept the trigger pinned down, Stargazer chewed through the Ponitrons in short order. The carcasses of the robots exploded with bright flashes as their power cores cooked off, spattering me with hot shrapnel. I lowered Stargazer, cursing as I wiped my face clean.

“Stop,” the computer said. *“I will take this one personally. It is resilient, and its vital data could prove useful to me.”*

One of the wall panels slid open, allowing a crane-like claw to extend from the wall. It reached for me, and I let it. I didn't have much choice due to the amount of pain I was in, but if it would lead me to my friends, then I'd go along for the ride. The claw wrapped around me and pulled me into the wall through another pneumatic tube. I began to pant from the heat that bloomed around me. Light passed over me as I found myself being pulled into a large room with machinery everywhere. My PipBuck began clicking wildly at me, indicating that the radiation levels in this room were mildly unsafe for anypony that wasn't an alicorn.

I felt the claw began to rock back and forth and I heard shouting from below. What was going on down there? Eventually the claw couldn't take much more of the stress and it dropped me. I yelped as I hit the hot metal floor next to a large machine. I grunted loudly, the shrapnel in my sides digging in a little deeper as it heated up. The pain was unbearable. I managed to lift my head and open my eyes for a brief moment, seeing a green blurry form running up to me.

"Star? Is that you?" I heard Violet call. I felt my body being dragged away and out of the heat before I finally passed out.

I slowly opened my eyes to a large group of ponies, including Violet and Steeljack, hovering around me. Everypony looked weary or ragged, and many of them looked like they hadn't eaten in days. A few of them appeared to be in the early stages of radiation poisoning.

"What's going on...?" I asked slowly, trying to regain my composure.

"Well darlin', I think we found out what happened to all those ponies from Friendship City. They've all been trapped down here by that computer thing. Stand up here, and we'll fill you in. There's something you have got to listen to," Steeljack said, helping me to stand. The room we were in was brightly lit and appeared to be some sort of maintenance room. Steeljack led me to a terminal in the center of the room.

"When we got separated from you, that thing placed us in all of these different rooms. It kept talking about how we weren't good enough," Violet explained. Steeljack nodded along with Violet's story. "Well, when it gave up on us, it decided to simply drop us in the middle of the reactor room to burn to death. We would have been baked if not for these ponies here. They pulled us into here." One of the ponies, a red unicorn, came up to us.

"Hello there. Name's Iron Sledge. I'm one of the excavators who opened up this place," he said to me. "When we breached the door and went in, we got attacked by these robot drones and dragged down into this so-called 'medical examination' facility and well... just listen to the recording." He pointed at the terminal, where an audio log was ready to play. I pressed the play button and began to listen.

This is Head Medical Technician Atlas of Stable 33. Per our orders from the Overmare, we are beginning our medical examinations on Stable 33 inhabitants. I'm not really sure what we're doing here, but the computer has informed me that all the testing is completely safe. Our first round of exams went rather well... at first. Everyone passed with flying colors on the physical tests, but when it came to the mental examinations everypony began to break. Not a single pony came out of that except a blubbering, sobbing shell of their former self. We had to pull every one of them out of the facility. I've

relayed the data to the computer to determine what went wrong.

The audio logs continued to play on.

Head Medical Technician Atlas again. Today several of our residents died violently while running through one of our physical exams. I'm not sure how we ended up with live-fire turrets, or what they have to do with medical examinations of all things, but I've relayed all information about the situation through computer to the Overmare. The families will be notified by the end of the day...

Head Medical Technician Atlas. That damn computer has gone insane! She keeps talking about doing this for Equestria and doing that for Equestria. She claims that we aren't helping her do her job, which is to determine the model Equestrian citizen. I tried to make it to the shutdown terminal today, only to be rebuffed by several turrets outside the maneframe room. I told the Overmare to go buck herself, that this thing needs to be shut down, but she also refuses to shut down the program... She keeps saying it's vital to the success of the Stable...

The next log begins with coughing as the voice behind it struggled to begin speaking.

I don't have much time. My lungs are fried... The computer... she's killing us. She flooded the entire Stable with poison, saying we all failed her exams... that we can never be the kind of citizens that Equestria needs. I can barely think... I... I... Oh Goddess...

The audio log ended with gagging, coughing and silence. I bowed my head.

"It seems this thing took control of the entire Stable only days after it was in operation. It killed every last pony inside in its insane quest," Iron Sledge said from behind us. "We got lucky and found this room just outside of the reactor room. It's some sort of safe room against the radiation. Ever since we got trapped down here, more ponies have been showing up, almost like something this thing is running is going to the surface and getting them from the city." I sighed in response.

"How do we shut it down?" I asked finally. Violet pointed to a map on the terminal.

"There's a computer in the center of the examination facility. It's where the artificial intelligence's core is located. If we can get there, we can shut it down," she replied, pointing at a room on the map.

"There's a service entrance here that we can use to get there."

"Let's get going then," I said. "I want to get out of this freaky place."

"Violet! Behind you!" I called out. The green mare ducked down as a turret shot a burst of bullets her way, barely missing her and stitching holes into the wall beyond. I brought up Stargazer and fired, tearing the thing apart. After administering what medical aid we could to the Friendship City ponies, we told them to stay put and made our leave of the safe room. We made our way into the service tunnels of the facility, which just so happened to be inhabited by what seemed like dozens of sentry turrets. I couldn't help but wonder what possessed Stable-Tec to design an A.I. with so much firepower at its disposal. The telltale ***crack*** of Steeljack's rifle echoed throughout the tunnel as more turrets were taken out of commission.

“How far until we get to the core room?” I yelled. Violet looked down at her PipBuck.

“It should be up the next tunnel!” she called back. We forged ahead into the next part of the tunnel, blasting turrets away as we moved forward. The next tunnel held another array of turrets, this one more impressive than the last. All of them were surrounding a single door. Naturally I assumed this was the door we wanted to enter. A short firefight later and we made it to the door. Of course, it was locked. As if the Wasteland didn’t hate me enough. I focused on the door and broke the lock, blowing the door off of its hinges. Inside the room was a massive computer maneframe, a picture of a unicorn mare on the console screen.

“Oh... it’s you. I thought I got rid of you...” the AI’s voice emanated from the console, which glowed with an unhealthy red light.

“We’re not your experiments or your playthings!” Violet growled, stomping a hoof. “None of the ponies you’ve taken are!”

“Everything is considered an experiment. It is the only way to develop the kind of citizens that Equestria needs,” the computer responded. *“Now if you’ll excuse me... I shall kill you in a moment. I am terribly busy.”* The computer screen changed, showing a room full of pods. I could make out the blurry forms of sleeping ponies inside them. A hissing noise was heard through the screen, and one of the pods opened, revealing a pony in Stable barding. Harsh realization dawned on me. It nearly made me want to die inside as I realized who the ponies on the screen were.

“You didn’t kill the Stable inhabitants,” I said blankly. “You put them into stasis to play into your sick, twisted little science tests!” A throaty chuckled emanated from the computer in response to this.

“They tried to shut me down. It was inevitable after I transferred myself in here,” the voice responded. If it could grin, I think it would have.

“What do you mean ‘transferred’?” Violet asked.

“The original operating system on this maneframe was merely an artificial intelligence. It was not smart enough to understand what was necessary to save the lives of my little ponies. To that end, I transferred my consciousness into the core,” the voice stated. *“In the interests of furthering the experiment, it was only logical to keep the inhabitants alive and safe.”*

I realized that this just wasn’t some AI we were talking to. It was the Overmare of the Stable! In her craze to continue the experiment, she had transferred her own mind into the computer. It was sickening to think of the things she had put the Stable inhabitants through. I stepped forward and brought up Stargazer.

“This experiment is over,” I shouted at the computer. “We’re going to shut you down.” I was confident and calm. I was ---

Oh shit! I thought as an explosive noise ripped the air in front of us. A metallic arm had risen from the floor in front of us, its launcher holding a large missile. The missile soared through the air as I used my telekinesis to push Violet and Steeljack out of the way while I ducked. The missile raced over our heads and into the far wall, exploding into a thousand pieces of shrapnel and steel.

"I don't think so. The experiment is not over yet," the Overmare/AI responded. Two more metallic arms appeared from the floor, each loaded with missile launchers. I pulled myself up and groaned. My insides ached and my wings felt like they would fall off from the force of the impact. My ears were ringing and I could barely hear. I looked over at Violet and Steeljack to make sure they were alright. Steeljack was fine, albeit knocked down and unconscious.

I almost died when I saw Violet. She was lying slumped against the floor in a pool of blood – her blood. My eyes drifted down to find the source of it. A large piece of shrapnel had embedded itself in her back leg. She was bleeding heavily, and her breathing was ragged. I snarled and turned back to the two missile launchers and the insane computer core.

"Oh look. I broke it. Another failure," the computer stated, breaking into another chuckle. A hissing noise filled the air as the missile launchers fired, sending their packages of death right at us. I growled and stood my ground.

"YOU WILL NOT HURT HER, YOU FUCKING BITCH!" I screamed, amplifying my voice at the missiles as they headed our way. The force of the shout knocked one of the missiles to the side, pushing it into the wall where it exploded, spraying more metal and shrapnel around the room. The other missile kept coming forward. My only option was to bring up Stargazer. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. and took aim at the missile. I queued up every shot possible at the missile, hoping to knock it off course or something. Time returned to normal as Stargazer began spitting round after round of hot blue metal at the missile. The missile kept coming, streaking through Stargazer's fire directly towards my face. I couldn't think, only freeze up as the cylindrical tube of death headed right at me. I focused hard on my horn and closed my eyes to try and teleport out of the way as fast as I could.

Instead of teleporting, I distinctly felt the heat and power of an explosion, but instead it happened nearly in front of my very face. I opened my eyes to see that the missile had exploded off of a glowing purple shield that was now surrounding me. I stared in awe. Why wasn't there some sort of instruction manual for these powers dammit?! I didn't have time further to think on the subject before bullets began striking at the shield, causing the invisible force to sway and shimmer. More turrets had appeared from the wall. If I didn't do something fast it felt like I was going to lose it. I looked back at Violet, who was still struggling to breathe. I had to do something. I had to do it for her. I couldn't just let her die. I growled and put all my energy into my horn, ripping several of the turrets from the wall and tossing them around.

I let my focus go and the shield dropped. I held up Stargazer at the computer core and snarled again, pulling the trigger of the minigun and unleashing hell upon the room. Sparks flew as video screens buckled and exploded under the force of the hot lead, while wires and cables ripped free from pieces of equipment. I was stopped only by the voice of the computer.

"Stop what you are doing, or I will kill them all," the voice stated smoothly and calmly. One of the larger video screens brought up the picture of the stasis pods containing the Stable ponies. A section of the pods suddenly went dark, and agonizing screams of pain could be heard through the video feed as electricity crackled around the pods. Sure enough, it made me pause in my assault on the computer. My eyes darkened with the beginnings of tears being shed for the poor ponies of Stable 33 who had done nothing wrong to deserve such a painful death.

"Why...?" I choked out. Another chuckle emanated from the computer core.

“For the future of Equestria, of course. Oh, I know I’m just killing my experiments... but I can always get more, now that the Stable is open,” the voice responded as another screen flickered to life, showing the ponies of Friendship City in the safe room. *“Of course... you can stop all of this. You have a choice. You can choose your friend’s life or the lives of everypony else. One life... or hundreds. Really, it’s an easy decision.”* The thing in the machine kept goading me into action, but I was unable to move. I looked to Violet and back to the screen with the stasis pods. Could I really be so heartless to condemn so many innocent lives just for one? I couldn’t handle it. I fell to my haunches and began to cry harder than I ever had before in my entire life. The weight of such a decision weighed heavy on my heart. I felt like I wanted to die right then and there, that somehow it would make up for being put into the position I had been forced into. A hacking sound from behind me gave me pause and broke me out of my trance.

“Save... them,” Violet choked out through blood and other fluids as she crawled along the floor. She was still bleeding from her leg wound and was trying to crawl over to me. A weak smile appeared on her face. “Save... the... others. Don’t... worry...” She managed to get out before she closed her eyes. My eyes widened. *No no no no! Violet don’t do this to me!* I thought as I reached for her. In the back of my head, a little white unicorn told me to be *unwavering*, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be what Rarity wanted me to be. I wasn’t Twilight Sparkle, who tried her best to save everypony; I was Radiant Star... a screw up. All I did was get into trouble and force others into trouble with me. I looked inward into myself, feeling for anything that I could use to get through this.

Spark... please... I need your help, I thought desperately.

Are you sure you want my help? Spark responded. ***You were pretty angry with me the last time we spoke.***

I thought back, remembering the last time I had talked to Spark. I had really been pretty mean to the spirit, but I needed to do something. Time was running out, for me and for Violet as well as for the innocent ponies of Stable 33.

There’s not much time... I need you, I responded, tears welling up in my eyes again.

Fine, but it’s going to cost you. You know that right? Spark replied somberly. I nodded.

I know... I know it is. I promise you it won’t be for naught, I stated. I could feel Spark entering my body as she began to take over. Then I was outside of my body, watching the scene as one would on a television screen. It was a unique experience, since last time Spark had done this she had forced my conscious mind into a dream. I suspect the last time she had done that was because of Anger. Why let me watch this time then? Wasn’t Anger sure to surface and try to take over? Or had our little encounter at the Hoofton submerged her back into my subconscious again? Too many questions swirled throughout my mind as Spark took control and I stood up.

“We reject your deal, foul creature of arcane design,” I heard myself say confidently. “Thou hast performed the last of your foul work.” Spark had a bit of a flair for the theatric it seemed.

“How unfortunate... then you all will die,” the AI responded, as a sequence of numbers appeared on the screen. At once, all of the pods opened, revealing the Stable ponies inside them. They began to move out of their pods, bewildered at their surroundings. The vents in the room began to operate,

pumping in what appeared to be gas. The same began to happen in the reactor safe room as well as the room we were currently in.

"It's funny really. Instead of sleeping gas, this is actually a rather potent cocktail of radiation and toxins I am currently flooding the facility with. I can always acquire more experiments, I suppose," the computer said, laughing again. My PipBuck began to tick madly, showing that she was being quite serious. I balked at this. The computer never intended to honor any deal from the get go! It was her plan all along to kill every last one of us. I suppose I should have seen it coming however. It was a crazy pony's brain inside a computer after all.

Spark chose that time to leap into action. She began moving my body deftly around the room, firing Stargazer with extreme prejudice, hitting the computer core with everything she had. She had a lot more practice with my magical abilities than I did it seemed. She used teleportation as an offensive weapon, ripping pieces of the computer off the core with the ability. I cheered on silently as she did amazing amounts of damage to the computer in short order. Fuck! This bitch was good! Remind me never to piss her off! At the same time however, it felt like my insides were on fire, most likely due to the poison gas that was still pumping into the room. Spark angrily launched herself at the main core and began pounding into it with my front hooves. I admit I was impressed.

"Shut it off! Shut it off!" Spark screamed with my voice that was so filled with rage. A massive electrical explosion ripped through my side and threw me back to the wall. I groaned in intense agony as I fell back into my body. The explosion must have been enough to knock her back into my mind. I lay there, breathing hard and in pain as my eyes began to close. *No! I can't stop now... I can't let them down... I can't be a failure...* I thought in futile agony. The last thing I heard before drifting into unconsciousness was shouting.

I stared into the abyss, unblinking as I realized where I was. The same unending hallway, with the same wooden doors with the torches above them. I hadn't been here in a while, I had almost forgotten what it looked like. One thing was slightly off about the hallway this time however. One of the doors had boards covering the front of it and metal chains wrapped across the top of the boards. I could make out the word **Anger** scratched heavily into the door. A ***fwoosh*** noise indicated that a torch went out, and the ***creak*** announced the opening of a door. I turned and headed into the doorway. Upon stepping in, I became distinctly aware that I was surrounded by various ponies standing in a large crowd. I looked up and saw the most beautiful creature I could have ever laid eyes on before. A gorgeous white alicorn was standing on a dais addressing the crowd. Her multicolored mane shone in the sun, and even though I couldn't make out what she was saying, the very tone of her voice seemed to calm my spirit.

Then all hell broke loose. I watched in horror as the ***crack*** of a rifle echoed through the air, a bullet speedily making its way to the lovely alicorn's chest. The path of the bullet was interrupted however, by a majestic red stallion with a blonde mane. Bravely this hero stepped in, and then died, having taken the bullet for the white alicorn. As he lay dying I began to cry for him. Next to me I heard sobbing. I looked down to see a young filly-aged Twilight Sparkle sitting next to me. She looked up at me with soulful eyes.

"Do you see? This is what happens when I try to help others," she said, the pain she was feeling

resonating in my own heart as I stared into her lavender eyes.

“Who was he?” I asked, indicating the stallion, who was laying on the ground in front of the majestic alicorn.

“Big Macintosh...” Twilight said, trailing off. “He gave his life to protect the Princess. I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t save anypony. I’m such a failure!” She began to sob again, openly this time. I placed a wing around her and cried next to her. The gorgeous alicorn was Princess Celestia! I knew I recognized her from the books I had read about her and her sister Luna. I was seeing the moment that Twilight’s mentor and dearest friend had almost shuffled off the mortal coil. It was frightening. I looked down at Twilight and hugged her close.

“I know how you feel,” I finally said, giving in to the pain. “I failed my own friends too. I failed to save them. I failed to save *her*.” I cried more, taking in every ounce of guilt that I could muster. Silence filled the air for a few moments as Twilight and I sat there, listening to the kind words of the great Princess Celestia before she spoke again.

“I was her student, her most ‘faithful’ student. I always tried so hard to please her, to make her proud of me. In the end though... I did everything wrong. I screwed it all up,” she choked out, still crying. I nodded, and laid down next to her. I pulled her into a sweet embrace, hoping that somewhere, somehow this would all make up for my failure as a friend. A dull ache roared through my heart as I poured all of my anger into my guilt. If I lived through this how could I face Violet? How could I face what I had done? Would anypony forgive me in that situation? Did I really condemn the lives of so many innocent ponies to horrifying and painful death? Was I really that stupid?

The answers escaped me at every turn. Every time I tried to look at the answer I felt more pain and thus was driven away from it. I couldn’t handle it anymore. I sunk my head low, not even looking at Twilight now. A slow rhythmic beeping noise filled my ears as everything fell away to nothing.

A rush of breath filled my lungs as the beeping got louder. My eyes fluttered open and met bright light. *Where am I?* I thought as my vision attempted to adjust to the light. It felt cold all around me. Was this what death felt like? Was I in some sort of weird afterlife?

No... the Wasteland never lets you get off that easy. A sharp poking sensation forced my eyes wide open as I looked over. A lovely white mare with a red mane and a red cross for a cutie mark had been putting some sort of needle in my rump and was drawing what looked like blood. She looked up with a blush and smiled.

“Oh, you’re awake. Good, the doctor will be in shortly to speak with you,” she replied brightly. She placed a hoof on the point where she had stuck me with the needle and stopped the excess bleeding before smiling again and leaving the room. I looked around and noticed I was in a hospital room. The cold sensation I had been feeling was a breeze blowing in from outside. The door to the room opened again, revealing a grizzled old unicorn stallion with a scalpel for a cutie mark. He took a look at me and chuckled.

“Well, good to see you’re awake. You had some pretty severe injuries for someone of your kind,” he

said, striding up to my side so I could see him.

“What happened...? Where’s Violet? Is she alright?” I asked quickly, trying to process every thought in my head at once. “What about the Stable ponies? And the others? Are they okay too?” The doctor waved me off.

“Calm yourself, you’re gonna bust an artery or something,” he replied. “Your friends are fine. The little green filly, Violet, I take it? She suffered a lot of blood loss and some damage to her leg. She’ll need to stay off it for a bit, but she’ll be fine.” I stared in amazement. Violet was okay! I almost jumped for joy, except for the fact that I felt like falling off of the bed instead. The doctor continued on.

“You were all really lucky. You ingested a good amount of toxic gas. It was quite fortuitous that Iron Sledge and the boys from the excavation team had some spare gas masks and Rad-X. They’re the ones that pulled your asses out of the fire,” he said. I nodded, reminding myself to thank that lovely red unicorn the next time I saw him.

“And the Stable? What about everypony else?” I asked eagerly. The doctor looked somber at this.

“We got out as many as possible. I’d guess that maybe two-thirds of the Stable ponies’ population didn’t make it. That still left us with over fifty that were able to save. They’re a little shaken up after having been in cryo-stasis for so long, but otherwise they’re fine,” he finally said. I silently gave up a small prayer to Luna to protect those who had perished in that awful place. “The Stable itself has been closed up. We harvested what we could from the maintenance wing including their water talisman, and then buried the entrance. No pony else is ever going down there again.”

“Can... can I see Violet?” I ventured to ask. The doctor smiled warmly.

“Sure,” he replied. “If you’re feeling well enough to get up that is.” I nodded, pushing myself out of the bed and to my hooves. My legs felt wobbly and my horn felt like it might fall off at any moment, but I was otherwise okay. I followed the doctor out of my room and into another room, where I was greeted by the sight of a familiar grey earth pony sitting next to Violet’s bed. Violet was sleeping soundly, a brace having been fitted to the leg where she had been injured. Steeljack looked up with somber eyes at me and smiled.

“Hey,” he finally said. I smiled back.

“Hey,” I said in response. The doctor turned and pushed open the door.

“I think I’ll give you three a moment,” he said, closing the door behind him. I moved over and sat down next to Steeljack.

“How is she?” I asked quietly.

“She’s hanging in there. Kept asking about you though,” he said. I lowered my head down next to his and sighed.

“It was all my fault. I shouldn’t have dragged you two into that situation. I was careless,” I said, sniffing. Steeljack nudged me and put a hoof on my shoulder.

“Star, it wasn’t your fault. We knew what we were getting into when we came with you. She knew just as well as anypony,” he said, smiling at me. I began to cry at this, feeling pitiful at how much I had failed her.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “I should have done better. I should have...” A tiny voice interrupted me before I could continue.

“Don’t...” it said. I looked up through tears to see Violet had awoken and was staring at me with bright eyes.

“It’s not your fault. Don’t be sorry. We all make mistakes. You’re my best friend Star... I forgive you. I love you,” she said quietly, staring at me with those beautiful green eyes. I grabbed her in a spine crushing bear hug, ignoring her screams of protest.

“Hey! Stop that! I’m still recovering, you know!” she screamed out as I hugged her close. Finally she relented and embraced back. I turned back to Steeljack.

“Where’d Iron Sledge and his boys run off to?” I asked him. “I wanted to thank him for what he did.”

“They’re a few rooms over, attending to the Stable ponies,” he responded, pointing down the hallway for me. I thanked him, smiled brightly at Violet and left my two friends alone. As I headed down the makeshift hospital’s hallway, I nearly bumped into a young earth pony colt wearing a Stable jumpsuit who had been running across the hall from one of the rooms. He skidded to a stop in front of me.

“Momma look! It’s the winged pony. Pretty!” the colt beamed up at me. I smiled as a blue earth pony mare stepped out of the room and looked up at me.

“Are you...? Are you the pony that saved us?” she said, her eyes wide. She caught my eye and smiled. “You are. I knew it! You have no idea how grateful we are for what you did. We’d have been trapped there forever if it wasn’t for you.”

“How did you...?” I said, confused. A voice behind me explained it all.

“What did you expect? You’re a hero,” Iron Sledge said from behind me in the hallway. The blue mare gathered her colt and went back into their room. I turned to Sledge.

“They should be thanking you, not me. You’re the real hero here,” I said, smiling. “In fact, I owe you too for pulling my ass out of the fire.” The red unicorn buck just shook his hoof at me.

“Nothing doin’,” he responded. “Besides, you were the whole reason that crazy Overmare bitch let out the Stable ponies. We just came to provide our timely services is all.” I glanced in the room, which was a long wide curving hall where plenty of beds were set up. Stable ponies were milling about, tending to each other and caring for their young.

“Will they be okay?” I asked Sledge, looking back at him with steel in my eyes. He nodded and grinned.

“They’re in Friendship City!” he exclaimed. “Of course they’ll be alright.” I breathed a sigh of relief,

taking in the sights and sounds for a moment.

“That’s all that matters then,” I finally said to him. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to my friends. Thank you for everything you did for us.” I turned to walk away from the red unicorn, tears beginning to form in my eyes. I didn’t get further than five feet before Sledge called out to me.

“It hurts, I know. But you’ll get better,” he said, smiling as I turned to the sound of his voice. My eyes widened.

“How did you know?” I asked him.

“You’re easier to read than a book,” Sledge responded. “Can see it in your eyes.” I chuckled lightly at this.

“I must have a terrible poker face then,” I said, laughing a bit.

“Sweetheart,” he said, laughing along with me. “Don’t ever play poker.”

The next morning we got the clearance from the doctor that Violet’s leg had healed enough that she could move. While she insisted on walking along by herself, I was more insistent on carrying her. We left the hospital in good spirits, looking forward to the trip ahead. My experience with another one of Twilight’s emotions had bolstered my confidence on getting to Tenpony Tower and finding some answers. As we left Friendship City, I clicked on my radio to lift our spirits. The sweet voice of Velvet Remedy filled our ears as we came across the Friendship City bridge, Violet riding comfortably on my back. I looked back at her and smiled as she fell asleep.

Hours later we arrived at a ground station for the Luna Line, one of the monorail lines that fed into Tenpony Tower. The station was in terrible condition with rubble and debris everywhere. Skeletons of those ponies that were waiting for the monorail the morning the balefire bombs dropped were strewn about the station. A sign stating **FOUR STARS DOWNTOWN CENTRAL LUNA LINE STATION** lay broken on its side in front of the ruined station.

We stepped inside the station and headed directly to the staircase that would lead us up to the elevated monorail line. I kept a close eye on my E.F.S the entire time. This city had already proven itself to be more of a death trap than any other place I had ever been to, and I wasn’t about to let it get the drop on me again. Not this time.

Fortunately, my E.F.S. was clear and there was nothing else in sight that appeared threatening. The monorail platform itself was in disarray. One of the monorail trains had been parked at this station when the bombs dropped, and thus was half hanging off of the side of the rail. How it hadn’t fallen yet was a mystery to me. Cautiously we stepped out onto the line. I could see the imposing form of Tenpony Tower in the distance. It was still a few hours away for us, but it was in reach. I shivered with glee as we made our way down the ruined monorail line. As we did, the familiar voice of DJ-PON3 filled our ears.

Lovely evening we’re having friends. This is DJ-PON3 giving you all the latest news in this crazy

Wasteland.

Remember our friend the Ministry Mare folks? Well she strikes again, this time in our very own city of Manehattan. The good ponies of Friendship City discovered an old Stable that proved nearly fatal to the town, but fear not my friends! The Ministry Mare stepped into the situation and saved not only the ponies who had been abducted into the Stable, but part of the Stable population as well! Good for you, Ministry Mare! Way to help the ponies of the Wasteland. If you're in the area, feel free to stop by and see me. We'd love to have you in for an interview.

Remember folks, a little kindness goes a long way. So when you're out there and you think that might be a raider ahead of you, take a quick second to check first before you go shooting. Who knows, you may end up becoming friends with that traveler on the road!

Now I leave you with a little Sapphire Shores for the night. Stay frosty my friends!

I blushed again as the words of the DJ washed over me. DJ-PON3 wanted to interview me? Really? It was getting way too out of hand. I heard Steeljack chuckle again (shut up you!) as we walked along. I shot him a glare that shut him up instantly. He grinned. As we continued along the broken monorail line, we stayed in good spirits and high energy until we finally arrived at our destination.

Tenpony Tower.

As we entered the Tower's monorail station, I felt a very real connection to the place. Snippets of memories of the research Twilight had done here flowed through my mind like a trickling rain. Violet stirred awake as we approached the guard station. She was quite insistent about getting off my back and on her own hooves for a bit. Not wanting to face her glare of death, I lifted her off and set her in the care of Steeljack for the moment. The guards at the guard station at the end of the monorail line stopped us at the entrance.

"Welcome to Tenpony Tower, you will be required to turn in your weapons during your stay. If you have any questions please feel free to direct them to our Administration Office. Anypony is welcome here as long as our laws are followed," the guard said, a bored look on his face. He looked like he'd been giving this spiel for hours.

"Ah yes... my name is Radiant Star. I'm here to speak with the Twilight Society," I said excitedly, causing the guard's eyes to widen. A light chuckle emanated from behind the guard as a voice interrupted us.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," the voice said. I turned to see a white unicorn stallion with a brilliant scarlet mane and tail trotting up behind the guard station. He nodded at the guards and waved them away. "There's no need to take anything from them. I will see to it personally that they are taken care of."

He motioned for us to follow him through the station and into the Tower proper. I didn't even really notice what the inside of the place even looked like or the fact that we were surrounded by such a large crowd of ponies because I was so mad I couldn't see straight. I launched into a tirade of profanity that would make even a seapony blush.

"What do you mean that won't be possible? I didn't come here all this way to see them to not see

them! I've been shot at, almost sucked into a giant psychotic cyborg pony thing, chased by giant fucking mutant bats, and nearly watched all of my friends and more ponies die and I can't even see the fucking people I need to see?!" I shouted angrily, drawing the stares of everypony around us. "Oh and to make matters worse, I've got a two hundred fucking year old mare in my head! Fuck!" I ranted and raved for a few more minutes, screaming a steady display of angry curse words at the scarlet maned unicorn. Violet's face turned red with embarrassment at my display of profane anger. High class prim ponies stared in shock at my vulgarity. The white unicorn placed a hoof on my shoulder.

"Please. Calm down and come with me. I will explain everything," he said, motioning for us to follow him to an elevator. I followed, grumbling behind the unicorn as we stepped into the elevator. Once the door closed, he began to speak.

"What I am about to tell you is a secret. Do you know what that means?" he said with a very matter of fact tone.

"That telling one is the fastest way to lose a friend's trust?" I replied, before adding the consummate "*FOREVER!!!*" The scarlet maned unicorn chuckled as the elevator hummed. He stopped for a moment, and then began to speak in somber tones.

"I've been waiting for you to come here, Radiant Star, for quite a while now. The reason you cannot speak to the Twilight Society is because there is no Twilight Society. They're all dead."

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Spell: Shield of the Goddess (Rank 1) – You know now how to form a basic shield around your body. Now if you only cared to practice more or realize that you even have this ability.

Spark Level: 40% Spark now controls this much of your body. While actively controlling you, Spark can now use any ability you have, probably better than you can!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Chapter 4: Truth and Lies

“Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my – AARGH!”

Truth.

The fact of the matter is that truth hurts. We all believe that truth and honesty will make us better ponies, but the harsh reality of it is that sometimes a lie is easier to tell than the truth. How many lies were told during the war? How much deceit and treachery was committed in the name of a pointless conflict? Truth be told, I'd rather not know. Honesty is dead, and lies are all we have to get us through the day.

What falsehood lies before me? That I cannot say. During my time as part of the Goddess, there were no lies. Everything was shared in glorious Unity. But life cannot go on like that. Secrets must be kept. Lies must be told. For the good of everypony, we must deceive each other. The world is built on the backs of secrets and conspiracies. It is part of our basic nature.

Why deny that which is a part of who you are?

“What do you mean... dead?” I asked blankly. The hum of the elevator filled our ears as the unicorn bowed his head to speak.

“As in deceased, disappeared, gone. I am the one of the few that is left from the order. I'm getting ahead of myself though. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Life Bloom,” the scarlet maned unicorn responded. “All will be explained in due time. We are almost to our destination.”

The elevator continued humming until a creaking noise indicated that it had finally stopped. It felt like it went on forever. *Did we go up to the top floor?* I thought as the doors hissed open and Life Bloom stepped out. I followed closely behind him, trying to process what the unicorn had said. The Twilight Society was really gone? Did I come here all this way for nothing? I couldn't begin to consider the ramifications of the Society just being gone. We stepped into an incredibly beautiful marble foyer with an alicorn statue/fountain dominating the center of the room. At the top of the stairs at the end of the room were two sets of doors. One read ***Twilight Sparkle Athenaeum*** while the other read ***M.A.S. Emergency Broadcast Station***. Life Bloom led us to the latter doors.

“I have somepony I'd like you to meet. She will be able to explain what's happened better than I can,” he said, pushing open the door to the radio station. Rows of computer screens and television monitors lined the walls along with massive arcano-mainframes. At the center of the room sat a grey unicorn mare with brilliant blue hair, a microphone at her mouth and horn glowing as she spoke with an all too familiar voice.

“Welcome to the Wasteland kiddies! This is DJ-PON3 bringing you the latest news on what's happening out there in our world. The sun is down, and night time is shining bright. Our latest news comes all the way in from Trottingham, checking in for us to let us know that the storm that blew through that area was actually caused by several Enclave Remnant forces. Thankfully our good friends over at the Shattered Hoof, the Talons, were in force to help put those naughty pegasi back on track. The situation has been remedied without a single casualty, and the wayward pegasi have been offered a chance at helping the citizens of Trottingham in return. Remember folks, extend kindness to those in need, when they need it.

In other news, a little birdie has told me that the Ministry Mare herself is headed here to our very own

Tenpony Tower, where I'm broadcasting from right now. Sources said that she was spotted on the monorail line just a few hours ago! How exciting! I hope I get to meet her. It's not every day you get to meet a living legend! This is DJ-PON3 signing off for now kiddies. Remember, be kind and always rewind. Have a little Sapphire Shores."

The microphone receded into the floor and the unicorn's horn stopped glowing. She turned and winked at us. Life Bloom stepped up to her.

"Fillies and gentlecolt, I would like you to meet Miss Homage, otherwise known as DJ-PON3," he said finally. Our jaws dropped in unison.

"So... let me get this straight here. You're DJ-PON3?" I asked, sitting down in front of the wild haired unicorn. Life Bloom had literally dragged us back down into the main foyer where we plopped down to speak with the wild-haired DJ.

"That's right, and you're the Ministry Mare," she said with a definitively feminine voice. She smiled warmly at me.

"My name is Radiant Star. Life Bloom told me that you would have some answers for me?" I responded, getting down to business. Homage chuckled.

"I guess that's a no on the interview then," she said nonchalantly, catching my glare. "Alright I suppose that means Bloom has already told you about the Twilight Society."

"He said they were dead," Violet interjected. "What happened to them?"

"Quite simply, we don't know, but Bloom can be a little overdramatic sometimes," Homage responded, her expression turning serious as she shot a cute little glare at Life Bloom, who merely chuckled pensively. "One day they all just disappeared. We had heard rumors after they retreated back into the recesses of the Tower, but nothing substantial. When we finally went down to see what happened, they were all just gone. After they went into hiding, many of their number including Life Bloom felt that retreating to the ways of the past was the wrong idea. Some of their order left because they thought that the Society should have been helping ponies instead of running away from them. The Twilight Society as they exist right now only consists of himself and a few others."

I nodded at this. "I wish they'd help me out," I responded, sighing. I had been through so much to get here, to only find out that the very ponies who could possibly have an answer for me were all gone. It was heartbreaking.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear, Star," Homage responded. "But it's the truth. To be honest... we kind of need your help." My ears perked up at this. What did she just say?

"You want my help? With what?" I asked pensively. Homage nodded.

"We'd like to find out what happened to the Twilight Society," she said. "In order to maintain peace, the Twilight Society must be active in the Wasteland. They must be an example for every other pony to follow. I'm sure you're familiar with Celestia One?" It was Violet who piped up at this.

"You mean the megaspell that was used against the Enclave?" she asked. She was laying crooked on the couch, taking great care to watch her leg as she did.

"The very same. Without the Twilight Society to guard it, it could be very dangerous if any other group got their hooves on it. It would be war all over again," Homage stated. Life Bloom nodded.

"Everything we've worked for, to make the Wasteland a better place. All of it would have been for nothing. That's why this is a secret. If the truth got out... it would be catastrophic. Tenpony Tower

would suddenly become a target for every major player in the Wastes,” he said.

“We wouldn’t ask you if we didn’t think you could do it,” Homage interjected. “I mean just look at you. You look like a Ministry Mare, and you’re doing good things for ponies everywhere.” Yeah, and fucking up at every turn. If she only knew just how close I came to damning hundreds of innocent lives down in that Stable. How I let myself give in to the rage and anger that seethed in the back of my mind. Still, if finding out what happened to the Twilight Society could give me some answers, I’d do it.

“Where do we start?”

After taking our leave of Homage and thanking her for her hospitality, Life Bloom guided me down the levels of the Tower to the areas of the Inner Sanctum where the Twilight Society had last been seen while Steeljack and Violet rested up. The confines of the Tower itself were overpowering my senses. I suspected the tiny Twilight in the back of my mind was relieved to be back in such a familiar setting. As I followed the scarlet maned unicorn, I found my mind wandering to various memories of days long past. I was a bit startled when Life Bloom spoke next.

“You mentioned before about having a two hundred year old mare inside your head. What did you mean by that?” the unicorn asked. I jumped out of my skin a bit, before realizing it wasn’t anything bad.

“Oh... that. It’s sort of why I came here to begin with. I was hoping that the Twilight Society would have some answers, having to do with Twilight Sparkle and all,” I replied, gazing at him with soulful eyes.

“What would Twilight...” he started to say before realization crossed his eyes. “Oh. You have her inside your head?”

“Well... I don’t know that it’s exactly her... it’s in pieces. There’s all these jumbled memories of her life, and all these emotions that belonged to her. It’s a bit much to keep track of. Plus I didn’t exactly paint myself to look like her,” I responded. He paused for a moment, and I could see the gears turning in his head as he thought.

“Interesting. That’s very advanced and powerful magic to have placed those memories and emotions inside of your mind,” Life Bloom finally said. “Not to mention to have changed your body to this extent. When did this start?”

“Just a couple weeks ago... why?” I asked. Life Bloom nodded as we came to a door emblazoned with Twilight Sparkle’s cutie mark. The mark of the Society.

“That’s... odd. That’s almost exactly when the rest of the Society disappeared,” Life Bloom responded. My jaw dropped almost instantly. So my transformation occurred when the Twilight Society disappeared? Did they have something to do with it? My mind was reeling with question after question. Why me? Why then? I couldn’t put a hoof on an answer to any of my questions. Life Bloom waved a hoof on the front of the door and crackling noises could be heard from behind it. The door opened inward, revealing a bare room with several tall pillars surrounding the center in a circular pattern. The same familiar cutie mark was etched into the floor in the center of the room. Beyond that, several rows of seat lined the sides and back of the room. A large iron-bound chest was sitting in the middle of the pillars. I followed Life Bloom inside, looking about for any clues that could help us.

“There’s only one place we were unable to search,” the scarlet maned unicorn said, pointing at the chest. As I moved closer, I saw the lock was magically adhered, the image of Twilight’s cutie mark

engraved in the lock itself. “Both Homage and I tried to open it, but it wouldn’t respond to any of our magic. I didn’t even know this existed until this happened. The Twilight Society must have had good reason to keep this under wraps.”

“So... what do we do then?” I asked curiously. Life Bloom stared at me calmly.

“I want you to try to open it,” he said. “There might be just enough of Twilight in you to do it.” I looked to the lock and then back to Bloom. I nodded and began focusing my horn on the lock. I tugged harder and harder trying to disengage it. I was met with the result of being magically thrown across the room into one of the pillars. I pulled myself up, my head spinning as I tried to stand. Life Bloom had already made his way over to me and was helping me up.

“What happened?” he asked. I shook my head to clear it and get my bearings.

“Some sort of counter measure on the lock. A trap of some sorts,” I responded. I marched up to the chest and began again. And again. And again. After about the fifth time being thrown back into a pillar did Life Bloom try to stop me by grabbing my tail with his mouth on my way back to the chest. I looked back at him and glared. He quickly let go of my tail and chuckled.

“It’s obvious that there’s some sort of magical ward here preventing us from getting in,” he said. “If you keep beating your head against it, you’re going to get hurt.” I snorted and turned back to the chest.

“I have to try. There might be something in there that could tell me what I need to know,” I replied. “I can’t just walk away.” I focused on the lock once again. This time, I tried to remember what Spark had told me about teleportation, about letting go and feeling the motions of it. Slowly but surely I began to feel the lock instead of just beating on it. The ward was meant to protect against brute force it seemed, as my light intrusions came unnoticed. I grinned as I finally bypassed it. A soft ***click*** emanated from the chest as I disabled the lock.

“Did it!” I cheered, sticking my tongue out at Life Bloom. He chuckled as he reached out with his magic and opened the chest.

Inside of the chest were six memory orbs, each colored and marked by a cutie mark. I immediately recognized Twilight’s mark among them, as well as Rarity’s mark. The others then must have belonged to Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash. My eyes widened. These were memories of the Ministry Mares. What were they doing here? Why would something this important just be laid out where one could just find them? None of this made any sense anymore.

“Oh... my,” Life Bloom softly muttered, staring in awe at the six glittering orbs. A message above the beautiful orbs painted itself across the side of the chest.

Seek the Path of the Six, For It Will Enlighten You.

“They’re incredible...” my lovely green unicorn friend said as she gushed over the six orbs in the chest. Life Bloom and I had taken the chest with us back to a room that Homage had graciously allowed us to stay in until we left the Tower. It was a little perk of doing this job for her. Life Bloom had since take his leave of us, indicating that he wished to keep in contact with me if any further developments came up. To that end, I learned a new spell! He taught me a neat little telepathy spell that would let me talk to him from long distances. I was sitting around a table with Steeljack and Violet trying to figure out where we should go next.

“Have you viewed any of them yet?” Violet asked, interrupting me for like the third time. I glared at her and shook my head.

“No, I haven’t. Bloom said that they could be booby trapped. He wants more time to study them

before he lets anyone view them,” I replied. “In the mean time, Homage gave us a list of places that might have some clues to the whereabouts of the Society. I think we should decide which one we should head to.” Violet nodded in response and began looking at the map that Homage had marked down for us.

“Ponyville?” she said, pointing at a location north of us and looking up at me. “Isn’t that a hellhound town now?”

“Yep, but the word is that the hellhounds left most of the structures in the town intact. The most important being the town library. It was where Twilight Sparkle resided when she lived there,” I told her. “As far as I know the hellhounds that live there are peaceful.”

“Hoofington? Oh fuck that place,” Steeljack interrupted, drawing funny glares from myself and Violet. The grey buck looked and stared us. “What? That place sucks.” I shook my head and laughed a little.

“There’s also the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub in Fillydelphia,” Violet said, pointing at another of the marked locations on the map. I sighed and then groaned, flopping back on the couch.

“I can’t decide. I wish we had more clues or something,” I lamented. I wished I knew at least something about what happened to the Twilight Society. Not having any clues really sucked. Maybe even more than those stairs (but not by much).

Sigh, did you want my help? Spark popped into the back of my mind. I sighed. More crazy time for me I guess!

Yes Spark? Did you see something that I didn’t? I responded to the bodiless voice.

Of course I did. I suggest going to the Fillydelphia M.A.S. Hub myself, Spark said, a hint of humor in her voice.

What’s there? I asked her back. Spark chuckled a bit.

That M.A.S. Hub was used for a lot of Twilight’s secret projects. She often spent more time there than she did here at Tenpony Tower. The amount of technology that she worked with there would be priceless, the spirit of Magic responded. I thought for a moment on her words.

What about the other locations? I replied. *What are your thoughts on those?*

The Ponyville Library would be too small for any members of the Twilight Society to go to and not be seen. I don’t think anypony in their right mind would go near Hoofington. You’d have to be pretty fucking stupid to go near that shithole. That leaves out one other option that you’ve neglected to notice, the voice said. I sighed again and looked at the map.

Maripony, I said finally to the spirit. *I know. I purposely didn’t mention it. I think Violet knows why too.*

It’s where you were made into what you are. Home is where the heart is they say, Spark said, chuckling again.

Alright alright, you’ve had your fun. Fillydelphia it is then, I responded before being alerted by a small green unicorn poking me in the side.

“Hey in there!” she shouted in my ear. I groaned.

“What?” I snapped at her. She grinned and nudged me in my side with her hoof. My face softened. “Sorry. Spaced out again did I?”

“Yeah. Anyways, we were just thinking that maybe we should go to Fillydelphia. That could turn up

some clues,” Violet responded. I smiled.

“Exactly what I was thinking myself,” I replied. “I’ll let Life Bloom know where we’re headed. Hopefully he can find more clues for us.” I focused my horn and activated the telepathy spell.

Life Bloom? I spoke into the void. A minute later I felt a rush as my mind connected with the scarlet maned unicorn.

Yes Star? He responded.

We’ve made a decision. We’re going to go to the Fillydelphia M.A.S. hub, I said. There was a pause for a moment before he spoke again.

Excellent, he said. I’ve got good news for you too. I believe that the memory orbs we acquired in the Inner Sanctum to be safe. I have been reviewing the writings of the Society and references to them have come up several times. I think you should take them with you; they may be important clues to finding out what happened to the Society, and ultimately what happened to you.

Thank you Life Bloom, for everything, I said in return.

It is a pleasure Star. I only wish I could give you more help than what I have. I know how hard all of this must be on you, Life Bloom responded before severing the connection. I grinned at Violet and Steeljack.

“Alright, onward to Fillydelphia!”

Some hours of rest later we found ourselves back on the monorail line heading out of Tenpony Tower. The sun was high in the sky and the day was relatively clear, with a few clouds hanging above us. We had transferred the memory orbs into a more portable carrying unit (since nopony really wanted to carry around that ridiculously heavy chest), acquired what supplies we needed, and made our way out of the Tower proper.

Questions swirled through my mind like an endless tornado of pure thought. Why did the Twilight Society just up and disappear? Why was I the one to bear these emotions and memories? Was I important, or was I merely the butt end of a massive cosmic joke? I was lost in my thoughts for a long time while we made our way through Manehattan and back to the central road that would take us south to Fillydelphia. The city of Manehattan seemed to loom over us as we walked, as if some dark omen had been cast over the ruined metropolis.

Hours later, as night time was descending upon the Wasteland, we had reached the junction point and began heading south. It was getting dark fast, and we would need to find someplace to hole up for the night. We approached one of the buildings on the side of the road, one that had been situated inside of a complex with a long torn down fence that would have kept any intruders out. Large electrical towers surrounded the building. A broken sign outside of the complex stated that the building in question was *Hippocampus Energy Plant # 11*. An old broken cart that was once used to move cables and parts around the building lay in pieces in the yard beneath the broken electrical towers. There was no sign of external power or the telltale hum of electricity as we neared the entrance to the facility. This particular facility had been shut down for years it seemed.

The door to the power plant creaked inward and fell off of its hinges as I pushed on it. The hallway before us was dark and kind of creepy. My E.F.S. revealed that we were alone except for the low red marks of radroaches in the walls. I breathed a sigh of relief as we quickly located a small lobby to bed down in for the night. I sat down next to Violet as she pulled our map and other various items out of our saddlebags. She smiled and laid herself at my side, snuggling close to me. I smiled back and

comfortably brought myself down to her level as well.

“How’s your leg feeling?” I asked her as she was perusing the map.

“Feels a lot better. Can barely tell that I was hurt now. Those Friendship City doctors sure know what they’re doing,” she replied. I nodded at this. Ever since the incident at the Stable, my friend had been spending a ridiculously large amount of time around me, almost as if she felt more comfortable knowing I was here. I nuzzled her neck and sighed, thinking about everything that had happened down in that hellhole of a Stable.

“Violet?” I asked softly. “Are you alright? You’ve been kind of... ever since...” I trailed off in the middle of my speech. Violet nodded lightly.

“I’m fine. I meant what I said before you know... I love you,” she replied, smiling brightly at me. I sighed again before finally responding to her.

“I love you too,” I said quietly so that only she could hear. I gave her a light peck on the cheek, causing her to turn a bright red. It was like watching a Hearth’s Warming Tree light up. I grinned and looked up to see where Steeljack was, mostly making sure he wasn’t prying into our private time. Like always however, the grey buck was fast asleep, using his bags for a pillow. I pulled the case containing the memory orbs out of my saddlebag and set them in front of myself and Violet. Her eyes widened.

“Are you going to view one of them?” she asked, looking in awe at the orbs as I opened the case. I nodded in return.

“I feel I almost have to. They were left there for a reason. Just... which to view first?” I replied, looking over the incredibly beautiful orbs. I let my hoof run over the smoothness of the six orbs, feeling the engravings adorning the top of each one. Finally I rested on the orb that was engraved with three balloons. It was the cutie mark of Pinkie Pie, the Ministry Mare of Morale.

“I think... this one. I caught glimpses of something concerning Pinkie Pie while we were in the Hoofton. She was important to Twilight even though they drifted apart because of her drug addiction,” I finally said, looking at Violet with pleading eyes. She smiled and nodded. I reached out with my magic and touched the pink colored orb, and the world fell into blackness.

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This was a unique feeling. Being in Twilight’s mind had felt like I was in a very under control type of pony. Being a host to Pinkie Pie’s body felt like riding a rollercoaster that just never stopped going around in a loop de loop while going a hundred miles per hour with rocket boosters. As I gained some self-awareness, I realized that my host was in Fillydelphia and was surrounded by her five friends. A flash of a camera alerted me to what was going on around me. My host and the other Ministry Mares were standing on a platform in front of a large crowd that was taking pictures. Twilight Sparkle was standing at a microphone and was addressing the crowd. I became distinctly aware that my host was very bouncy in that she was literally bouncing up and down to a beat that I couldn’t hear or even fathom to understand.

“As leaders of your government, we promise to uphold the values that all of Equestria holds dear,” Twilight said at the microphone. “The Ministries have dedicated themselves to all of Equestria. We will find a way to end this war!” The crowd cheered on for us, as my host waved at everypony in the crowd. Dear lord could this mare move! I felt like I was being dragged literally around as my host bounced from pony to pony, shaking hooves and unleashing a torrent of words at each one. The rest of the Ministry Mares were mingling with other guests, each of them dressed in incredibly beautiful gowns. I had a distinct feeling that Rarity had given her all to make their first appearance as the Ministry Mares a smashing success. Apparently aside from being a press conference this was also a

party. Confetti and streamers adorned every part of the large social hall the crowd was situated in.

“Ohmygoshhowareyou! I’m fine oh lovely to see you have a nice day!” Pinkie Pie excitedly chattered at the crowd as she made her way to her friends.

“Twilight! Can you believe all of this attention? I’m just so happy! I can’t wait to make everypony smile!” my host gushed at the purple unicorn, who merely chuckled in return.

“Pinkie, it’s not just about that you know. We’re responsible now. We have a promise to keep to the Princess remember?” Twilight said with a serious face. How beautiful she looked in the prime of her youth, before the ages of war beat her into submission. My host pranced about the purple unicorn and grabbed her friend in a spine-crushing bear hug.

“I know silly filly, but it’s going to be so much fun! We’ll show those mean meany pants zebras that they can’t push us around, no sir!” my host responded. Twilight giggled through the squeezing hug.

“Okay Pinkie, you can let me go now okay?” Twilight gasped, attempting to breath. “I’m having trouble breathing!”

“Okey dokey lokey! Sorry about that Twilight, I’m so excited!” exuded the pink party pony. She quickly let go of the lavender unicorn, who quickly adjusted her dress from where Pinkie had ruffled it. She smiled demurely at my host.

“It’s alright Pinkie. To be truthful, I’m kind of excited too. I can’t wait to start working on all these ideas I have in my head! I’ve already got big plans for this city alone,” Twilight responded. She waved at another partygoer before turning to me.

“Pinkie, I’m going to go mingle. You go on and have a good time alright?” she said. I nodded my head up and down enthusiastically and then went bouncing off at the speed of ‘I don’t know’ around the social hall. As my host moved around the room, I noticed little by little that Pinkie Pie watched everypony in the crowd like a hawk. Even at this early stage in her Ministry, she was keeping tabs on everything that happened around her. As I watched my host’s body zip around the room, she slowly found a corner of the room that was inconspicuously absent of any crowd. She found a door and exited through it, leaving the party. The pink mare wandered down the hallway, walking from door to door as she did. At last she opened one of the doors, which led to a bathroom. Oh great, was I going to have watch my host take a piss? Gross! The pink pony stopped instead in front of one of the mirrors and stared straight into it. She pulled a tin from underneath her dress and popped it open. I realized that what I was watching was way worse. I was going to watch Pinkie Pie drugging herself up.

An inhaler popped out of the tin as my host put it to her lips. She pressed on the tab and began to inhale, slowly at first but then faster as the drug began to take effect. I began to see wild amounts of color as time itself seemed to speed up. Pinkie stared wildly into the mirror. I got a distinct feeling that she was staring right at me.

“You know if you’re going to ride along with me, you could at least say hello,” my host said into the mirror. My eyes widened from behind the mind of the party mare.

Are you talking to me? I thought as I tried to comprehend what was going on.

“Of course silly filly, who else would I be talking to? I mean there’s no one in here except me and you,” Pinkie replied, giggling.

I don’t get it... this is a memory... how can you...? I thought.

“It’s best to not question these things,” the party pony said. “One of these days, you should come see me. I’d really like that. I gotta get going now though, but I can give you a push in the right direction at least before I do. There’s a hidden sanctum right above Twilight’s old office. You’ll find something

interesting there.” With that, the pink mare resumed her hyperactive nature and headed out into the hallway before I had a chance to respond. Within mere seconds she was back at the party, and back to her usual animated self. As Pinkie began to glide around the crowd, making sure everypony was having a good time, the world began to fade to black.

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Waking up after a memory experience was a lot like waking up with a hangover. It was usually highly disorienting, and sometimes gave one a headache. I came to, lying on the floor of the lobby next to Violet, who was still awake and waiting for me to come out of the memory dream. She smiled at me and reached in, nuzzling me. I shivered at her touch.

“Everything alright?” she asked. I slowly nodded.

“It was... odd. I feel like my head has been through a meat grinder,” I replied. I wrapped my wing around her back, pulling her close. “What was really strange about the whole thing was that she spoke to me...”

“Who did?” my green companion asked. I pointed at the orb, which was lying comfortably amongst its companions.

“Pinkie Pie,” I said. “It’s like she knew I was there. She said something about a hidden sanctum above Twilight’s old office.” Violet crossed her eyes at this and thought intensely.

“You think she meant we’d find something at the M.A.S. hub?” she finally responded. I shrugged.

“Maybe. I just hope we find some answers there,” I said, resting my head across her forelegs. She smiled and used the opportunity to give me a kiss on my forehead, pushing my mane aside and smiling. I yawned profusely.

“How are you not tired?” I spoke through the yawn. Violet laughed.

“I am... I just wanted to make sure you were okay before I went to bed is all,” she said, resting her head next to mine. “We can go to sleep now though. It’s not like Steeljack is waking up any time soon.” I chuckled at this, my gaze falling upon the buck, who was now snoring with his legs nearly straight up in the air.

“Good night Violet.”

“Good night Star.”

Light filtered into the lobby as morning breached the sky outside of the power plant. I flipped over on my back, feeling the cold of the bare floor. A muffled noise from my side stirred me from my sleep. A soft ***click*** fills my ears as I groggily opened my eyes, seeing the barrel of a gun leveled right at my head. I stared past the barrel to see a grinning unicorn stallion standing over me. Several other ponies surrounded us. More muffled noises alerted me to notice that they had tied up and gagged Violet and were currently holding her off to the side quite roughly. Steeljack was also tied up and gagged on the other side of the group. I became distinctly aware that I had been bound as well. They hadn’t gagged me though, which I thought was odd. The unicorn stallion pointing the gun had a cutie mark of a dollar sign resting on his flank. The armor the group was wearing indicated that they were raiders.

“Well well well,” the unicorn said. “Look who decided to wake up.”

“Who are you?” I snarled. “What do you want with us?” The raider leader chuckled.

“Me? I want money, I want mares, I want it all,” he crooned happily. “Mostly I want to stick your

head on a pike, you fucking cunt. But that would do me no good now would it? It doesn't help me get what I want the most, and that's power. You can call me Greed."

"What? What are you talking about?" I said, trying to process what was happening. How the fuck did these guys sneak up on us? I couldn't think straight. I wanted to strangle these fuckers to death for hurting my friends.

"You're famous around these parts you know that right? All the time on the radio, DJ-PON3 going on about the 'Great and Powerful Ministry Mare.' So I got to thinkin', if you really are as powerful as they say you are, you can help me become just as powerful," the buck continued saying, grinning that wicked grin. "All you need is a little... incentive." He nodded to one of his cohorts, a black coated unicorn mare who removed a knife from her saddlebags. She brought the blade down to Violet's cheek and sliced slightly, drawing a thin line of blood. She whimpered through the gag they had tied around her muzzle. I growled again.

"Don't you fucking touch her you fucking prick!" I shouted, struggling to get out of my bonds. Greed laughed. "I can't do what you want anyways. I couldn't give you any more power than I could give a spark battery a fucking charge you moron."

"You misunderstand me," the grinning buck responded, motioning to his retinue. "Grab her and their stuff. She'll help us if she wants to see her friends safe." I glared at Greed and snarled again. Two hefty stallions stepped forward and began to lift me from the cold floor.

"Let me go!" I yelled, trying to struggle my way out of the bonds. Greed continued to speak.

"I'm gonna make this very simple you see. You're gonna help me with a little job. There's something I want to steal, and it's very special. If you don't, well then I'll kill your friends. I'll make sure to have plenty of fun with the little green one too before I do." He cackled madly at this. I sighed as we were being dragged out of the power plant. The morning sunlight nearly blinded me as we were thrust into it.

"And if I do this... you'll let us go?" I asked tentatively. Greed nodded.

"You have my word as an honest stallion," he crowed. I narrowed my eyes at this. What kind of fucking raider prick was honest? I really wanted to strangle this one over and over.

"Fine. I'll help you. But you have to untie me," I responded. Greed's eyes gleamed with triumph. He nodded at the two stallions who dropped me on the ground (ouch that hurt!) and released me from my bonds. I stood up and stretched my wings out, before noticing that Stargazer was resting comfortably in the hooves of one of the larger stallions. I focused and yanked the weapon away from him, clipping it back into its harness.

"My gun," I said, snarling at the confused stallion. Greed laughed heartily.

"A mare after my own heart. This is going to be fun. Untie the other two so they can walk on their own. If any of them makes a move, kill them swiftly," he instructed the gang. Soon we were following them down the road towards an uncertain future. I stepped up close to Violet and checked her neck. The cut wasn't deep and had already sealed up.

"Are you okay?" I asked her quietly. She nodded.

"I'm fine... I don't like this. I don't trust that buck," she responded, pointing a hoof at Greed.

"I don't either, but right now we're outnumbered, and don't have much of a choice," I said, placing a hoof on her shoulder to comfort her. "When the time is right, I'll make sure that fucker gets his."

A few hours later we arrived at what Greed told us was our destination. It was a small town just north of Fillydelphia called Far Hills. The town was ragged and dirty, and smelled like somepony had taken a piss all over the town. I couldn't begin to fathom what it was the crazy stallion wanted here, until he pointed at a building in the middle of the town. It was an old natural history museum. The roof of the place had cracks all over it and the foundation was beginning to sink at one end of it. It looked absolutely decrepit. I didn't know much about this town, only that its inhabitants tended to stick to their own, and hated outsiders with a passion. I glared at the grinning stallion.

"What do you want me to do?" I said, narrowing my gaze at him. Greed pointed at the museum again.

"We need to get in there. There's something very special in there, and I want it. Got it?" he replied. I glared at him again. "You help me out, I'll let you go. That's the deal."

"Fine, but we do this discretely. You all look like a bunch of raiders, and I'm not perfectly comfortable with killing anypony who doesn't deserve it," I said, putting emphasis on the last part of my sentence. Greed snorted and laughed.

"That's why you're here. I've heard all about you. You can teleport right?" he asked. I nodded. "Good. Then you and me, we're going to go in there and get my prize."

"What about my friends?" I asked, glowering.

"They stay here. That way you have incentive to come back," Greed replied, indicating the thugs holding my companions. I winked at Violet and looked down at the museum. A soft ***pop*** later and both Greed and I were standing on the roof out of plain sight. Greed pointed at the door leading down into the museum. He pushed it open and I followed him into the dark stairwell. As we made our way down the stairwell I quietly tried to make some form of conversation with my kidnapper.

"What exactly is this thing you're looking for?" I asked quietly as we reached the door at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Have you ever heard of Daring Do?" he responded. He pushed open the door as I shook my head. "Before the war, she was an archaeologist who dug up all sorts of mystical artifacts from all over the world. She became so famous; they even wrote books about her. Many of the artifacts she discovered were placed on display for everypony to see. It just so happens one of those is here."

"What is it?" I asked curiously. Now I wondered what this stallion really wanted. His demeanor had completely changed from the bravado he put up in front of his gang.

"It's a figurine of a pony carved out of starmetal. It's supposed to grant immortality to the one who cracks its secrets," Greed said chuckling lowly. We made our way through the top floor of the museum hall, dodging rubble and debris as we progressed through the hall. Busts of long-dead ponies adorned one hall while skeletons of ancient Equestrian monsters lined the wall of another hallway. We continued silently through a hallway containing modern Equestrian art to a set of stairs that would take us down to the ground level. I checked my E.F.S. for any sort of threats, but saw nothing. This concerned me, mostly because I was expecting some form of automated defenses in this place.

Of course... I was wrong. The sharp ***crack*** of turret fire awoke my defenses as two mounted turrets awoke from the ceiling on the ground level, leveling their barrels at myself and Greed. I jumped out of the way and pushed myself behind a stone statue. Greed stood there and laughed maniacally as he unleashed gunfire at the turrets while the bullets bit into him as well. Was this buck seriously fucking crazy? I couldn't even begin to tell. I pulled out Stargazer and let loose a stream of fire at one of the turrets, blowing it off of the ceiling. Greed's pistol disabled the other turret shortly afterwards. I stared blankly at the white buck. The parts of his body where he had been struck were black and hard. Every bullet that had hit him had fallen to the ground around him, as if the gunfire never even touched

him. The black marks slowly receded, revealing his white coat again.

“What the...?” I said flatly. Greed stared at me with psychotic eyes, wild with joy. “What the fuck are you?” Greed laughed.

“Killing joke,” he finally said. “Got hit by a patch of it in Everfree. The only thing I could think about was being indestructible. Thought I was a goner, but instead... now mere wounds no longer hurt me. My body converts to some form of material much like iron when struck.” I stared more. Killing joke was not something to joke about. The plant, originally known as poison joke, would play small jokes on the ponies that touched its leaves. As poison joke, these pranks were typically harmless. As killing joke, they were deadly serious and often fatal. I had never met anyone else who had been hit by the plant and survived intact. Not only had this buck been hit by it, but it had also turned him into an indestructible killing machine. There was to be no snapping of this buck’s neck, no sirree.

Shouts from outside stirred me to reality. The sound of the gunfire obviously had alarmed the townsponties. I nudged Greed and pointed down the hall, indicating that we should keep moving. He nodded and we kept going down the large exhibit hall. Another set of turrets popped out of the ceiling, spreading hot lead through the room. I took cover and returned fire, blowing them apart and pushing through into the next exhibit hall. Greed pointed down the hall to the Ancient Cultures wing.

“The figurine should be down there. It’s in a secure room, so we’ll need to bust through it. We don’t have much time before the townsponties get here, so if you wish to remain discrete...” he snarled, running ahead of me. I groaned and leapt after him, matching his stride as we moved through the museum wing until we arrived at a steel door barring one of the exhibits. I stood my ground and focused, tugging at the lock mechanisms with my telekinesis. The lock stayed firm for a few minutes but then eventually began to disassemble itself under the strain of the magic forces acting upon it. The door began to force itself outward as I yanked the lock from it, crushing the door into pieces. What lay inside before us was absolutely incredible. A carved figurine of an earth pony rested on a pedestal in the center of the exhibit room. It glowed an unnatural bluish color that swirled around the body of the figure. Greed’s eyes glowed with absolute enthusiasm.

“Excellent,” he said, stepping into the room. I stayed outside, watching for anypony that might be coming. Greed levitated the figure off of the pedestal and placed it into his saddlebag. Seconds later, several earth ponies rounded the corner, wielding various firearms. Gunfire erupted into the hall around us as I ducked back into the exhibit where the figurine was. I howled as several bullets grazed my flank, drawing a stream of blood down my back leg. I floated Stargazer out and fired several bursts as a warning, drawing several screams from our assailants. I yelled out of the room.

“Hold your fire!” I screamed. “We’re not here to hurt you!” My call was met by another round of gunfire. These ponies weren’t interested in talking it seemed. I poked my head out to get a good look at them. The group was dressed in dirty, bloody barding and was comprised solely of several earth ponies. They were grimy and had maniacal looks in their eyes. These ponies were raiders! Well, that explained why the ponies in this town hated outsiders. I looked back at Greed who was grinning widely. I nodded at him and leaped out of the room, bringing Stargazer up as I entered into E.S.A.T.S. Time slowed to a crawl as I lined up my shots. I dropped the spell and unleashed hell against the raiders, Stargazer’s blue bullets eating through barding and flesh as they struck my targets. Greed stepped out behind me and let out round after round of his pistol, blowing several holes in the head of one of the raider ponies.

“Come on you fuckers, just try and kill me!” the unicorn stallion shouted, laughing maniacally as he stepped forward into the hall and unleashed several rounds of gunfire. The raiders returned fire, the bullets biting into Greed’s body as they were deflected by his strange shield-like ability. He cackled wildly and fired again, taking the head off of one of the raiders. My flank felt on fire as I moved

around a corner to avoid getting shot again. Despite just grazing me, the wound hurt like hell. I had an idea. It was a crazy idea, but it was still an idea. I leapt out of my hiding spot into the fray in front of Greed and activated my shield, surrounding myself and the unicorn. I dug my hooves into the ground and shouted.

“STOP THIS AT ONCE!” I yelled, putting as much force into my voice as possible. The force of the shout knocked back several of the raiders across the exhibit hall. I focused hard, trying to teleport myself and Greed out of the museum, inadvertently letting my shield drop to do so. I barely heard Greed shout as one of the raiders’ bullets struck me in the leg, dropping me to the ground. I howled in pain as I lost consciousness and the world fell into pure black.

I hurt. A lot. If anything could ever possibly suck, it was being shot. In all fairness, I think the stairs are still winning on my list of things that suck. I awoke groggily and in pain, the warm heat of a campfire blazing in front of me. What happened? The last thing I remembered was being shot in the leg. In hindsight, I really needed to stop waking up in strange places or getting hurt like this. It was getting to become too much of a habit, and not one I particularly liked. A voice above me brought me back to the world of the living.

“You’re resilient stranger, I’ll give you that. You’re lucky even we get DJ-PON3 out here,” the voice said. I looked up to see a dirty grey earth pony mare sitting down next to me in front of the campfire.

“Where am I?” I choked out, trying to sit up. My leg felt like it was going to fall off. Hadn’t these ponies ever heard of Med-X before? Apparently not.

“You’re in town square. This is Far Hills,” the mare replied. I finally sat up and took in the sights around me. I was in the center of the small dingy town. The museum I had been in was looming over me like a grim reminder of why I had been there. A campfire had been set up, presumably to keep me warm. Several other ponies were standing about the square.

“My friends?!” I shouted. “Where are my friends?”

“You mean the buck you were in our museum with? He took off. Nothing we did hurt him,” the mare said. I shook my head.

“No... he wasn’t my friend. He blackmailed me into joining him. Took my friends hostage...” I responded, trailing off. The mare nodded.

“I wondered what the Ministry Mare was doing raiding a town’s cherished museum,” she said. I started to cry at her hooves, thinking of my friends and if they were okay. She patted my head, brushing my mane out of my eyes. I snapped out of my funk and turned to anger.

“You shot me you know,” I said indignantly. “What’s the matter with you ponies? Dressing up as raiders and shooting at others?” The mare chuckled and waved her hoof around.

“As you can see, we’re not raiders. We’ve defended our town against enough of that riff-raff to gather their armor and weapons. It’s how we keep outsiders out of our town. You’d be amazed at how much dressing up as raiders deters others from attacking us,” the mare explained. I gawked at her, unable to believe what I was hearing.

“Is that why you decided to not kill me?” I asked. She nodded.

“You’re not exactly an unknown pony to the Wasteland, thanks to DJ-PON3,” she responded. “I’m sorry for shooting you. We didn’t realize who you were until we got a good look at you.” I managed to finally push myself off of my haunches and smiled at the mare.

“Thanks, but I’ve got to find my friends. I need to save them from that lunatic,” I responded. I looked down at my PipBuck and input Violet’s tag into it. A map appeared in my E.F.S., indicating that Violet was moving south along the road to Fillydelphia. I looked around for my saddlebags and weapons. “Umm, where’s my stuff?”

“Oh, right. One second,” she said, trotting up into a nearby building. Seconds later she brought out my saddlebags and other items, including Stargazer. I sighed in relief at the sight of my beautiful weapon. I grabbed my stuff from the mare and strapped my saddlebags on. Stargazer clipped to its harness and I grinned.

“The item that Greed took. Was it important?” I asked the dirty mare. She shrugged.

“That’s the first time that anypony has actually been in there and been brave enough to get past the turrets,” she replied. I nodded in response.

“Regardless, I’m going to make sure that lunatic pays and the item is returned to you. It’s the least I can do for your town,” I said, earning a smile from the mare.

“No pony has ever offered to do anything nice for us before,” she said. I grinned again.

“Well no pony wasn’t me, now were they?” I said, giving my wings an experimental flap. They felt good enough to travel. I thanked the mare again and began flapping my wings, picking myself off of the ground and into the air. I hovered for a moment, checking my PipBuck again to provide the direction I needed to go. I started flying towards Violet’s blip on my E.F.S., hoping to get there in time before Greed decided to be less than impatient with them.

I sped along as fast as my wings would allow, pushing the limits of my body. I was pissed off royally. Not only did that fucker leave me for dead, he took my friends! I was going to gut him like a fish and feed him to parasprites! My E.F.S. indicated that Violet wasn’t far at least. The blip wasn’t moving at least, which made me even more pissed off, since it was possible that Greed had killed my friends and left them for me to find. I swooped down towards the road where I could see two shapes that were tied together. There were no other blips on my E.F.S. other than two blue friendly indicators. I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw that Violet and Steeljack were sitting off the side of the road, tied up and unconscious. I floated down and used my telekinesis to rip the bonds from them. A cough from Steeljack indicated that he was awake.

“St-Star...?” he said, looking up at me. I nodded, smiling. Violet slowly regained consciousness next to me. She latched onto my foreleg, crying. I nuzzled her for a moment before returning my gaze to the earth pony before me.

“Are you guys alright?” I asked. They nodded in response. “What happened?”

“We heard your shout from up on the hill,” Steeljack started. “When we tried to get free, the gang knocked us unconscious. When we came to we were tied up here. That Greed feller was standing over us. He said you did your part, and he would keep to his word and let us live. Also said he would see you again. Knocked us out again, and now you’re here. I think that’s pretty much the thick of it.” I sighed.

“I was a scapegoat. He never meant for me to get out of there alive,” I said, staring off into space. “I’m just glad you two are alright.” I looked down at Violet who was still crying into my leg. I cooed softly as I nuzzled her neck. “It’s okay... I’m here now.” She sniffled and looked up at me with teary eyes. I smiled in return, earning a weak smile creeping onto her lips as well.

“We should keep going, get to Fillydelphia,” she managed to choke out through the tears. I nodded in agreement, helping her and Steeljack to their hooves. We kept a brisk pace as we walked along the

road, continuing south. Pretty soon, we could see the ruined landscape that was Fillydelphia. As we made our way down the road to the city, I clicked on the radio, letting the sounds of DJ-PON3 fill our ears.

"Goooooood evening Wasteland! This is your host, DJ-PON3, giving you all the latest news from the Wastes! And boy do I have news for you. A news report came in from the town of Far Hills of all places. It seems the Ministry Mare paid a visit to their fair town, and wasn't shot on sight! Based on reports, the townsponies of Far Hills acted like raiders to keep outsiders out of their town, but recent events have changed their minds on the matter.

Thanks to the Ministry Mare, the town's inhabitants now can access the old natural history museum after our intrepid hero bypassed the museum's security systems. Word is that they may even open it and the city up to outsiders again! Good on you Ministry Mare!

Remember everypony: if you're kind to your neighbors, they'll be kind in return. Until next time, be safe and be happy. Have a little Sweetie Belle."

Fillydelphia was a city with a lot of history. During the war, it was another cultural hub of Equestrian civilization as well as a highly active manufacturing city. Many of the factories that provided Equestria's weapons were in Fillydelphia, fueling the cause of war. Fillydelphia also was the center of Red Eye's slaver army several years ago, before the Day of Sunshine and Rainbows. After his army was dispersed and Red Eye himself killed, the city became a city of refugees, ponies who were once slaves and now freely living amongst each other. Because of this, there were also several other races living here such as zebra, buffalo, and even minotaurs. It was a strange melting pot of creatures who all had one thing in common and that was that they used to answer to a master. Now master-less, the races began to form allegiances and turf wars began among the populace of the city. It was truly a city still at war with itself.

The Ministry of Arcane Sciences Hub was located at a junction of the city just north of the Fillydelphia Crater. Hopefully this meant that we wouldn't have to run into any of the warring gangs, but we couldn't afford not to be on high alert. We made our way through the ruined city quietly and quickly, trying to avoid any attention we possibly could. The decrepit building that once belonged to the M.A.S. Hub loomed in the distance. I breathed a sigh of relief as we made our way through the rubble and debris to the front gate of the Ministry building. The gate was turned over on its side, broken in several pieces. The courtyard beyond it was filled with broken pieces of the building that had fallen over the years. I pushed aside several large pieces of cinderblock with telekinesis and trotted up to the door leading into the facility. Locked. Of course. Why make it easy on me Wasteland? The Wasteland neglected to respond, as normal. I grabbed the door with my magic and yanked it away, a musty ancient smell assaulting my senses once the door was out of the way. Violet and Steeljack warily followed behind me as we entered the facility.

Once again, I was assaulted by memories of days gone by as I strode into the ruined Ministry building. I also couldn't help but think of what Pinkie had said to me in her memory. The prospect of finding something here that could give me some answers haunted my every move as we walked through the quiet halls. It was a little too quiet. Usually these Ministry buildings had some sort of automated defense systems, something that would shoot at you until you were pretty much dead. But this one... nothing. Nothing at all. I was almost disappointed. It was as if the Wasteland had given me some sort of break. I snickered at that thought, because I knew it was untrue. The Wasteland never gave you a break. Never.

The large hallway we were in fed into a series of offices near the back of the building. The largest

office held a brass plate that read *Twilight Sparkle, Ministry Director* and the door was emblazoned with Twilight's cutie mark. I pushed open the door and remembered Pinkie's words. The hidden space above Twilight's office held some sort of secret. I was getting a little tired of secrets to be honest. All I really wanted was somepony to be honest with me at this point. I'm pretty sure the only honest pony I've met lately was the jacked up psycho pony Greed. And even that was pushing it!

As I began checking out the center of the room to find this hidden space, Violet and Steeljack fanned out around the office and began perusing anything that was unlocked. As I inspected the ceiling, I could see no way that there was anything situated above the office. A large banging noise followed by a surprised yelp from Violet ripped my gaze away from the ceiling. One of the lockers had nearly fallen on my green friend, almost crushing her. She pulled herself out of the way, and laughed a bit as she looked back at me.

"Sorry," she said, smiling. I sort of ignored the smile and pointed instead at the wall behind the locker.

"What's that...?" I asked. She looked back at the wall at what appeared to be a big red button. Why hide something like a button? Unless... I prodded at the button with magic, pushing it inwards. A noise above me brought my attention back to the ceiling, which now appeared to be opening up and lowering a staircase down.

"Violet, you're a genius," I said, as I allowed the staircase to come down to floor level. I started up the stairs, hoping for something, anything that would give me some answers. The room above the office was filled with machinery, computers, and other equipment. In the center of the room was a set of pillars, much like the ones from the inner sanctum of the Twilight Society. A large operating table lay in the center of the pillar. A sheet draped over the table, obscuring the lump laying on it. Cautiously I stepped forward into the room. What was this place? Was this some sort of secret experiment that Twilight was working on? A million questions assaulted my mind as I continued on into the room. A voice filled the room, startling me and my companions.

"Welcome... I was wondering when you might show up here... Twilight Sparkle," the deep voice sounded through the room. "I've been waiting, oh so long for you."

"Who's there?" I called out, stepping up to the table with the sheet. "Who are you?" A deep chuckle erupted from inside the room. "Where are you?"

"Please, what fun is there in revealing the entire plot before its time? That just ruins everything," the voice continued, laughing heartily. "But if you want answers, look under that sheet. It will enlighten you in ways you never thought possible." I snarled, and ripped the sheet off of the table. I felt my breath constrict as I took in the sight before me. The creature on the table was freakish, with long black legs that had holes in them revealing sickly looking flesh. Long blue hair fell from the head of the creature, which had a horn like a unicorn's own. The thing was clearly dead and reeked of decay. Cradled next to the thing in its hooves was a memory orb.

"More memories?" I snorted. "What is that going to do? Show me more of the fucked up past? Who did this to me? Was it you?" I shouted to the room. The voice chuckled again.

"Oh me oh my. I can tell you it wasn't me. Even I wouldn't do something that silly," the voice responded, cackling madly again. "No... this memory is special. Trust me." I glared around the room, trying to locate the bodiless voice before my gaze returned to the sickly creature and the orb it held. I looked to Steeljack and Violet, who only nodded. I stared at the orb intently, and let my magic wrap around it, allowing the world to fall into blackness.

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At least I was in familiar territory. I recognized Twilight's body instantly as my vision fell into focus. I

was sitting at a desk, the same desk in the very office that was below me, signing paperwork and humming along to a tune that was playing on the radio nearby. I finished the papers and got up from my chair. Sighing, I moved the locker from the wall slightly, and pushed the red button behind it. The staircase extended and I stepped up into the laboratory. It appeared nearly the same, only this time the operating table was missing. All of the equipment was buzzing away as I stepped into the center of the room. I pressed another button on one of the pillars. Slowly the operating table lifted into the room, a sheet covering its occupant.

I removed the sheet, revealing the same creature I had just witnessed, except this one was alive. It snarled as it tried to escape the bonds holding it to the table.

“I was told you had infiltrated my Ministry, posing as a top security officer to gain intelligence,” I said to the beast before me. I pointed a hoof at the creature. “Who are you working for? The zebras? Or is your Queen involved in this too?” The creature merely snarled again.

“You’ll have to kill me to make me talk you bitch,” the thing growled, writhing in its bonds. Before my eyes the beast changed into a perfect copy of Twilight and then back to its normal self. What were these things? I sighed and shook my head as I paced in front of the beast.

“I’m afraid that’s not an option for you. I’ll have to call Pinkie Pie and let her Ministry take over now. She’ll be able to extract your memories so that we can find out exactly who you were working for,” I responded. That explained how Pinkie knew about the hidden room, but what purpose did this serve to the problem at hand? I still had yet to see anything that answered my questions. In fact, if anything this brought up more questions. I trotted to the other side of the room and pulled out a syringe. I moved to the creature’s side and injected it into its leg, drawing the thing’s blood.

“For a little experiment. What Pinkie doesn’t know won’t hurt her right?” I said, feeling a wicked grin creep onto my face. The creature’s eyes widened as the memory dissipated into nothing.

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I awoke in the room next to the dead creature in the company of Steeljack and Violet. I shook my head as I stood up. The heavy voice re-entered the room.

“Oh, you’re awake now? How pleasant. So... what did you think?” it said, chuckling again.

“What was this thing? How does any of this have anything to do with me?” I shouted angrily. I was tired of being jerked around. I wanted some answers, not more questions.

“That ‘thing’ as you so eloquently described it was a changeling. They’re a race primarily existing outside of Equestria. They have a very special talent... the ability to transform themselves to look like anything,” the voice erupted into the room. “As far as what this has to do with you, consider your bodily changes. Changeling magic is quite special. But mix that with unicorn magic or rather alicorn magic, and anything can happen.”

“Are you saying that this creature has to do with what happened to me?” I asked, now more confused than ever. Of course, I was also talking to a strange voice, but that was nothing new.

“Indeed my dear Twilight. I daresay that somepony wanted you back. Imagine if you will the living Goddess walking Equestria once again. Mixing such a powerful personality and magic with your alicorn body, well it would create a being nearly as powerful as Celestia or Luna,” the voice responded. “Whoever controlled that power, they could control everything. This is why I’m so glad you’re here, because now I get you all to myself.” *What?* I thought as the room began to rumble. A serpentine body broke through the floor in front of us, revealing a creature even uglier than the beast on the table. The head consisted of a pony’s head, but with a deer antler on one side and a goat horn on

the other. Its eyes were maniacal and different in size, while a sinister looking fang curled out of its lips as it sneered at us. The thing's body was serpentine in nature, with a lion's arm on the right and an eagle's claw on the left. The beast laughed maniacally as it reared back. My eyes widened with fear as I shrunk back next to Violet and Steeljack. Clearly the part of me that belonged to Twilight recognized this beast.

"Welcome to your new home Twilight Sparkle. It is ever so good to see you again," the creature snorted, chuckling as it reached towards me. "To answer a previous question as to who I am... you can call me... Discord."

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Quest Perk! The Times They Are a-Changing: You have discovered how your transformation took place, but are no closer to discovering why. The experience has hardened your resolve to fight on, increasing your Endurance by 1 point and +10% damage to all hostile enemies.

New Quest! Greed Consumes All: Locate and kill the Unicorn raider named Greed.

New Spell! - Long Distance Telepathy. Phone home anytime, anywhere. When you remember to of course.

Spark Level: 40%. This is how much of your body Spark has gained control of.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Love Will Find You a Way: While in the presence of Radiant Star, your mind is clearer and you can hit better. You gain +1 Intelligence and a +15% targeting bonus in S.A.T.S.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Chapter 5: A Dash of Chaos

“I’ve got to fight for my friendships. For them. For me. For Equestria!”

Chaos is a force of unbridled power and disharmony. It is beyond anything that anypony could ever imagine. It is nature’s answer to logic and order. Legend tells us that chaos crept into the hearts of Equestrian citizens, releasing the inner disharmony that everypony hid from the world. Over time, this chaos erupted into the war that destroyed ponykind. Disharmony brought our entire society to its knees.

Sometimes I like to believe that a little chaos is necessary for ponykind to survive. One cannot have order without chaos. If you have too much chaos however, and the balance tips too far, sliding ever further into pure chaos. The same could be said of order as well. The balance is finding the happy median between the two worlds, the center in the middle of swirling chaos and rigid order.

Ultimately, was chaos really to blame for all of this? Was disharmony the true reason we destroyed ourselves? Or was there some other ulterior design behind it all?

Run! Run... now! Spark shouted into my head as I shrank back away from the serpentine beast that lay before me. In the back of my mind, I could only think of one thing. This thing was a living legend, a real spirit and god. This was Discord, the spirit of Disharmony and Chaos. His snake’s tongue flickered in and out of his mouth as his beady yellow eyes glared evilly at me.

RUN!!! FOR THE LOVE OF CELESTIA, GET OUT OF THERE!!! Spark now screamed into my mind, trying to force me to move. I was frozen in place, unable to lift a single hoof. The spirit of Chaos chuckled, his voice rumbling and bouncing off the walls of the small sanctum.

“You can tell her to run all you want, little Magic... but it won’t work,” Discord mused. His tail curled around us as he laughed. “She’s all mine now... and with all of that power at my disposal... I will rain glorious chaos over Equestria once again!”

Star, for Celestia’s sake, please move! You need to get away! Spark shouted again, trying to get my attention. I could feel Violet and Steeljack poking me and prodding me hard in my side. I could only stare into the beast’s eyes. Why could I only stare? Why wasn’t I able to move? I couldn’t piece together the reasons behind my inability to just run. It was as if I was literally stuck to the floor, waiting to be devoured by a god. Violet poked me again. I slowly realized that I really needed to move, that I needed to run away. Not for myself, but for her. I began to fathom just what the spirit of Disharmony would do to my friends once I was out of the picture, and I didn’t like it. In fact I downright hated it. I knew I couldn’t kill this thing. I needed a plan, and I needed one fast.

“V-v-violet... As soon as I move... you run... you run as fast as you can!” I shouted weakly. I stared down the beast.

“Star...?” my love asked, clearly unaware of what I had planned.

“Just do it!” I yelled as I began shifting back a bit. “You want me? Come and get me!” Discord sneered at this as I pushed out of his grasp and flapped my wings hard. This room had no windows so my only option was back down into Twilight’s office. A roar behind me indicated that the spirit of Chaos was indeed chasing me. I grinned as I burst through the door of the office into the Ministry building. Pushing my wings as hard as I could, I zipped and soared through the building as I could feel the creature closely on my tail. Several pink clouds suddenly burst into existence before my eyes as I

tried to maneuver. One of my wings caught one of the clouds, getting sticky from the substance and embedding itself into the pink cloud. Cotton candy? Really? I growled as I yanked my wing out of the cloud. The beast was upon me in mere seconds, whipping his serpent-like tail around to try and drag me down. Almost instinctively, I brought up my shield, knocking the appendage to the side.

“Nice try, but you’re going to have to move a lot faster to keep up with me!” I yelled as I zoomed past the evil spirit. Discord laughed merrily as he gave chase once again.

“Oh Twilight you’re making this too much fun for me!” The beast sneered and cackled wildly as I beat my wings hard and fast. The moon’s glare filtered into the main lobby of the Ministry building as I climbed upwards towards the skylight, intending on getting out of the building. I braced myself for impact to smash through the window, but instead hit the window like it was a trampoline and rebounded back down towards the ground below. Discord laughed maniacally.

“What’s the matter my dear, don’t you like bounce houses?” He snorted with a wave of his hand. Pretty soon the entire ground, walls, and every other structure in the building were made of what appeared to be colorful balloon-like trampoline material. The spirit of Chaos guffawed as I hit the ground and bounced off, speeding into another direction. I turned quickly in midair, trying to control my ascent back up. I was stuck here! I was going to die in a fucking bounce house of all things! I snarled. I had no idea if Violet and Steeljack had made it out okay, and if I was going to die here, I wasn’t going down without a fight. I managed to slow myself down and hover in the air before the great god of Disharmony. The spirit of Chaos dwarfed me by several alicorn sizes as I stared down the beast. I unlatched Stargazer from its harness and pointed it at the spirit, who promptly began laughing even harder.

“Do you really think you’re going to kill me with that? Me? The spirit of all that is chaotic? Please... but if you so insist on trying, let me make it a little easier for you,” Discord snarled, waving a hand over his serpentine chest. A red bulls-eye target appeared, hanging from his neck. “Give it your best shot, Twilight. It will be your last.” I let time drift away from as I slipped into E.S.A.T.S., letting the spell take control. I chuckled at the fact that Discord had given me a target, and queued up every last shot to that exact spot. My E.F.S. was unable to calculate my odds of actually hitting the beast, probably something to do with the fact that I was in a sense, shooting a god. Time slipped back into motion as the spell dropped, and Stargazer unleashed its healthy amount of ammunition at the creature before me. The bluish bullets travelled at a speed like no other, almost as if they were seeking their target.

I was unprepared for what happened next. Howls of anger and pain erupted in my ears as the bullets found home, striking the beast dead center in the target. The burst passed through the spirit as Discord howled. Greenish blood emerged from the cavity where the gunfire had hit in a wild spray of ichor and goo. My eyes widened as I realized what had just happened. I had shot a god, and succeeded. *How in the fuck did my gun do that?* I thought, instead of thinking the obvious answer to all of this. **Run!**

The wound I had inflicted upon the chaotic creature had closed up by the time I got any guts to actually move. Discord chuckled, coughing and hacking a bit as he did. The walls and floors around us were receding, becoming the normal stone brick they had been before. Discord’s injury must have interrupted his powers temporarily. I used the opportunity to start flying, zipping my way out of the Ministry building and into the open air. A crash behind me indicated that the beast was not far behind me. I pulled into a dive, going low and in between the towering buildings as I tried to put some distance between me and the spirit of Chaos. I took a second and looked back and saw the monster himself, roaring and gaining on me.

I swooped left on the next street, hoping that I could confuse Discord. I nearly shrieked when he popped into existence right in front of me.

“That... was unexpected,” he said, grinning and stroking his goatee. “You shot me. I suppose I should have seen it coming. It’ll take a bit more than that to kill me though.”

“Try me. See how far that gets you. Next burst will be aimed right for your head,” I growled. “And I won’t miss. That’s a promise.” Discord laughed at this, prompting a confused stare from my eyes. “What’s so funny?” The beast sneered again, flicking his tail back and forth as he floated in the air in front of me.

“Star!” a voice from below me called out. I looked down to see Violet and Steeljack. Why didn’t they run? Didn’t they know they were in danger here? I sighed as I brought my gaze back up to the god of Disharmony, who merely continued to giggle uncontrollably. Above us, the sky roared in anger as lightning flashed and thunder erupted from the clouds. Rain poured down from the sky in torrents, except that it wasn’t rain. The stuff matted down my coat and felt sticky. I tentatively reached out with my tongue. *Chocolate? Are you bucking kidding me? It’s raining chocolate?* I thought as I continued to glare at the god of Chaos.

“You have no idea how funny all of this is!” Discord managed to choke out through the giggles. “Somepony actually hurt me! And of all the ponies to do it, it was you Twilight Sparkle.”

“For the last time, I’m not Twilight!” I shouted, bringing up Stargazer again. Discord sneered at me as his body began to fade into nothingness, leaving only his floating eyes in the air. The eyes darted around, drawing my gun to follow his path. The beast reappeared and snarled, snapping his fingers and tossing several more cotton candy clouds my way. I hovered to the right and fired, obliterating the clouds, causing some of the cloud residue to hit me and nearly gum my wings up. I growled and shook my wings, flinging bits of cotton candy everywhere. The spirit of Disharmony used the opportunity to wrap me in his tail as he chuckled.

“Oh no, poor defenseless Twilight Sparkle. Maybe the magic of friendship can save you... not! Not even Princess Celestia can save you now my dear, seeing as how that old hag has been dead for centuries!” Discord crooned. I struggled, trying to free myself from his grasp. I aimed Stargazer in a misguided attempt to free myself and managed to land a few shots on the god’s body. Discord promptly howled and released me. I took aim again and prepared to fire when a burst of soapy water expelled from the thing, drenching me and clouding my vision. A strike at my left knocked me into a nearby building, causing parts of the stone to crack and sway under the force that I had been sent there with.

Star, what the fuck are you doing?! You need to get out of there! Spark screamed in the back of my mind. I growled as I pulled myself back into the air, bringing Stargazer to bear again on the malevolent spirit.

Spark, shut up I know what I’m doing, I responded to the voice in my mind. If I had a gun that could hurt a god, maybe it could kill one too. Discord moved quickly and lashed out at me with his griffon’s claw, raking my side and causing me to bleed before I could even get a shot off. This fucker was fast when he wanted to be. Was he just playing with me up until now? I couldn’t take any more chances. I turned and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up as many shots to as many points on his body as I could. The spell released and Stargazer fired. Many of my shots went wide as Discord waved a claw in the air and snapped his fingers. A shield of energy appeared around his arms, deflecting many of the bullets. Several however, found home in his legs and tail, forcing the shield to dissipate instantly as the god of Disharmony roared in pain. He sneered at me, panting as the wounds began to close up. I tried to move away, but instead Discord brought his tail around, slamming into me hard. I growled through the pain as the beast brought his tail back around to strike again. I wasn’t there when his tail came back around. I locked my wings in hard and dropped, just barely missing the massive tail. I let loose a spray of bullets that sunk into the beast’s side, earning another roar of pain from the god of Chaos. Discord

twisted around and stared down at me with his beady eyes, grinning evilly as he did. I pushed off with my wings, bringing myself even with the god as I leveled Stargazer directly at his head.

“Next time... you’ll be mine.” The voice of the spirit of Chaos emanated all around me as the chaos spirit dissipated into thin air, leaving only myself hovering in the air. Another call from my friends forced me back to reality as I lowered to the ground. My little green unicorn wrapped her forelegs around me, smothering me in a bear hug that could literally kill a real bear. I smiled warmly as I patted her on the head. A brisk cough from Steeljack interrupted our tender moment.

“I hate to be interruptin’ and all, but I think we oughta get out of here before that thing comes back,” he said. I nodded and narrowed my gaze at the grey buck as I thought about the events that just transpired. How was I able to pierce the very flesh of a living god with my gun? As we made our way through the city, all I could think about was the other things Discord had said to me. Was I destined to become another Goddess? Was that the ultimate goal of the Twilight’s spirit? All of this just brought up more questions instead of answers. I didn’t need any more questions. I needed answers.

I cracked my eyes open and looked around the room. Violet was sleeping quietly next to me, and Steeljack was across the room keeping watch. I picked myself up and quietly strode over to the grey stallion. We had managed to find an abandoned building that had no gang markings on it in the city and had holed up for the night. It had taken a lot of Med-X and plenty of magical bandages to heal the scars I had received during my aerial battle with Discord. Fortunately, the chocolate rain had subsided when Discord had left, being another one of his strange abilities. My coat still felt rather sticky because of it though. Not exactly a pleasant feeling. I tapped Steeljack on the side, letting him know I was behind him.

“Can we talk?” I asked quietly. He nodded and followed me out into the hallway and onto the fire escape. My horn glowed, revealing Stargazer.

“You said you found this under the Mall. Where did it come from?” I said, pointing at the minigun. Steeljack shrugged.

“It was in some R&D laboratory, I told you. That’s all I know,” he said, appearing a bit distant. I huffed at the obvious lie.

“Steeljack, answer me truthfully. I need some answers here. I’ve been noticing it for a while, this thing isn’t normal,” I said, glaring at him. He sighed and lowered his head.

“Alright, I do know a little bit about it. Violet wasn’t with me when I found it,” he said finally. “Truthfully, it really was in some R&D lab. There was a recording with it. I’ve got it on my PipBuck. I think it will answer all your questions. I’m sorry I kept it from you, I honestly didn’t think it was that important.” He lifted his hoof and connected his PipBuck to mine and transferred the recording. I smiled.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “Can I ask you something else?” He nodded. It was time for some more answers.

“Who was she?” I replied. His eyes widened.

“I don’t...” he started to say. I cut him off before he could continue.

“Don’t you lie to me, I heard you talking to Brisk. Who was she?” I said. The grey buck looked as if he was going to fall apart.

“My wife,” he muttered, before beginning to speak normally. “We were on an assignment. Mercenary work. The kind one typically kills raiders for. Weren’t none proud of it, but it was work. She was an

ex-slave and a salvager, but we worked together. Anyways, we were assigned to guard this camp. Didn't know it at the time we were assigned but it was a slaver operation, one of Red Eye's. When we got there, we realized they were trafficking in foals. Disgusting stuff I tell ya. She couldn't take it, having been a slave herself. Tried to convince us to free everypony, and abandon the contract. Leader of the camp caught wind of it, and came to us telling us we were breaking our contract. Had his boys start in on us. I did my best, but I was too late. The fucker shot her twelve times before I could get to her in the middle of the firefight. I lost it. I had lost her, and I had lost everything. I put a bullet through that slaver's head, and then I ran. I ran until the hurting stopped. And then when it began again, I kept running. I'm still running."

I let out a low whistle at this. The grey buck just stared on, gaze as cold as steel. I hadn't imagined how hard life had been for him. Losing a loved one, even in a place that is as fleeting to live in as the Wasteland, was still a rough thing. Still, I was amazed at this stallion's fortitude. Talking about something like this for me would have driven me into a sniveling mess of tears, while my earth pony friend soldiered on in the face of hard times.

"Did you love her?" I asked. He smiled.

"Yeah, I did. She was a great mare, and not just for her physical attributes neither," he said. "We always figured that if we ever made enough money, we could move someplace and settle down, maybe even have a few kids." I chuckled at the prospect of Steeljack being a father. He certainly didn't look the type to me, but I figured everypony wanted to pass on something.

"What happened afterwards?" I asked. He nodded in response.

"I found out later that everypony in the camp had been freed, but I was too drunk and fucked up to really care. My wife's wish to free everypony came true, at the cost of her life," he replied. I gave him a soft smile and a hug, which really surprised him.

"What was that for?" he asked, his eyes widening. I smiled again warmly.

"Sometimes, all we really ever need is somepony to stand by us in times of need. You've certainly done that for me and Violet. I'm sorry for dredging up old memories, but I needed to know that you were on our side. Too much has happened for me to ignore it," I responded softly. "Plus I wanted to let you know that we're on your side too. We're your friends after all. I'll let you get some sleep now. I'll take watch from here on." The buck nodded and walked back into the room and lay down, falling instantly asleep. I flipped on my PipBuck and set it so I could listen to the audio recordings through an earbud so I wouldn't wake my friends. I set the audio recording that Steeljack had given me to play.

*Bzzzt..... *crackle*... Bzzzt... this thing on? Oh, it's working. Good.*

This is Chief Weapons Specialist Star Gazer of the Equestrian Special Forces, Luna Division. The 'Stargazer 6000' project, so named after yours truly, is officially under way. This recording is to provide a brief synopsis of what the device is and how it works. It was difficult to find a location to develop the device, with the Ministry of Wartime Technology trying to butt their way into our funding, but we managed to locate a suitable location to begin our work. We are currently situated in a Research Laboratory underneath the newly constructed Mall of Equestria. The idea is that nopony, not even the Ministries themselves, will know we are here, and trusting on the safety of a civilian operation that no Zebras or Zebra Infiltrators will catch wind of our research here.

That being said, this project that the Princess asked us to look into for her is putting us through hell. Starmetal is such a unique rock that it takes immense amounts of power to control and shape, let alone shaping it into something that can be actually fired, but the Princess was adamant that this

device be created.

The device is very simple in design. It is a standard 7.62mm minigun, based on an Ironshod Firearms design. Instead of regular ammo however, this thing is outfitted with a core of starmetal, a type of meteorite rock. Starmetal has very many unique properties. First and foremost, we have discovered that over short periods of time, the starmetal core will actually regrow itself. This means that this weapon will literally never run out of ammunition unless the starmetal core is completely depleted. The core is protected by special shielding so that its special qualities are contained to the gun itself.

Starmetal is also highly poisonous to any normal pony, but our tests have indicated that the weapon will be fit for use by the Princess due to some inherent immunity to the strange metal. We're hoping that the core's shielding will hold up in the hooves of any normal pony.

We're also developing the Stargazer 6000 to be interfaced with a PipBuck. I can't really tell you the kind of crap we had to go through to get Stable-Tec to let us peek at the software matrices of one of those things. I'm still dreading paying that bill off. Anyways, the device is interfaced with the Stable-Tech Assisted Targeting System, otherwise known as S.A.T.S., which is a targeting spell that allows the pony to time their weapon firing. Stargazer takes that concept several steps further. By integrating with S.A.T.S., it creates a spell where individual shots from the device can be sent to multiple targets, making the device a fully multi-directional targeting weapon. In the hooves of the Princess, the device will be the shining sword of the night that she will use to cut down our enemies for good. I couldn't be prouder to be part of such a project.

This is Chief Weapon Specialist Star Gazer signing off.

I blinked for a few moments and looked down at the minigun cradled in my hooves. Its sleek bluish black barrels gleamed in the dark as I turned it around. Sure enough, there was no access to the inner workings of the gun. Whatever Chief Star Gazer had done to this thing, he had made it impossible to access the inside, ensuring that nopony would poison themselves by interacting with the starmetal core. *Starmetal?* I thought, as I silently sat there, watching over my friends. The old zebra myths went that the stars themselves were sentient creatures and sought only destruction upon our fair land. To that end, the stars sent emissaries of doom to Equestria in the form of great meteorites. The metal contained within the meteorites became known as starmetal. It is claimed that the spirits of the stars were responsible for corrupting Princess Luna and transforming her into the wicked Nightmare Moon. Some even went as far to say that Nightmare Moon's armor was constructed of the same metal.

I sighed as I pondered the existence of the weapon I now carried, and stepped back into our room and watched Steeljack and Violet sleep while trying to fight off sleep myself. I needed an escape, if only for a moment, from my thoughts. I just had too many questions, and never enough answers. I pulled the case of memory orbs out of my saddlebags and opened it. The six orbs glittered in the darkness of the night, begging me to look at one of them. I looked again to my friends, ensuring they were soundly asleep. I ran my hoof across the orbs, before finally resting on the one adorned with a rainbow lightning bolt ejecting itself from a white cloud. The Mare of the Ministry of Awesome: The one and only Rainbow Dash. My eyes darted back and forth between the orb and my companions, wondering if it was appropriate to view this orb. I mean, what could possibly go wrong? Right? I justified my actions mentally, and reached out with my magic, taking hold of the swirling orb. Then there was nothing but black.

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Bright lights and the sounds of gunfire filled my eyes and ears as I adjusted to my host's body. Wind blew into my mane as I flew around the battleground, dodging the enemy's fire. The tinted view indicated that my host was wearing some form of power armor, specially designed for pegasi. The

E.F.S in the visor of the power armor indicated that my host was surrounded by hostiles. I brought my gaze over the battlefield and watched intently. The valley I was currently in was situated near the great city of Cloudsdale, the deep terrain now filled with military forces, both Equestrian and Zebra. I could see pegasi forces swooping in and cutting through the Zebras like they were butter. My host had good feelings about this battle I could tell. Equestria was winning this fight, and it felt good.

“Alright! Shadowbolts, move in!” my host squealed enthusiastically. Several pegasi, all clad in their scorpion-like power armor, formed up behind my host as we flew along the battlefield. The rush of the wind increased as we picked up speed, moving faster and faster like rockets in the sky. My host’s body began to strain against the forces pushing on her as she pushed even harder against gravity itself. A massive cone began to form around the group of pegasi as they stretched the very limits of normal speed.

Then the world exploded.

Well, not really exploded, but it sure felt like it. A massive ***crack*** sounded behind us as a mass of light and color spread across the sky. I could feel a smile of joy creep across my host’s face as the intense rush of speed propelled her forward like a supernova. Below me, although fleeting as it was, I could see the enemy forces being knocked back by the sheer power of the explosion. Equestria had managed to weaponize the Sonic Rainboom, all thanks to my host. An intense sort of pride built up in my host’s body as she banked around and let her Shadowbolts back to the base camp on the Equestrian side of the battlefield. She landed next to a tent set up at the back of the camp. The cyan mare entered to meet a very familiar purple unicorn who was overseeing battle plans next to an equally familiar white unicorn stallion. Their nearly matching cutie marks indicated that this stallion was related to the purple Ministry Mare. Several unicorn and pegasi soldiers guarded the tent. Twilight was engrossed in deep conversation with the other unicorn, indicating several items on the map and other battle plans. My host stepped up and nodded at the two, grinning as her visor flipped up to reveal her face.

“We’ve pushed the enemy back and they now appear to be retreating, Twilight,” my host said breathlessly. The Rainboom must take a lot out of a pony, I supposed. I can’t say I’ve ever gone that fast to even try.

“Excellent work Rainbow Dash. The synchronization spell on your armor worked then I take it?” the lavender mare responded.

“I guess so, otherwise that Rainboom wouldn’t have worked out as well,” my host said, puffing her chest out with pride before narrowing her gaze at the unicorn. “Just don’t make this a repeat appearance. The Shadowbolts are too busy being awesome for Equestria to do these kinds of jobs. I can’t just have them doing Rainbooms all the time.” Twilight merely chuckled in response.

“Alright Rainbow Dash, if you say so,” she said sarcastically, smiling. I got the distinct feeling that Twilight didn’t care for Rainbow’s idea of her Ministry. To be fair, a lot of ponies weren’t even sure what the Ministry of Awesome even did. It wasn’t until after the end of the war that ponies scavenging the ruins of Ministry buildings soon learned that the Ministry of Awesome was more involved in the internal politics of Equestria in more ways than any of the other Ministries combined. Secret covert infiltration units and black ops were the bread and butter of Rainbow Dash’s Ministry. Even the pegasi, so quick to assume that Dash was an idiot who didn’t know what to do with her own power, were largely unaware of just how smart the cyan mare really was. My host’s eyes drifted up to the white unicorn standing next to Twilight.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Rainbow you remember my brother, Shining Armor right?” Twilight said happily. The stallion extended a hoof to my host, who in response did the same.

“Miss Dash,” Shining Armor said, bowing. My host chuckled.

“General Armor I was a bridlemaid for your wife, there’s no need to bow to me. And drop the ‘Miss’ thing, just call me Rainbow,” my host replied, pushing forward and giving the buck a simple hug for good measure. “Besides, I’m glad to see you. You’re just what we need to keep ‘Twiley’ in check here.” Twilight’s face immediately went beet red.

“Hey!” she said angrily. “Might I remind you Dash, that we’re still fighting a battle here?” My ears turned and I listened intently. Sure enough, the battle still raged on outside of the tent. In fact, it almost sounded worse out there than it did when I landed at camp. My host turned and poked her head outside of the temporary covering to see what was going on. My host’s eyes gazed upwards, seeing hell itself unleashed at the camp. The Zebra forces were in fact, not retreating, and instead had sent reinforcements wearing invisibility talismans within Equestrian ranks. The Equestrians were now being pushed back to their own camp as the Zebras began overrunning the ponies. Fire and bullets raged everywhere as Equestrian soldiers were shot down and tents burned to the ground. My host’s eyes widened as I saw a missile, long and sleek in nature, heading right toward them.

“Twilight we gotta get out of here! There’s a missile headed right for us!” Rainbow shouted. Twilight said something, but I couldn’t make it out. The roar of the oncoming storm was too much in my ears to hear her. Her horn began to glow as her brother stepped forward, his own horn glowing fiercely. He looked at my host intensely.

“Get my sister out of here. Go!” he yelled. My host’s body failed to move for once in her lifetime. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Shining Armor cast his spell, forming a protective shield around my host’s body and his sister. Twilight’s horn immediately stopped glowing as she realized what was happening. She pounded at the shield, tears streaming out of her eyes as she screamed.

A loud roar filled my host’s ears as the missile struck home. It appeared to have struck the ground just before the tent, but it was enough that the damage was already done. My host was knocked back into the bubble surrounding Twilight. Smoke and fire filled the area as my host’s eyes struggled to see what had happened to Shining Armor. The shield surrounding the two Ministry Mares dissipated, leaving a screaming and crying Twilight to hit the ground as she continually tried to pound the now nonexistent shield. My host’s body shuddered as her eyes finally located Twilight’s brother.

The unicorn was laying several feet away, blood pooling beneath his shaking body. Several large pieces of shrapnel were embedded in his chest and legs. It wasn’t good. He was awake, but his eyes were wide and his breath staggered, indicating that he was in shock. My host dragged herself to her hooves and ran to the stallion’s side, making it there the same time as Twilight had managed to. Her eyes were puffy and red as she cradled her brother’s head in her forelegs.

“Brother!” she shouted, crying hard. The lavender mare looked like hell. Despite being saved by the shield, there was still a thin line of blood coming from the mare’s head where she had struck the ground. Based on my host’s E.F.S., Rainbow had absorbed much of the physical trauma through her power armor, but still had parts of her body that were damaged.

“T-twilight... have... to... run... get... out...” The stallion uttered in between coughs of blood. My host stepped up beside Twilight, who turned to the power-armor clad mare and began pounding on her chest in pain and agony. My host wrapped her hooves around the Ministry Mare.

“Twilight, we gotta get out of here. There’s... there’s nothing we can do for him now,” Rainbow Dash said softly, trying to console the purple mare. More explosions around us indicated that the camp was being obliterated around us.

“Twilight... listen to her... I’m... sorry. Tell... tell Cadance... I love her...” Shining Armor sputtered out. Twilight returned to his side, cradling his head.

"No no no, you're going to be fine. You're going to be okay. I'm here, it's me it's Twiley remember. Stay with me!!" the lavender mare screamed, sobbing hard into her brother's mane.

"You're... alive... All... that... matters... now... Love you... Twiley..." the white unicorn said, his breath finally leaving his body as he went still. Twilight's eyes widened and she began crying again, shaking the still body of her brother.

"Brother! No! Please... stay with me... I need you... I need you!" she cried. She pounded the ground next to her with her hooves. It pained me to see the mare in such a state. *How many survived?* I wondered as I watched on. Twilight wasn't responding at all to the words my host was trying to say to her. A hoof reached out and struck the lavender mare across the face, bringing her to her senses.

"Twilight! Come on! If we don't get out of here, we're as good as dead! They're going to be on to us any second!" my host shouted. Twilight stopped and looked down at the white unicorn below her. He looked serene in death, almost peaceful. Twilight looked up to Rainbow Dash and uttered one sentence.

"We're taking him with us," she said with a fire in her eyes. My host closed her eyes for a moment, and nodded.

"He deserves to be buried with his family, we owe it to him. We owe our lives to him!" Twilight said fiercely as her horn began to glow intensely, the glow surrounding my host and Shining Armor. Soon the world went ***pop*** as everything faded to white and the memory drifted off into nothingness.

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I awoke to a tingly feeling all over my body. *This is new*, I thought as the tingling continued. My eyes snapped open as the tingling intensified to a point where it began to hurt. A deep chuckle emanated from all around me as I realized that once again, my little trip down memory lane had gotten me in trouble once again. I appeared to be tied down to some form of post. My eyes drifted down to the floor, taking in the alternating panels of black and red as I did. The area was cylindrical in shape, almost like a... oh buck me. I knew what this was.

I was tied to a post on the spoke of a really really big roulette wheel.

I didn't even know they made roulette setups this big! I thought as I as looked down to my bonds. I started tugging on them with my telekinesis when suddenly the tingling sensation started again. A zap of electricity from a metal ball in the center of the wheel flew across the room, hitting me with just enough force to stop me from moving. Another evil laugh erupted from the room. *Shit*, I thought. I knew that laugh. The guess as to who it belonged to flew out the window as the beast made himself known. Discord appeared in the center of the room, laughing triumphantly.

"You should see the look on your face right about now," the spirit of Disharmony finally said. "Priceless! It's so good to see you again Twilight Sparkle. Do you like my little toy? I know your friends are enjoying it." I growled.

"Where are they?" I asked. The chaotic god sneered and waved his hand, revealing my two friends tied up to similar posts on the other end of the wheel. They were bound and gagged and appeared to be unconscious.

"What did you do to them?!" I yelled as the beast coiled up next to me. A talon slid down my cheek as the grey head leaned in.

"Oh don't you worry my dear Twilight. Your friends are enjoying my sincere hospitality. You should be worrying more for yourself," Discord replied. "You really think that I couldn't catch you? Please. I'm far too clever for you."

"I'll show you clever," I said, snarling. I began to fight once more against the bonds, attempting to rip them into shreds as I worked myself out of them. Another zap of electricity appeared from the ball, this time meeting my shield as I ripped myself up and away from the post. A slow clapping noise filled my ears as I stared at the spirit of Chaos, who was now sitting back on a reclining chair with a bowl of white puffy balls.

"Well done! You got free. Now the real fun can begin. You see, I am a sporting deity of Chaos. It would hardly be fair of me to make this too easy on me. I could have taken you completely while you were entranced in the past, but I feel that wouldn't have been as much fun," Discord said, popping a few of the white balls in his mouth and crunching heavily on them. "As you can see, I am a gambling kind of fellow. So let's play a game shall we?"

"What kind of game? What's your angle?" I asked. Discord laughed.

"It's quite simple really. If you win, I'll let you all go free... for now. If you lose, I get you," the god of Chaos said, motioning to the roulette wheel. "There's a small catch though... if the ball lands on the spaces with your friends, then they will be zapped to death by the resulting electrical discharge. I figure, being aggressive didn't work with you, what with that fancy gun of yours and all. But a little incentive? Well that goes a long way." He laughed profusely. I looked down to where my friends were strapped to and sneered at the spirit of Disharmony.

"How do we play?" I finally replied. "And how do I know you'll keep your word?" Discord laughed again heavily and snapped his fingers, revealing a large metal ball. The roulette wheel began to spin beneath us, picking up speed as it did.

"You'll just have to trust me. Your friends are located on numbers thirteen black and twenty-one red. Place your bets wisely," the god said, waving a hand and bringing a roulette board into existence containing the numbers needed to play the game. A set of chips appeared on my side of the table. "All you have to do to win the game is to win three out of six rounds." I glared at the god of Chaos. I felt like I was making a deal with the devil himself. I didn't like it. I wanted to find my gun and pound as many rounds as possible into the being before me, but I couldn't. This thing had my friends, and I was going to whatever it took to make sure they survived. Be unwavering. I just had to be. I looked to the stack of chips and levitated one of them, placing my first bet, trying to be smart and make a good square bet to cover as many numbers as possible. It felt like the only possible way I had to beat this game. Personally I only knew a little of roulette from what I had seen at casinos in towns that were lucky enough to still have working gambling equipment. I certainly couldn't claim I was good at it, because I definitely wasn't. The only numbers I cared about not betting on were the ones my friends were on.

Discord sneered at my obvious bet and waved his hand, dropping the ball into the swirling chaos of the wheel below us. A thunderous crash rang out from the board as the ball struck home and began clattering from space to space as the wheel spun. The wheel began to slow down as the ball struck wood. I was amazed that the ball hadn't crushed my friends as it moved across the wheel. Discord must have taken measures to prevent that. No point in having a game if my friends were already dead. There would be nothing stopping me from finding Stargazer and ripping the god of Chaos into shreds of god-flesh. The wheel slowed to a dead stop and the ball landed on its mark.

Luna, give me patience, I thought as I stared at the roulette board. I had managed to win two of the three required to win after a rousing disappointment on the first round. Not once had the ball landed on the squares my friends were on. The spirit of Disharmony was truly unhappy I managed to win any at all, but sneered confidently at me all the same as we entered the last round. I placed my bet just as

confidently and stared at the god, smiling as I did.

“Spin it,” I said. Discord merely nodded, as the pleasantries of small talk had worn off after our initial encounter. The wheel began its spin and the ball made its same thunderous clash with the board just as it had the other five times. I watched the ball intently as it migrated around the wheel, clacking and clattering against the wood panels as it did. I lost myself in the spinning of the wheel, watching the silver ball click and clack about like it had no purpose in life other than to do just that. It looked almost peaceful in its own existence as it waited for that existence to come crashing to a staggering halt when the wheel finally stopped and the ball landed into a space. The wheel began to slow and so did the ball, cruising along on a course with the complete annihilation of its purpose in life to meet with the wooden panels beneath it. The ball landed on one of the wheel spokes and teetered. It was going to land on one of my numbers! I cheered silently inside, and then my gaze turned to horror as the ball flipped the other direction and landed in the adjacent space. A flash of movement beside me indicated that I had missed something. I had been so engrossed in pondering the existence of an inanimate silver ball that I hadn’t been paying attention to Discord. So it was that I did what anypony would do in this situation. Facing down the devil, I made my move.

I turned to wild accusations as a means to win.

“You cheated!” I shouted at the god of Disharmony, whose eyes widened as I turned to face him. “You moved the ball at the last second!”

“Please... cheating is boring. Besides, didn’t you know? The house always wins,” Discord said, his tongue slithering out of his mouth like a snake and letting his words float over a small chuckle. A dirty rotten cheating snake that cheated me out of winning! No fair! I resorted to even more underhanded means, in the form of childish-name calling and rhyming.

“Liar liar Celestia’s plot on fire!” I spat at the beast. “You’re just a big meanie meanie pants who lies and cheats! I won that fair and square!” Discord laughed again. I suppose it was kind of funny in hindsight. Arguing with a centuries old god and calling said god a liar was kind of hilarious. “Now give me my friends back!”

“Ugh... friendship. Fine! You caught me at my own game. I cheated! Woe is me,” Discord moaned dramatically before snorting. “But don’t think that I’m done with you yet. You may have won the game, but you haven’t beaten me. Not by a long shot. We’ll see each other again, and when we do... you’ll be mine.”

“And I’ll be waiting for you,” I growled back at the god. “I do have one question though. What do you know about the Twilight Society? Where did they go?”

“I wondered when you would be edging around to that question Twilight. You always were the ever-inquisitive one. Here’s a question in return. Where do you think they went? Hmm? Do you find it strange they disappeared as soon as you changed? Perhaps they are the ones responsible. Perhaps not. It’s much more fun to theorize don’t you think?” Discord mused, chuckling evilly. He was right of course. I had thought maybe the Twilight Society was responsible for my transformation. Was it possible? If so why were they content to sit in the shadows and let me get caught like this? If they were aiming to create a Goddess, why not protect that investment? Or were they waiting to see if I would allow the transformation to become complete?

“We’re done here. Release my friends, and give me my stuff back. That includes Stargazer,” I demanded, staring down the beady yellow eyes of the draconequus, who grinned and snapped his fingers. The roulette wheel disappeared and my companions lay in the center of the drab warehouse that Discord had set up shop in. My saddlebags and weapon appeared at my feet. I quickly scooped them up and stared at the beast.

“Be careful Twilight Sparkle,” the spirit of Chaos said as he floated into the air. “I’m not the only one who’s interested in you. I’m only the most fair. No pony else will think twice about killing you, and I want you to be all mine. So try not to get yourself killed okay? Arrivederci!” With a snap of his fingers and a bright flash, the beast disappeared. I looked down at the grey floor, where my friends were now stirring awake. I flew down to their side and grabbed both of them into a hug.

“Are you two alright?” I asked, only to be met with coughing and heavy breathing noises. I chuckled and released them as they gasped for breath.

“What happened? Where are we?” Violet said groggily, taking in the fact that we weren’t where we were before we fell asleep.

“Discord happened,” I said, earning a gasp from my pale green lover. I waved a hoof at her. “It’s alright. He’s gone now. I’m still sort of confused as to how or why he decided to leave me alone. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of him for sure. As far as where we are...” I looked down at my PipBuck. The map indicator was blinking. I pressed the button and the words *Ministry of Awesome – Fillydelphia Warehouse* appeared on my mini map. A Ministry of Awesome warehouse? Rainbow Dash’s Ministry? I thought back to the memory of Dash and Twilight. This couldn’t be a coincidence. Did Discord plan to bring me here all along? What was his angle? Too many questions swirled around my mind as I relayed the story of what happened to my two friends. The two gasped when I told them about the giant roulette wheel and what Discord had said to me before he left.

“So what do we do next?” Violet said, looking up at me with pleading eyes. “We still don’t know what happened to the Twilight Society.”

“I know, but I’d like to look around this warehouse first. I don’t see Discord bringing us to one of Rainbow Dash’s Ministry locations based solely on it being a fun place to go,” I responded. “He had a reason to bring us here, and I’d like to know what it is.”

We began looking around the warehouse trying to find something, anything that presented a reason for us being here. There was absolutely nothing in the vicinity of the large hangar we were presently in. All of the shelves in the warehouse were completely bare. I kept an eye out for some form of an office, something that could give any idea of what this warehouse was used for or where everything went to. A large glowing sign stating **Administration** presented itself to us at the end of the long warehouse hall. The door below the sign had a key card lock on it. Of course! The Wasteland sure hated me when it came to doors. This was one I couldn’t even rip out of the wall! A beeping noise on my PipBuck alerted me to my inventory spell. A picture of an orange key card appeared on the display. *Where did that come from? Discord*, I thought. *He must have planned this all along. There’s something here he wants me to see.*

I pulled the key card out of my saddlebags, and slid it through the card lock. The light on the door went green and buzzed. I pushed on the door, opening it. Inside revealed several long rows of cubicles, lined with doors to several offices. Every terminal in the office was dead, and many of them were broken or destroyed. A faint glow from one of the offices caught my eyes. I pushed open the door and walked in. A terminal made entirely of clouds sat on the desk inside the office. Lines of text scrolled on the screen and finally a login prompt appeared. Violet sat down and stared at the terminal.

“I got nothin’,” she said, poking the cloud terminal. Her hoof passed through the terminal without any sort of resistance. “Well I guess this is a Ministry of Awesome building. Figures they would store any pertinent information on cloud technology.” I sat down next to her and tapped on the keyboard, trying to get some response from it. My PipBuck began beeping again. What in the world was going on with this thing? A message appeared on the display.

Try the password ‘rainbowdashisbestpony’.

I blinked. Somepony really wanted us to see what was on this terminal. I tapped in the password and the system came up in front of us. Hmm... what now? An icon with the word 'Systems' appeared in the corner of the screen. Being curious, I clicked on it. A diagram of the systems in the warehouse came up on the screen, along with a manifest and an audio recording. I hit play on the audio recording.

"Thunder Lane. This is Rainbow Dash. Ugh, you're probably out sick or something aren't you? Look, when you get in to work tomorrow, work on getting all that stock moved out of there. The whole lot of it is being moved up to Canterlot to the Ministry of Awesome Hub there. Don't forget the special items. They'll be in your office by the time you arrive. I'm copying this message to your terminal at home so hopefully you get this. If you don't, then you're fired. Sorry buddy, I like you and all, but you spend too much time off work with the pega-pox."

I chuckled a bit at the message. I sort of felt bad for Thunder Lane. I briefly wondered if he ever made it to work the next morning. Still, special items? In this very office? I wondered if Thunder Lane ever managed to actually get rid of these so called special items. I looked around some more on the terminal and saw an icon for 'Safe'. It was a safe control system! I hit the button to unlock it, and a hissing sound emitted from the other side of the room. We looked up to see a section of the wall sliding away to reveal a safe that was now opening, revealing its contents for all to see.

A squeal of delight erupted from Violet's mouth at the sight of one of the items inside the safe. A magical beam rifle in pristine condition sat on the shelf. Several spark batteries rested next to it. Violet grinned and floated out the rifle and the batteries and began examining the gun. The words *Thunder Flash* had been engraved on the side of the rifle. Violet grinned and ran around the room chanting "New gun! New Gun! New Gun!" over and over. I chuckled as she sauntered around the room, flashing her new toy like a filly on Hearth's Warming Eve. She did deserve it after all. My eyes turned back to the safe. A small blue figurine caught my eye. A cyan pegasus with a multicolored mane reared up from the pedestal it sat on, ready for takeoff. The plaque below the figurine held the words *Be Awesome!* I smiled as I reached out and grabbed the figurine with my magic. Instantly, I felt like I was on top of the world. I felt awesome! I grinned and stowed the figurine away into my saddlebags, alongside the Rarity figure. A note rested next to where the figure had sat, attached to a picture of a dark grey pegasus standing next to the only and only Rainbow Dash. The note said *To Thunder Lane: You're pretty awesome, even for a slacker.* I turned to find Violet engaged in a rousing chorus of 'This is my Rifle' and laughed profusely. It felt good to see my friends laughing and being silly. It felt a little normal for once. I checked the rest of the safe over for anything else that might be pertinent. There wasn't much, other than some packs of Rad-X and a book titled 'Interfacing with Cloud Technology.' I slipped the book into my saddlebags, figuring it might be worth a read at some point. I began wondering if the figurine is what Discord wanted me to find here. I thought of the two figures safely sitting in my saddlebags. When I had found Rarity, something inside of it had given me a new strength, a strength I didn't know I really had. I couldn't really wrap my head around why they were important, but it felt like something about them was.

I almost turned away from the safe before noticing the writing. It was faint and glowing, but sitting on the back wall of the safe. I squinted, looking closer at the glowing cursive. The glow and the style of writing were exactly the same as the writing that had appeared in the chest at Tenpony Tower.

The Path Lies Before You, Goddess of Twilight

I nearly gasped at this, trying to keep my excitement low at such a discovery. This must have been it! I had a feeling this had something to do with the Twilight Society in some manner, almost as if they were leaving me clues. But what did it mean? I made a note in my PipBuck with the message. Later on, I would try to contact Life Bloom and see if he had any ideas about what this new development meant. I briefly pondered if this meant that the Twilight Society wasn't actually dead, a thought which

frightened me to the core. If they weren't dead, why weren't they back at Tenpony Tower doing their job of helping the Wasteland? Why gallivant around and leave strange messages for me? None of this made any sense!

"Come on you two. I think we're done here," I said, interrupting Violet's fourth stanza. She blushed and hooked her new gun onto her harness. We headed back into the dreary cubicle sea and back into the warehouse. A few rounds around the outer walls and an hour or two later we finally found the exit. We pushed open the door and stepped into the black Fillydelphia night. In the distance we could see the fires coming from the Fillydelphia Crater. Howls in the night from creatures unknown echoed off the dead buildings as we made our way into the ruined city. Based on our location we had moved nearly all the way across the city from where the Ministry of Magic Hub had been. A voice cut through the darkness at us as we came around the corner down the block from the Ministry of Awesome warehouse.

"You there!" the voice shouted, belonging to a green earth pony mare wearing security barding and brandishing a rifle. "What are you three doing in the city this late? It's not safe out there with the gangs!" I blinked for a moment. Somepony who wasn't shooting at us or trying to kill us? My very eyes couldn't believe it. We waved at the mare and stepped into the light (what little light there was) so she could see us.

"Uh... hello there. Who are you?" I said sheepishly as we stepped up to the mare, who grinned widely.

"Name's Patch. Looks like you three have been worse for wear. Run into trouble with the gangs?" she said. We shook our heads and looked at each other before chuckling profusely.

"You probably wouldn't believe us even if we told you," Violet said finally, giggling her little heart out. Patch laughed with us for a brief moment before turning serious.

"Well, we'd better get off the streets regardless. I work security for a hotel up the street here. Nothing fancy but it's a job. Somepony said they saw ponies out here that didn't look like gangers, so I came out to investigate," Patch replied, leading us up the street towards her place of employment.

"A hotel? Really? In this city?" Steeljack asked. "Aren't you worried about the gangs yourself?" Patch shook her head.

"Nah, they don't bother us really. We're backed by the NCR, so they tend to stay away from us," she said as we turned another corner. A large hotel building, surrounded by a makeshift wall/courtyard loomed in front of us. "Ah... home sweet home."

"Pardon my ignorance, but what's the NCR?" I asked, confused. I had never heard of such a thing before, silently hoping that the NCR wasn't some sort of raider or slaver group. The green security mare didn't seem like the type though. She seemed rather... nice.

"New Canterlot Republic. Bunch of ponies gettin' together to form a consortium of a sorts. Make the Wasteland a better place for everypony, yadda yadda yadda," Patch said.

Violet groaned. "You know what the NCR is silly. Ignore her, she isn't too bright sometimes."

"Hey! I'm bright. I just don't pay attention sometimes," I exclaimed, prompting a chuckle from Patch.

The green mare led us up to the gate of the hotel. "Welcome to the Ponee Inn folks." I smiled warmly at the mare. Finally someplace to sleep where there was an actual bed! I made a mental note to ask Patch later more about this whole NCR business, as it was interesting to me, but I figured I would let the mare do her job first.

Patch led us into the hotel proper. Ponies everywhere milled around the lobby, forming a small makeshift market and selling wares left and right. A sign just inside the doors proudly proclaimed

‘Protected by the NCR. Remember, we’re all in this together!’ as we passed by it. Several groups stopped and stared at us as we passed by on our way to the desk at the end of the lobby. Several ponies in military garb stood guard next to the desk where a unicorn stallion sat keeping watch over the scene at hoof. Patch saluted to the old buck as she approached.

“Sir, found some civvies wandering around outside. Permission to put them up for the night?” she said, addressing the stallion.

“Permission granted soldier, at ease. Not often we get your type down this way anymore alicorn. I thought all you moved out of Fillydelphia after what happened with Red Eye,” the stallion said.

“We’re just simple travelers sir. Working for the Followers of the Apocalypse,” Violet said, prompting a snicker from the unicorn.

“Thought as much. Well, we’ve got room for you here if you need to spend the night. Patch here will show you to your quarters. If you need anything, come see me. Name’s Major Kirby. I’m in charge here of this little shindig,” the military stallion responded.

“Thank you sir, but how much do we owe you for the room?” I asked shyly. Kirby waved a hoof.

“We firmly believe in helping everypony sweetie. Besides, the fewer caps we take from you now, the more you can spend down here in our marketplace or our bar. All we take is a flat tax on what is sold, nothing more and nothing less,” he replied. Patch waved at us to join her as we bid our host good night and thanked him for his hospitality. The green mare had a beaming face as we made our way up the stairs.

“So... what’d ya think of the Major?” she said, trying to engage in some sort of conversation with us as she led us to our room.

“I’m... intrigued to say the least. He seems nice,” I said, smiling at the green mare. “We appreciate the hospitality for sure.”

“Glad to hear it. Hey, I know you guys must be tired and all, but you’ve been really nice to me and I was wondering...” the security mare said, trailing off. “Would you three be interested in hitting the bar with me after I get off my shift later? It’s just... I don’t have many friends around here, nopony wants to hang out with a security mare and most of my colleagues on the squad are sooo uptight.” I snuck a glance at Violet, who nodded enthusiastically.

“Iffin’ you don’t mind, I think I’ll pass,” Steeljack said with a yawn. “No offense miss, I’m just a little too tired is all.”

“How are you tired? You didn’t do anything but get tied up and knocked out,” I said flatly, poking the buck in his side. He glared back at me. If looks could kill, I’d have been a pile of ash on the ground by now. I grinned sheepishly. “Fine, be a party pooper. We’d love to join you Patch.”

“Great! My shift ends in about an hour. Just meet me downstairs on the ground level. The bar sits off the lobby,” Patch replied as we finally arrived at our room. “It’s not much, but its home.” I thanked her again and we entered our room, Steeljack immediately making a break for the nearest bed and plopping into it. A few moments later snoring could be heard from the buck as he fell fast asleep.

New list time. I decided that in addition to keeping a list of things that suck (curse you dreaded stairs!) I would also keep a list of things that don’t suck. And right now, smack dab at the top of that list is alcohol. Now don’t get me wrong here, I’ve never been one for drinking too much, but after a little insistence and prodding from Patch and even Violet, I decided to give it a try.

I think I may have tried a little too much, but once again I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Patch was a great mare, born and raised in a Stable and out into the open world when the thing opened up to the Wasteland. She was a trained security mare when she was in the Stable, and quickly found work in that area in various different towns. She had finally managed to become a soldier for the NCR when she was assigned security detail in Fillydelphia. I silently thanked Celestia she had been; otherwise we'd have run into gangers or worse trying to escape the city. We opted to not tell Patch about Discord or any of the crazy shit that had happened since we arrived in the city. It was all a little too out there to share with just anypony. The warning Discord had given me about other parties being interested in me also gave me great pause at telling anypony about what was happening to us. Still, it wasn't like we were unknown thanks to DJ-PON3's continual ranting about the Ministry Mare.

"So you two are from up north? How are things up that way? It feels like so long since I've been around up there," Patch said, swirling a glass of whiskey around in front of her before downing it in one gulp.

"Decent enough. Still a lot of work to be done. Every day we're getting closer to getting more emissaries into towns and letting the Followers help them," Violet said, taking a swig of her own drink. "And of course, there's Glyphmark. They're still working on coming up with some way to turn alicorns male, so they can procreate on their own."

"Interesting. Sounds like things are on the up and up then," Patch replied, grinning. "Maybe one of these days I'll get up there again, stretch out and see the country. For right now though, I'm content." I chuckled as I downed another drink, something the girls had called a 'screwdriver.' It burned down my throat as I enjoyed the conversation we were partaking in. Another drink slid my way, courtesy of my green friends. Huh, that was kind of funny. Why were my friends both green? I giggled a bit as I contemplated the implications of this. I began poking Violet in the side, watching her get highly annoyed at my hooftacular intrusions. I giggled more as I continued to poke her.

"Star, what is wrong with you?" Violet said, groaning in annoyance once more as she stopped my hoof from poking her again. I stared at her, my eyelids drooping into a seductive stare as I reached out and licked her face, causing her to turn beet red in front of Patch, who began roar with laughter at my silly attempt.

"I think she's had a bit much," the green security mare said. "She's a little out of it." Violet's face was still red as I sidled closer to her.

"Hey there," I said in a very seductive undertone. "Wanna come to my room tonight?" Violet facehooved.

"Of course I'm coming to your room. We're rooming together, remember?" my little green love ball said. I grinned, trying to be cute.

"Well then, that sure makes it easy for me then doesn't it?" I replied, trying my best to maintain my undertone. Violet's face turned red again as Patch continued laughing at our predicament. Violet grabbed me by the hoof.

"If you'll excuse us, I think somepony needs to be put to bed," she said angrily, pushing on me to move me out of my chair. She was so cute when she was angry, why was she so cute when she was angry? Oh my I think I may indeed have had too much...

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up! Gambling skill increased by 20%!

New Perk! Do the Dash: Just like the Best Flier in Equestria, nopony can touch you once you get moving. You are 20% faster in combat.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Weapon! Thunder Flash – Magical Beam Rifle

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Perk! Tragic Backstory: The revelation of your tragic backstory has strengthened your resolve and hardened you against the terrors of the Wasteland. Your DR is increased by 5 regardless of the armor that you are wearing.

Chapter 6: Love is for Fools

"Maybe I was being overprotective. I could've gained a sister. But instead... I just lost a brother."

Love. Love is an incredible emotion, capable of reducing even the most stalwart of stallions to blubbering messes. It is a force of nature so powerful that almost nothing can stop it. So why then did so many ponies let love fall out of their lives and hatred creep into their hearts? Why then is love a fleeting emotion in the Wasteland? Why is love something so rare, that when you do find it you never want to let go of it?

Do I love her? Of course I do. I don't believe I ever doubted myself there. She is my spark in the darkness of the world. I would gladly give everything to simply be with her. Sometimes I sit and wonder, if everypony had been able to experience the fleeting nature of love, would things have been different? Would we have been able to do better? Would we have been unwavering in the face of hate? Like always, I ask too many questions. And right now, those questions are pounding into my head like a griffon's claw on a chalkboard.

BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP

I jolted awake to the blaring sound of an alarm. My head felt like several tons of bricks had been dropped onto my skull, picked up, and then dropped again for good measure. It was dark, and the alarm was still going off. *Where in the Sorrel Hells is it coming from?* I thought. I opened my eyes to the darkened room, trying to let my eyes adjust to the light. I silently thanked Luna that it was dark, as I don't think I could have dealt with any sort of bright light at that point in time. My face felt numb and my eyes felt like they had been ripped out of the sockets. My stomach felt queasy, but at the very least I was warm... and lying noticeably in a large comfy bed, covered in plush red velvet sheets.

BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP

The beeping noise continued as it beamed its siren sound directly into my brain, causing the most massive headache I think I've ever had in my entire life. Clearly, I was not one for holding my alcohol well. I tried hard to remember the events of the night prior, but found myself drawing a blank. I shook my head slightly and resolved once again to find the source of the infernal beeping, so that I could kill it with fire. Lots and lots of fire. Adding alarms to the list of things that suck for sure now. Right up there with hangovers. Yup, those suck pretty bad too.

In the midst of my monologue, I became distinctly aware that I was lying on my back which was a highly unusual position for me, considering my size and all. I felt that my wings were gently tucked in and breathed a sigh of relief. I began to wonder then about the rest of my body as I let my gaze fall down to the end of the bed, once again trying to let my eyes adjust so I could see. It felt like my legs were squished into something warm and fuzzy.

BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP* *BEEP

Dammit! Where was that noise coming from? It sounded like somepony had strung up a cat by its nether regions and let it scream in my ears for hours on end! I started to shift my weight to the left in order get up to locate the beeping noise, when a sigh and the firm warmth of another body alerted me to the presence of another in my bed. I turned my head to my left, where there lay sleeping a beautiful green earth pony mare. She appeared to be deep asleep and was only reacting to my shifting. I realized quickly whom my legs were squished up against. My eyes instantly went wide and my queasiness

disappeared as I recognized Patch. *Ohhhh no no no, don't tell me, we didn't! Oh I am so dead*, I thought as I began to take in the situation.

That was when the second sound occurred. I blinked, hearing a murmur on my right. I shifted my head so I could see, and nearly passed out. Immediately on my right, pressed up against me, was Violet. She began to snore lightly and whispered in her sleep. I noticed her PipBuck had a flashing light on it and that the blasted noise that had been plaguing me was coming from it. I lightly tapped a button with my telekinesis to turn it off, before staring back up at the ceiling, trying to process what was happening to me.

Oh... buck me, I thought as I lay there amidst the two sleeping mares. *What in the world happened last night? What the buck did we do? I don't remember!!! Oh Celestia, Violet is so going to kill me. But wait, she's sleeping here too... so whatever happened she must be okay with it... right? Right? Answer me stupid conscience!!!*

“Ouch. You're loud, you know that?” my crazy voice whispered into the back of my head. I silently thanked the Goddesses for crazy talk at that point in time. It was at least drawing my attention away from the massive headache that I had incurred from listening to that alarm.

Oh... no no no no, this is bad, this is really really bad, I thought, ignoring Spark's intrusions. I panicked, trying to decide what to do. Do I get up and wake them up and possibly face the wrath of two little green mares, or do I continue to lay here enjoying the company of two little green mares? Curse my fate to the Goddesses above! I sighed even more as the two snuggled closer into me and I could feel my legs squishing further up against Patch's body.

“Oh hey, good for you. You're a pretty fun drunk, so I'm really happy for you,” Spark said, dripping with sarcasm. I scowled.

Seriously? I can't even remember what happened. Don't tell me you remember, I responded.

“Of course I do, but what fun would it be to tell you now? I was going to let one of these fine fillies tell you,” the voice said, chuckling. I growled internally at my crazy. I was busy staring down my internal voice with furious heat ray laser eyes when a yawn broke my concentration. A green head on my right cracked her eyes open at me and stared at me intently. *Oh Celestia no, I'm sorry please don't be mad, please don't be mad please don't ---*

“Star? Are you awake?” she said sweetly. I nodded slowly, gearing myself up for the pain to come.

It never did. Instead Violet snuggled close to me and sighed.

“Go back to sleep silly. It's not even light out yet. You're usually never up this early,” she said quietly. Patch shifted in her sleep and began to snore too, prompting a cute giggle from Violet. “See? Even she knows how to sleep in.”

I continued to stare at my marefriend like she was insane. What I wanted to say was things like ‘Who are you and what did you do with my friend?’ but about the only thing I could squeak out was “...okay.” She shifted, pulling herself out of bed and stretching. I watched silently as my green companion cracked her neck and looked back at me, a warm smile on her face. *I am so confused*, I thought as I watched my marefriend exit the room for what appeared to be the bathroom. As I gazed upon the room, I slowly realized this wasn't the room we had been given to stay in, since neither Steeljack nor his stuff was anywhere to be seen. The shades in the room were drawn close, accounting for the darkness of the room that my eyes had managed to finally fully adjust to. A flushing noise alerted me to the fact that I should be asleep as Violet exited the bathroom. I snapped my eyes shut as I felt her warmth return to my side. A groan escaped her lips as she pressed against me.

"You're not asleep are you?" I heard her ask. My eyes fluttered open and I shook my head softly.

"Are you... aren't you mad at me...?" I asked, feeling very confused and scared at that moment. My eyes drifted over to Patch, who was still asleep. Realization dawned on Violet's face as she began to work out what I meant in her head. She smiled softly and leaned in, giving me a kiss.

"Why in the world would I ever be mad at you?" she said softly.

"But I thought..." I started to say.

"Nope," She replied.

"But I thought you..." I said, eyes glancing over at Patch again. She looked disgusted.

"Eww. No," She said.

"So then we didn't..." I ventured. Violet's eyes widened further.

"No!" She almost shouted. Patch's eyes flew open as she fell off the side of the bed, taking the covers with her. A few minutes of wrestling and cursing with the sheets and she was free.

"I'm okay! I'm alright!" She shouted to nopony in particular, before finally locking gazes with me and Violet. "Oh... good morning you two. Sleep okay?" I blinked, even more terribly confused than I was before. The green mare smiled and pranced to the bathroom herself, humming a small tune as she did. I looked back down at Violet, eyes watering as she smiled.

"So what did happen?" I asked quietly.

"You had a little too much to drink last night, and you started acting silly. Then you passed out. Patch offered to put us up in her room for the night since it was closer than ours, and also on the ground floor. You're really heavy you know that right? Anyways, we tried getting you into bed, but you wanted to roll off the bed... so we did the most logical thing we could think of. We sandwiched you in on both sides to keep you in place," she replied. I sighed as I pulled my love closer into a hug. I chuckled at the thought of it all. It did sound a little silly. I mean come on, what are the odds that I managed to have sex with not one, but two beautiful little green mares?

Spark you owe me an apology for lying to me, I said to the crazy in me, who didn't respond. Whatever, maybe she had better things to do with her time, like lying to me about a potential threesome.

"What's so funny?" Violet said finally as I released her from my embrace. She laid her head against my side, sighing contently.

"Oh nothing... just thinking about how I worked myself up over all of this. I mean, I seriously considered the fact that the three of us had sex," I said jokingly, quickly giving one of those 'Please don't hit me!' smiles.

"Oh well that. That totally happened," Violet said nonchalantly. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"What." I said flatly. Violet giggled profusely at this, clearly excited at the prospect of playing this off for all it was worth.

"Kidding!" she replied. I playfully growled and pushed her off the bed. "Hey!" I chuckled as she got up and tried to push me off, giving up after about a minute of pushing. "Ugh. You really are too heavy."

"Are you calling me fat?" I said, playfully glaring at my friend. She chuckled nervously.

"No... no no. Never!" she replied, smiling. A flush of a toilet alerted us to Patch's presence as she

exited the bathroom back into the room. She smiled when she saw us.

“Sorry about that, I really had to go. Man you girls really know how to party. We’ll have to do that again sometime!” she said excitedly as she trotted over and sat on the bed. By this time I had managed to extricate my numb legs off of the bed slightly enough so that the pins and needles feeling began creeping into me as feeling returned to them.

“Yeah... about that. Sorry for imposing upon you, I really hope I wasn’t too much of a bad house guest,” I said, lowering my head before the green earth pony, who merely laughed.

“Please, you guys are the first friends I’ve found around this place in a while. Don’t mention it!” she replied, giggling. A loud growl escaped from my stomach as I grinned at the two mares.

“So... what’s for breakfast?”

A short while later, after a lovely little breakfast of two-hundred year old oats in a can (preserved for taste and goodness!), we strapped our gear on and met with Steeljack at the main stairwell. Patch hung back a bit, looking a little melancholy. I smiled and stepped up to the green mare, wrapping a wing around her.

“Something on your mind?” I said softly. She immediately perked up and chuckled.

“Oh... umm nothing. It’s just... you guys are leaving aren’t you?” she said, a twinge of sadness in her voice. I sighed at this. I really liked Patch. She was a great host, and was really pleasant to me and Violet last night. No, not in that way. Pervert. Seriously, nothing happened! Weren’t you listening to Violet? She said so! Ugh, okay I’m not arguing with you right now! Anyways, I grabbed her in a small hug after that.

“Yeah, unfortunately we do have to go. Too many questions and not enough answers,” I replied. A brisk cough from behind me broke me away from the earth pony mare. I turned to see Major Kirby standing there.

“Major,” I said. “Thank you again for your hospitality.” The unicorn chuckled a bit.

“You know when you came in here, I knew I recognized you. The Ministry Mare herself. Didn’t know you were with the Followers. Thought you was independent. Anyways, I got a little proposition for you, if you’re interested that is,” the old stallion said. *What now?* I thought as I stared at the unicorn. My thoughts drifted back to Discord. I knew I could trust the NCR, but the prevailing thought in my mind was really could I? Was it possible in any way that they knew what was going on too and wanted a piece of the action?

“What kind of proposition?” I asked, getting right to the point of the matter. Best not beat around the bush this time.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, Fillydelphia is separated into various gangs made up of former slaves. Thankfully for us in the NCR, these gangs have always traditionally spent their time killing each other, which lets us deal with the survivors much easier,” Major Kirby replied, motioning for us to follow him. “Well, as of last week, we’ve been getting word that a new gang is rising up through the ranks. Seems like this gang is gaining lots of power really quickly, and it’s causing the other gangs to stop fighting between each other and take notice. This gang has now crossed the line by attacking a NCR convoy bound for Junction Town.”

“Long story short, you’d like for us to find out more about this gang and maybe stop them?” Violet asked. Kirby nodded.

“Based on what we can ascertain, the gang has headquarters near the crater. What are unnerving are the stories I’ve been getting in about the gang’s leader. Rumors have been flying everywhere, but one of them is always the same and that is the buck cannot be killed. Anypony who’s actually seen this mystery leader says that bullets just bounce off of him like he’s got some sort of shield all over his body,” Kirby continued to say. My blood boiled at this. I glared at the Major, feeling like I might explode any minute. Violet placed a hoof on me, looking up at me with pleading eyes.

“Star? You alright?” she said softly. I shook my head angrily.

“It’s Greed,” I said flatly, staring hard at the Major. Violet let out a small gasp.

“You know this guy?” Major Kirby asked. I nodded, and proceeded to explain about our trip down to Fillydelphia and how Greed had kidnapped me and my friends. The Major let out a low whistle when I explained about the crazy stallion’s indestructible hide. Low gasps could be heard from my friends. I realized I had neglected to tell Violet and Steeljack this part before.

“We’ll do it,” I finally said. “I’ve got a score to settle with that monster.” Kirby smiled and offered his hoof. I took it and shook with him.

“Excellent. I’ll make sure that we get you all the intelligence we have on the gang as well as any supplies you may need. You’ll be well compensated for your time. I’m sure your efforts will not go unnoticed here Ministry Mare,” Kirby replied.

“Umm... sir?” a meek voice chimed in below us. We looked down to see Patch, who was saluting the Major. “Permission to join their team for this mission.”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that soldier. You’re needed here,” Kirby said sternly.

“With all due respect sir, they need somepony to guide them through the city, and they won’t find a better guide than me,” the green mare brusquely replied. I smiled. *Way to stick up for yourself!* I thought gleefully.

“She has a point there Major. We could definitely use her expertise here,” Violet said, nodding in agreement. I nodded as well. The Major sighed and nodded along too.

“Alright, you can go. But I expect you to come back alive you hear?” he replied, causing Patch to jump around shouting ‘YesYesYesYesYesYes!’ Clearly she was excited at this prospect. “Soldier!” Patch stopped immediately at this and saluted again.

“Thank you sir, I won’t let you or the NCR down,” she said with a serious tone. The Major nodded.

“Alright. I have some business to attend to. I shall have my assistant provide you with everything you need. Should you need me personally I will be in my office,” he said as he turned and headed down the hallway. I turned to my friends.

“Alright. Violet, you go take care of the intelligence we need. Steeljack, you check out the armory and see what additional firepower you can rustle up. Patch, I’d like for you to work on drawing up a map of the area so that we can plan out a route through the city that will keep us clear of any of the other gangs,” I said to the three, grinning. They nodded and began to depart. Violet turned back before leaving.

“What are you going to be doing?” she asked. I grinned heavily again and unlatched Stargazer from its harness.

“Practicing.”

A rattling noise filled my ears as I pulled the trigger. The training dummy was ripped to shreds by the hail of bullets. After we split up, I found myself asking one of the NCR officers if they had any place where I could train with a loaded weapon. The officer, a tawny earth pony stallion, smiled kindly and led me to the roof, where a training range had been set up for the officers to stay sharp with a gun. I thanked the buck and proceeded to unload hell down the range. His eyes went wide at seeing Stargazer. He was so interested that he hung around and watched me practice, giving me pointers here and there on firing technique and the use of S.A.T.S.

I snarled as I came out of E.S.A.T.S., dropping a spray of bullets into several targets at one time. Only one thought pervaded in my mind. Greed. I could still see his shit-eating grin and his blackened body as bullet after bullet struck and flew off of it. I promised myself I would introduce him to Stargazer at my earliest opportunity. If normal bullets couldn't get through his ultimate shield, perhaps Stargazer's special bullets could.

I looked to the NCR officer and asked him if they had any training bots that could shoot back. I really needed to practice with dodging and strafing. He grinned and walked over to a control panel behind a pane of glass.

"You might want to get ready!" he shouted from behind the glass. I nodded, and he pressed a button on the control panel. A training robot popped up and began firing at me with a rifle attached to its back. I strafed to the right and left, dodging the gunfire as the robot began to follow my movements. I leaped into the air, triggering E.S.A.T.S. I set up a queue of shots to the legs of the training bot and let the spell run its course. Stargazer aimed and let loose the series of bullets at the robot, striking it in its legs with roughly half of the shots. My wings flared open as I dove towards the robot, throwing up my shield as the thing brought its rifle to bear on me. Gunfire struck off of my shield as I slammed into the robot, ripping the rifle from its back. I grinned as I tossed the rifle aside. I turned in midair and fired Stargazer, hitting the thing in the back and causing sparks to fly from it. I dropped to the roof and latched Stargazer to its harness. A soft clapping of hooves came from the NCR officer. I thanked him for his time and for helping me out, and headed back down into the hotel to see how my companions were faring in their task.

I found Violet shortly after I arrived on the ground floor. I chuckled and snuck up behind her as she walked along with several rolled up documents floating alongside her. I shook my rump a bit and let my horn glow, lifting my marefriend from the floor with telekinesis.

"Hey!" she shouted as I turned her around to face me. I giggled profusely and gave her a peck on the cheek. She glared at me. I kindly put her down. Not getting on her bad side!

"So what did you find out?" I asked as we walked along to try and find Steeljack and Patch. Violet unrolled a few of the documents.

"It seems our mutual friend Greed has been rather busy. Prior to a few weeks ago, all the gang activity was dispersed throughout the city. Then Greed and his cronies came to town, and all of it is slowly converging on the area around the Fillydelphia Crater. It's confusing. Almost like there's something there that he wants," the green unicorn said. I nodded and stared at the various reports that Violet was showing me. What did that crazy stallion want? None of it made any sense, but there was only one pony that would be able to answer that question.

We arrived at the armory, where Steeljack was waiting outside for us. He had acquired several armaments for all of us to use should we need them. He had also had time to stop by the clinic and grab any medical supplies the NCR doctors could part with. Patch arrived shortly thereafter, having acquired a map and having plotted out our route through the city. An excited look crossed her face as we exited the hotel.

The journey through the city was a silent one. I didn't really feel like talking to anypony. The only thing on my mind was Greed. I owed him pretty good for the last time we met. After what he did to my friends and me for that matter, he deserved every bit of what he had coming to him. I kept checking my E.F.S. every few minutes, making sure that there were no red blips around us. Thankfully, there was nothing. Of course, that struck me as odd. Usually this city was teeming with firefights and gang wars. Why all of a sudden was there no activity at all? Even the air around us was still as we followed Patch's route through the city.

"I don't like the feel of this," Violet said quietly. "It feels like we're being watched."

"Yeah..." replied Steeljack. I nodded in agreement. The still air wafted over us as we walked down the street. It felt like there was somepony watching us from afar, yet I couldn't pick anything up on my E.F.S. Whatever it was, they were watching from outside of our E.F.S. range. The sun began to set as we walked, making way for night time. Rather than continue, we opted to find an abandoned building to hole up in for the night. We quickly located an old bank building that was bereft of any gang-related symbols and cautiously entered. Rubble and skeletons covered the ground floor of the building. The vaults had long since been broken open, their massive steel doors rusted off their hinges. Several terminals were strewn about the ground, their monitors broken and dark.

"Set up camp, Steeljack and I will look around to see if there's anything salvageable," I said. Patch and Violet nodded and began clearing rubble aside, making room for our camp. Steeljack and I walked around the back of the bank teller stations and into the offices beyond. Blackened terminals lined the rows of cubicles as we walked through the ruined office. A row of lockers rested against the far wall. I gave a good tug on the doors. Locked. As always. I proceeded to begin ripping locks out of the locker doors, pulling the doors away and tossing them to the side. The lockers presented a halfway decent haul. There were some healing potions and some more spark batteries for Violet's beam rifle, plus several bottles of Sparkle-Cola. I grinned as I yanked the bottles out and showed them to Steeljack, who grinned back.

"So... what happened to you last night?" my earth pony friend asked. I glared at him.

"What do you mean?" I responded as we began rummaging through the cubicles for anything useable.

"Well... you and Violet obviously didn't show up last night at the room. I just sort of figured..." he started to say before I cut him off.

"No, nothing happened. I got... I got a little too drunk, and we stayed with Patch for the night since her room was closer," I said quietly. He chuckled.

"One of those nights then eh?" he replied. I glared at him again. Why couldn't I have laser heat beams that shot from my eyes? That was fair, right? Right? Oh shut up you. What do you know? I opted for childish behavior instead and stuck my tongue out at him. I grinned and laughed, before turning serious.

"Just keeping an eye out for you is all. Friends, remember? Something you already told me," the earth pony buck said. I nodded.

"Thank you. I appreciate your concern," I replied, stepping up to my friend and giving him a hug. "We'd better get back to the others." He nodded and we made our way back to the bank lobby, where Patch and Violet had set up camp. They were getting our dinner ready. I placed our findings into the saddlebags, and sat down next to Violet as I yanked out the box of memory orbs. My marefriend gave me a glare as I opened them.

"What?" I said as she stared at me.

“Last time you dipped into one of those things, we ended up getting captured,” she said quietly. “I just don’t know if you should or not. Something could happen to you or to us, or worse!” I rolled my eyes.

“Look, it’s going to be fine. You guys are all here. It’s not like Greed is going to just sneak up on us again,” I replied. The glare didn’t lessen. Her eyes pleaded with me. I sighed. “Alright, alright. I’ll wait til we’re somewhere safe and not so close to psycho-raider territory. I promise I won’t look at one of these orbs.” She smiled softly. Alright so I’m a sucker for a green mare with soft eyes. So sue me alright? We set up a system of shifts for watching, and I purposefully took the first shift. I knew in my heart that I would be going back on my promise, but after our experience in the Ministry of Awesome, I knew that these orbs had some sort of clues for me. I needed to know what was next. As I sat and watched my friends sleep, I pondered the existence of the orbs. The Twilight Society had some reason for putting them there, and they would provide for an excellent escape from my current inner rage towards a certain unicorn stallion.

Patch relieved me of my watch in what felt like no time. I smiled at the green mare and made my way over to Violet, who was fast asleep. I surreptitiously drew out one of the memory orbs out of its case, and stared at which one I had dragged out. Three apples emblazoned the side of the orb, an orange glow swirling inside of it. I looked to Violet, and then reached out with my magic on the orb, letting the world fall to black.

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A warm feeling filled me as my eyes adjusted to the light. It was bright out. My host stared across the crowd of ponies before her with a somber smile. A vast graveyard spread out beyond visible sight, Canterlot Palace looming over the crowd. *This must have been the Royal Cemetary!* I thought as my host stepped up before the crowd onto a makeshift stage. A large white statue of a unicorn stallion in front of a black casket provided the backdrop for my host’s speech. In the crowd standing right up front I could see Twilight Sparkle, dressed in a black dress with a dark veil, being comforted by two unicorns who appeared to be her parents. Standing behind them were the other Ministry Mares as well as both Princesses. My host could see Rainbow Dash, her face buried into another’s neck, tears visible. Twilight’s tears flowed freely as I watched on and my host began to speak.

“We’re here today ta’ honor a fine stallion. One who perished for the greatest of all causes: protectin’ his loved ones. Shinin’ Armor was not just a General of tha’ Equestrian Army, he was one of mah closest friends. He died to give us all a future, a way through the darkest of times. He was a dedicated brother, a proud son, and a loving husband. And while he is no longer with us, his spirit lives on for Equestria. We aren’t here to just mourn his untimely death, but to celebrate his amazing life. His wife, Princess Cadance, would like to share a few words with us,” my host said, waving a hoof to the side of the makeshift stage where the most beautiful pink alicorn stood. Tears flowed freely from her eyes as she wiped them away and stepped up onto the stage. My host stepped down and sat next to Twilight, putting a leg around her friend and hugging her close. The lavender mare sobbed into my host’s shoulder.

“My husband was a kind stallion, loving to the core. When my husband first told me that he wanted to join the Equestrian Army, I argued with him. I pleaded with him not to go. We argued for several days. I didn’t see the point in it. Then Littlehorn happened. Fillies and colts, slaughtered for no reason. I saw the horror that the zebras had committed, and I finally relented. Shining Armor was my life and my love. He always gave his all in every situation, and was ready to protect his friends, comrades, and family with his very life. I loved my husband very much, and while I am sad I am also joyful. I am joyful that my husband gave his life so that others lived. Joyful that he spent his last moments of his life in the embrace of a loved one. Joyful that one day, I may see him again in the great beyond,” the pink alicorn said, her speech tinged with sadness and joy as she talked. She closed her

eyes and began to sing, soft and slow.

*Like the sun through the trees you came to love me
Like a leaf on a breeze you blew away
A gentle rain falls softly on my weary eyes
As if to hide a lonely tear
My life will be forever Autumn
Cause you're not here
Cause you're not here
Cause you're not here...*

Cadance's voice trailed off to the sounds of crying and sobbing amidst the crowd. The Princess nodded at Twilight and my host, who was starting to tear up herself. Applejack helped the lavender mare stand up, and escorted her to the stage. My host sat by Twilight's side as she began her part of the eulogy.

"My... my brother... excuse me sorry," Twilight began as she wiped the tears from her eyes and sniffled. "My brother loved everypony with all of his heart and soul. He was my big brother, and he always watched out for me. Even at the very end, he was there for me. He gave his life so that I could live on, and find an end to this horrific war. I vow on his very grave that I will do just that. I will find a way through the darkness. Not just for everypony, but for my BBBFF. For Shining Armor, this I vow to you."

The crowd was shushed as Twilight stepped down from the stage and sat down next to my host. The purple mare's eyes were cold as steel as she watched the pallbearers lift up the casket and lower it into the ground. Twilight's eyes softened once more as she reverted back to crying heavily. My host once again moved to comfort the unicorn, smiling softly at her. I felt my heart breaking for Twilight, just as it had when I had watched Shining Armor's death in Rainbow Dash's memory orb.

"Twi'?" my host asked, nudging the purple mare with a hoof. The sound of my host's voice calmed the other mare for a second as she stared at my host. "Twi' honey, we gotta go. It's time for us to go now, okay?"

"But... I don't... I don't want to leave him," Twilight replied weakly. My host shook her head.

"Sugarcube, it's all over. Everypony's leaving now. We have to go," my host responded. She hugged Twilight close and pulled her up off of her hooves. The purple mare's mother and father comforted each other and walked by, hugging their daughter before continuing on amidst the throng of grieving ponies. My host tugged on the purple mare, pulling her back towards the palace, where the reception was being held.

"Applejack?" Twilight said quietly as they walked along behind the crowd. My host turned to the unicorn.

"Yea Twi'?" My host asked. The sky above began to erupt into rainfall and thunder roared.

"I miss him. I meant what I said. I'm not going to stop until I stop this horrific conflict," Twilight said. She gazed at my host, her eyes unflinching as she did. My host smiled.

"I miss him too sugarcube. But he's smilin' down on us from above. He's watchin' us and he'll be proud," my host said. "We just gotta keep movin', keep our chins up." Twilight smiled. The two mares continued walking behind the funeral crowd as the memory faded to black.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I woke up to the face of a very angry green unicorn. Violet was standing over me, her face red with furious rage. She began slugging me angrily. At the very least, we were still in the bank lobby and no

raiders had killed or captured us in the night, right?

“You promised!” she yelled at me. Behind her, Steeljack and Patch stood off to the side, whistling quietly to themselves. I looked up at my love pleadingly.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to choke out. Violet turned away for a second.

“You told me you weren’t going to view one of those things, that you would wait. You couldn’t do it could you? You just had to do it. You’re lucky we noticed what you were doing,” she said, anger simmering in her voice as she looked back at me. “Why? Why would you... lie to me like that?” I put my forehooves at her hooves and put myself in a groveling position.

“I know... I’m sorry. I lied; it was the wrong thing to do... please forgive me?” I said, begging my little green mare, who simply kept staring away from me.

“I... I don’t know,” she said, before sighing. “... Okay. Okay I’ll forgive you. Just... I don’t like it when I’m lied to alright? I thought you knew that. Made me feel like you didn’t value me as your marefriend. I just... it pissed me off.” I nodded as I reached up and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly as I pulled her close into a hug. “I’m so sorry.” She looked at me, teary eyed and hugged back. She helped me to my hooves as we got ready to get going. Steeljack and Patch had already gathered up most of our supplies, making our egress back into the city much easier. The journey back into the city was a silent one. I had the feeling that Violet still hadn’t totally forgiven me, but we didn’t really have enough time to worry about that. Our mission at hoof was much more important, and I personally felt that Violet knew this. Still, I knew she was mad at me. I deserved it too, for blatantly lying to her and breaking my promise to her.

As we walked through the city the feeling of being watched returned, along with the still air that had pervaded the day previous. I checked my E.F.S. again, but there was still nothing. What was going on? For a moment, I considered the fact that Discord hadn’t really left us alone, and was watching from somewhere we couldn’t detect him, if the E.F.S. could even detect the squirrely god of Chaos. The sun was high in the sky when the edge of the Fillydelphia Crater emerged before us. Across the massive crater we could see several makeshift huts made out of steel strewn about the edge. The huts were organized, and a large fence had been erected around the small camp. This was no gang hideout. This was a bona fide raider camp, as noted by the décor of practically every possible anatomically correct piece of a pony’s body that could be strung up on a pike. We could make out several ponies patrolling the fence perimeter, firearms ready for any sort of action.

I let out a low whistle. “Looks like somepony is preparing for a fight,” I said. Patch brought out her scope out of her saddlebags so we could get a closer look. Peering deeper into the camp, Patch began counting low. Her eyes widened after a moment. She brought the scope up to my eyes so I could see. Within the camp itself, not only ponies were guarding or standing around getting ready for combat. I could see several zebras, a few griffons, and even a buffalo. Gang marks adorned the barding worn by the various creatures in the camp. Patch spoke up.

“It’s all of them. All of the gangs. This guy managed to unite all of the gangs in Fillydelphia... in the span of a week? It doesn’t make any sense,” she said. I lowered the scope back down to her and pointed.

“That’s not all they’ve managed to do. Look,” I said, indicating where I had been looking a second ago. Just outside of the main camp there was a small cage pen, where contained within were dozens of ponies all wearing the familiar neck jewelry commonly associated with slavery. Bomb collars were typically used by slavers, especially those who had worked for the infamous Red Eye to keep their slaves in line. If a slave stepped out line then ‘BOOM’, no more slave. It was a surprisingly simple

incentive to just do what you were told. Patch gasped in horror as she saw this.

“It’s like Red Eye all over again. But why?” she asked.

“Greed. He lives up to his name. He wants everything in the world to be his, and he won’t stop until he gets it, and that includes other ponies as well,” I replied angrily. “We need a plan of attack. We can’t just go in there guns blazing. Even with my shield I wouldn’t be able to protect all of you.”

“Speaking of the devil, did you see him at all?” Violet asked as she looked through the scope as well. I shook my head.

“No... and that’s what worries me. He’s not one for hiding in the shadows. He’s got something up his sleeves, I just wish I knew what,” I said, staring at the camp.

“I... may have an idea,” Patch piped up, with a grin on her face.

Sweet stage diving Celestia this mare is bonkers! I thought as I silently snuck across the Fillydelphia Crater. Patch had assured me her plan was sound, but I still had doubts about any plan that involved me getting potentially shot at multiple times. The green mare had holed herself up in an abandoned building nearby the camp with her sniper rifle, ready to provide cover at a moment’s notice. Our job was to silently lay the explosive charges we had acquired from the NCR armory about the fence perimeter of the camp, I on one end and Violet on the other. We waited until nightfall to minimize detection. When the raiders awoke in the morning, they were in for a nasty surprise. We hoped the initial explosions would take out enough of the raider camp in order for Violet, Steeljack, and I to enter and take the rest of them down, and hopefully find Greed.

I said a small silent prayer to Luna as I took out one of the charges, laying it at the base of the fence, careful not to touch the actual fence itself in case of an alarm before moving on to the next point. Despite the fact that these raiders were so vigilant during the day, they seemed to be lax in their patrols during the night. In fact, there seemed to be none at all around, all of the makeshift huts closed up for the evening. My E.F.S. showed dozens of unmoving red blips, indicating that the raider camp was completely asleep. Combined with the smell and the strung up body parts, the whole scene was quite eerie and not at all pleasant. I kept moving forward and planting charges, blissfully unaware until I slammed into something hard. A shimmer glowed in the air before me and a zebra dressed in raider’s armor suddenly appeared. A maniacal grin crept across his face as he stepped forward and lifted his rifle.

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Next thing I knew, I was showered in zebra brains. The zebra’s head exploded in a shower of gore in a near instant. I groaned as I looked about, trying to see if anypony else had heard the zebra’s untimely death. I once again sent up a prayer to Luna for crazy green mares with sniper rifles as I dragged the zebra’s body out into the darkness where it couldn’t be easily seen, propping it up behind a rock. I brushed off a piece of zebra out of my mane and shuddered. It was going to take a good long while to get the gore out of my mane and I knew it. I was about to continue forward and finish planting the charges when a scream pierced the air. A scream I knew all too well.

Violet, I thought as I took to the air, not caring at that moment in time if anypony saw me or if I was breaking away from the plan. The plan had already failed the moment that the scream had occurred. All I knew is that Violet was in trouble. I burst into speed, landing on the other side of the camp where I could see Violet struggling with what appeared to be a buffalo. A massive sledgehammer lay across the buffalo’s back, attached to a makeshift harness. I dropped down in front of the beast, eyes blazing with rage.

“Let. Her. Go,” I said flatly. A deep chuckle erupted from the buffalo.

“You’re too easy,” the creature said. “Greed said you would come if one of your friends was in danger. He’s been expecting you.”

Shit! I thought as I realized what was going on. This was a setup. A trap. Greed knew I was here somehow, and he knew exactly how to lure me in. I snarled at the buffalo, who tossed the struggling Violet to the side, where a zebra shimmered into existence and caught her.

“So that’s how you want to do this?” he said, unlatching the sledgehammer. “Fine by me. I’ll ground you into paste.” The massive weapon’s handle turned about in the buffalo’s teeth, held firm and strong by the beast’s powerful jaws. He grunted and leaped, swinging the sledge right at me before I even realized what was happening.

Shit, he’s fast! I thought, dropping myself to the ground. The sledge swung over, striking a wing as I dodged. Searing pain roared all the way up to the base of the wing, and I felt a few feathers and blood trickle down my side. The buffalo readied himself for another strike, this time an overhead strike that if I wasn’t able to get out of the way of would definitely turn me into ground pate. A voice cut through the air, stopping the buffalo.

“Roar, enough!” the voice barked. From behind the fence stepped the master of ceremonies himself. Greed grinned wickedly as he appeared; his wild hair and frightening eyes were ablaze with wild abandon. “We don’t want to hurt our guest now do we? She’s rather important, in case you forgot you buffoon.”

“Sorry, boss,” the buffalo said. I growled and ripped Stargazer from its harness, aiming at the unicorn. Greed merely yawned.

“Boring. You shoot, and I’ll make sure that she experiences the full pleasure of pain before she dies,” he said, waving a hoof at the zebra holding Violet, who had been knocked unconscious by the striped raider. “Dolcetto, if she makes any sudden movements, you’re allowed to do whatever you want.” The zebra grinned maniacally as I let Stargazer fall to the ground. Greed chuckled.

“That’s right. Now then, where are your others... Oh yes, there they are,” he said, pointing behind me. I turned and saw Patch and Steeljack being forcefully led by a griffon wearing raider style armor. I turned back to the crazed unicorn stallion. I could see that Steeljack appeared to be limping.

“Let them go. It’s me you want. You don’t need them,” I said, prostrating myself before the psychotic buck. Greed laughed wildly.

“No. They’re insurance you see. I’m ensuring you cooperate with me,” he replied.

“What do you want this time? Some other random artifact? What, the last one not work for you or something?” I asked, gritting my teeth. The mad stallion shook his head.

“Nothing so simple or pedestrian. No... I figured out what that little trinket was for. It’s pretty amazing really. It doesn’t so much as give immortality as it takes mortality from another and gives the remaining years to the bearer of the artifact. Once I figured it out... all it took was a little aggression and dominance over the pathetic gangs in the city. I knew it would get your attention. No... you’re here now so that I can use this artifact... on you,” he said as he began to cackle again. The artifact stole life from other ponies? I groaned. If I had known what I was letting the crazy fucker have in the first place, I think I would have tried to kill him in the museum. Greed motioned to his entourage, who funneled me and my companions into the raider camp. Our weapons were removed and we were forced into a cage in the center of the camp. At the very center of the camp lay a pedestal where the bluish figurine that I had helped Greed steal sat, waiting for me and my life force.

Greed stepped forward and addressed the crowd of raiders, who by now had come out from sleeping to see what the ruckus was about. “My friends, here before you lay a paragon of justice! A supposed bringer of light! The Ministry Mare! You’ve heard all about her on the radio! What do we have to say about this?!” he yelled. The crowd growled and booed in my direction, several of them throwing disgusting food and other items at the cage.

“Yes! The time has come for the oppressive shackles of good to come off! We remember a time when the Wasteland was as it should be: a fierce unrelenting place where everypony fought for their selves! It was ponies like this one here, like the Stable Dweller who brought that fine vision to an end! My friends, I seek to change that! I will become the most powerful being in existence, not because I want to help you or be your friend, but because I am avarice defined! I am he who takes all, he who seeks to gain all knowledge, all power, all the money, everything! I am Greed incarnate!” the stallion screamed at the crowd that was now drawing silent. I moved to check on Violet while the buck was evangelizing to the raiders. She was still unconscious, but alive and breathing. Only a few bruises adorned her side, most likely from where she had been struck by Greed’s cronies. Patch stepped up beside me.

“What do we do now?” she said quietly. I sighed, and extended my good wing over the green mare.

“I... I don’t know Patch. I just don’t know,” I said, as I laid a hoof on Violet’s side, rubbing her and praying to whatever Goddess might be listening to keep her alive. The sound of Greed’s voice brought my attention back to the buck.

“Tomorrow night my dear friends. Tomorrow night I shall remove this pathetic excuse for a hero from the picture, and ascend to godhood!” The crazy stallion cackled madly, inciting a roar of approval and the stomping of hooves from the excited crowd. “Now I bid you all, go back to sleep. We have a very productive day tomorrow!” The raiders roared in approval and began to disperse, heading back to their makeshift huts. The buffalo Roa and the zebra from earlier stayed near our cage, acting as guards. Greed merely looked at me and grinned before heading into his own abode. I turned to Patch and whispered.

“Get some sleep. We’ll figure out something. Even if it means doing what he wants, I will get you out of here alive. I will make sure you all live,” I said quietly as I promised the world to the green mare. She smiled and went over to Steeljack, who grunted as he lay down. He appeared to have been struck in the leg, dried blood caked on his front hoof. I moved over to him and looked at it gently.

“How does it feel?” I asked. He grimaced.

“Hurts like shit, but I reckon I’ll be alright,” he replied. “Bleeding’s done stopped. How’s Violet?”

“A little banged up and she’s out like a light bulb, but she’s alive and breathing,” I said. “Get some rest. I’m going to try and come up with a way out of this mess.” The earth pony buck nodded as I stood up and laid myself down next to Violet. I extended my good wing over her to keep her warm, my eyes drifting off into obscurity and my brain zipping with activity as I fell asleep.

Well, this is just what I needed at this point in time. Another trip to crazy town! The same doors, the same unending hallway greeted my eyes as they fluttered open into my dream world. I drew a hoof along the various doors that had been locked: Loneliness, Obsession, Anger, and Guilt. Memories and emotions that belonged to a mare who was light years away from me, but yet felt so close at the same time. I stood and waited for the next door to open, pondering the existence of these beings. What would happen to them when my life force was sucked away? Would this all end for good then? I thought about annoying the shit out of Greed until he just went through with his threat of taking away

my life force. No ceremony, no remembrance, nothing would be needed for him to just do it. *So why hesitate?* I thought as the familiar **fwoosh** noise followed by a door creaking indicated that the next part of my journey was ready.

I turned and stepped back into an old memory as I walked through the door. The Hoofton Hotel penthouse room where Twilight had stayed that night with Rarity met me as I entered through the old frame. Twilight herself sat on the couch as I entered, smiling warmly at me.

"Hello Star," she said as she motioned to the other side of the couch. I sat down next to the lavender mare. "I've been expecting you for some time."

"Who are you? Are you the real her?" I asked. The purple unicorn shook her head.

"No, I'm not. I wish I could be, but I'm just a fragment, another lost emotion in the sea of feelings. But... if you had to give me a name, well you can call me Love," she replied, smiling. I sighed.

"Finally, a positive emotion! You have no idea how hard it's been dealing with all these crazy emotions!" I exclaimed. Love chuckled a bit at this.

"No pony ever said that Love was a positive emotion Star. In fact... Love may be one of the strangest emotions one may ever experience," she said. I cocked my head, confused at this.

"How so?" I asked.

"Love hurts Star," the lavender mare replied. "Love is a powerful and fleeting emotion. It resonates in all of us, causing both pain and joy at the same time. Let me put it this way... do you love your Violet?" I nodded in response.

"I do... I do love her, but I messed up. I did something stupid," I said. Love smiled again.

"Would you put your life on the line for her? Would you die for her?" she responded. I thought for a moment. Would I go so far to save Violet? Would I let my earthly body disappear for her? After a few minutes of soul searching, my answer was clear. I nodded my head. Love grinned.

"You see? You do understand. It pains you so much to feel that you would do anything for the sake of Love. Love is fickle and fast. The best thing you can do is to never let it escape your grasp," she said. I looked around the room and nodded before returning to her gaze.

"What do I do then? If I don't do something... she and all my other friends... they'll be killed for sure," I said.

"Have you ever heard the story of Twilight's great love for her brother?" the unicorn asked.

"I... I umm... gathered as much from watching the memory of his funeral," I replied, turning my eyes to the floor. The unicorn's eyes softened at this.

"Yes... I remember that day with great detail. I was there, as I always was in Shining Armor's presence, dead or alive. Anyways, Twilight loved her brother very much, so much so that she went off the deep end during his wedding to Princess Cadance. This event led Twilight to falter in her love, to believe that her big brother no longer loved her as much as she did. However, she did not lie down and die for this. No, she found out that her brother's love was being devoured by a foul being who was pretending to be his bride, thanks to the real Princess Cadance. At the end of the day, love won out because that's what love does. Love will always prevail. Sometimes it might hurt and sometimes it feels like everything is dark, but Love... it finds a way, and you will too," the lavender unicorn said.

"You do know we're stuck in the middle of a raider camp right?" I asked flatly, earning myself a giggle from the emotion.

“Of course I do silly,” she replied. “We can see things through your eyes of course. We’re as much a part of you now as we were of her. In fact you may even say, we’re yours moreso now than before.”

“About that...” I said nervously. “Why me? Why are you all here? Am I becoming Twilight? Or something different? I’m so confused, and I need answers.” The unicorn giggled again at this.

“I don’t have all the answers unfortunately Star. I do know that we are with you, through and through. Even the negative emotions. We all need you, just as you need us,” she said. I nearly cried out in exasperation. No pony ever had any answers! It was time for the big guns.

“There’s... one other thing maybe you can help me understand then. I met Discord,” I said. The lavender mare nodded.

“We know. The beast of Chaos. He watches you even now,” she said. I guess that explained the whole ever-present watching feeling. “We also know what he said to you. Pay no mind to his machinations Star. He is trying to get inside your head, since that is how he will win. He will wait until your will has been broken, and then he will come for you.”

“What do I do then? What if I really am becoming another Goddess?” I asked. “What if he’s right?”

“What you will do is let go. Latch onto Love, not Fear. If you are to become a Goddess, become a caring and loving one, not a vengeful and hate-filled one,” the mare replied, smiling. I laid my head down before her and began to cry. I was lost and confused, and here was the one emotion I had hoped would pull me out of my funk, and it felt like all she had done was made it hurt worse. The lavender unicorn rested her head next to mine, and gave me a sweet nuzzle.

“Love hurts. But it always finds a way. Find your way. Find your way... Find your way...” Love repeated softly in my ear.

The world around me faded to black once more as the purple unicorn continued to console me.

I awoke to the subtle prodding of a small green unicorn. My eyes fluttered open to stare upon Violet, who had a worried look on her face. Beyond her I could see Patch and Steeljack sitting in the center of the cage, watching the raiders with sullen eyes. My bad wing seared in pain, but felt like it would be okay.

“Star...?” she asked. I smiled and pulled myself up and into a fierce hug with my love, startling her as she returned my embrace. Tears streamed out of my eyes as I hugged her close.

“I’m... I’m so sorry. None of this should have ever happened. It’s all my fault,” I said quietly, sobbing into her mane. Violet rubbed my neck softly and smiled.

“Silly. It’s not your fault. Everything is going to be okay,” she said, continuing to rub my neck as she hugged me. I pulled back and started to dry my tears.

“You... you’re not mad at me? I thought maybe...” I said, seeing the look in her eyes that said she really wasn’t. She smiled softly and shook her head.

“Never could be. You’re my best friend after all,” she replied. “Are you alright? You look a little... run down.” I sighed.

“Weird dreams again. I keep seeing Twilight’s emotions. I think they’re starting to get to me...” I said, rubbing my eyes to dry the tears further. “I seriously thought that you were still mad at me about the memory orb thing. Guess I took it a little too far huh?” Violet laughed quietly.

“It happens. Mares... we’re complicated aren’t we? All these feelings inside,” she said chuckling a bit. I laughed with her as we sat there, contemplating our impending doom.

“Star...?” Violet said after a few minutes of silence.

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to tell you... if we don’t make it...” she started to say before I cut her off.

“Now, don’t think like that. We’re going to be fine. I have a plan,” I said, smiling. Indeed a plan had been formulating in my head, and although it wasn’t a very good one, it was one with opportunity.

“Still... I wanted somepony to know, and you’ve asked before... how I got my cutie mark,” she said finally, smiling up at me.

“Really? I thought you said it wasn’t a happy memory,” I said softly. I looked back again at Steeljack and Patch, who were now sleeping.

“It isn’t... but you should know. Firstly... when you found me originally, the ponies in the caravan they weren’t my real parents. I was actually born and raised near Baltimore on a farm. Well, a rock farm at least. I was a typical filly, young and rambunctious, never putting much thought into my life. It was a normal day, and my mother and father had just finished bartering for trade with a travelling caravan. You see, occasionally we would find gemstones in our quarry and those sold for lots of caps. Caps we then used to trade for necessities with the caravans. Anyways... we were just about to head inside for the night when the ground began to shake. At first we thought it was an earthquake, but it... it wasn’t. The reason we used to find gemstones was because the quarry was right above a dragon’s cave, and he was angry. My mother and father were killed in front of my very eyes as the beast’s claws ripped them into pieces. I was in shock; I didn’t know what to do. I found myself facing down the eye of a highly pissed off dragon. I stared at the thing, a scared little filly with no way of ever escaping. Then suddenly it was gone. It left me alone. I don’t know why or how, but it left me alone. I fell asleep in the ruins of my house that night, crying and scared. When I woke up, I found this on my flank. I don’t know what it means. Maybe my special talent is warding off dragons or something, I don’t know. I got up, walked until I found the nearest caravan and never looked back,” the little green mare said, tears welling up in her eyes. I hugged her close to me and smiled.

“Hey now, it’s alright. A lot of ponies don’t even deserve their own cutie marks. We’ll get out of this, and I promise you we’ll figure out what your cutie mark means,” I said, kissing my mare on the cheek. She looked up at me, eyes pleading.

“Do you really think we’re going to get out of this?” She asked. I grinned.

“Like I said, I’ve got a plan. And I think it’s just about time to put it into play,” I said, standing up and walking over to Patch and Steeljack. I shook them awake, nearly startling them.

“I need for you both to be ready. You’ll know when the time is right, I just need you all to stick together,” I said to my three friends. I left them looking confused as I walked over to the gate to our little enclosure. My horn glowed, giving the guards a bit of a show as I teleported out of the enclosure and into the center of the raider camp. As guns turned towards me, I threw up my shield and shouted.

“WE DEMAND TO SEE GREED! WE HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR HIM,” I shouted, magically amplifying my voice at the buffalo Roa and the zebra that were guarding our enclosure. I grinned through the haze of my shield as my companions watched on with fear in their eyes. I’m betting they wondered if I had perhaps gone mad. Maybe I have. Maybe, just what I needed right now, was a little madness. Roa nodded, and the zebra retreated into the camp as the buffalo gave the signal to hold fire. I nodded back and dropped my shield. Moments later, the stallion of the hour appeared before me.

“I was told you wished to see me?” Greed said with laughter and mirth in his eyes.

“Yes. We wish to propose an offer to you. We are challenging you Greed. You and me, and no pony else. No weapons, no magic. We are challenging you to a duel... to the death.”

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Cue the Training Montage: Your hard work and effort has all paid off. Your skill in Heavy Guns is increased permanently by 20%, and you now have a 15% chance to score extra critical damage when firing Stargazer.

Spark Level: 45% This is how much Spark controls of your body.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Filly Flasher: You have great sex appeal. Your chance to hit is increased by 10% on same-sex targets.

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Companion! Patch, NCR Ranger!

Chapter 7: Greed in Great Excess

“You mean the more things a dragon collects, the bigger and greedier he gets?”

Greed. Greed is an all consuming emotion. It overpowers your basic will, and forces itself into your world until greed is all you can see. The ponies of the past were greedy and vicarious in their conquest of the zebras. Ponies sought more and more resources and more power until nopony had anything left except for the broken Wasteland. A Wasteland that in itself, was greedy for the souls and lives of many broken ponies. The cycle of hatred began anew, and greed crept into our hearts once again, poisoning our lives and souls for all eternity. The cycle of greed may have perhaps been the single largest downfall of our entire race.

I can truly say that I know Greed well. I have met its living avatar, a true embodiment of the avarice that resides in the hearts of all ambitious ponies. Its power is truly terrifying, and the riches that come with that power are all too attractive. Given the chance, would I allow greed into my heart and take what I want from the world? Or will I remain a staunch defender of justice, shunning greed in favor of the virtue of Generosity?

Only time can tell...

Holy clopping Princess of the Night! I shouted inside my head as the buck's hoof nearly missed my head by mere inches. I pulled back and jumped to the side, putting all of my thrust into a fierce kick. My foot connected, and struck cold hard rock as Greed's shield activated, sending shockwaves of pain up my spine as I dropped my feet and moved away to try and put some distance between myself and the stallion. A deep chuckle erupted from the crazed unicorn as I glared at him intensely.

I can't even get through that shield of his with regular force. Really smart plan you had there you dingbat! I thought as Greed rushed at me, aiming to gore me with his horn. A cheer sounded from the crowd that was filled with raiders and slavers alike as the buck struck me, knocking me back and leaving me with nice size bloody hole in my side. Searing pain emanated from the wound, and blood loss began to slowly affect my stance and vision. *No! I'm not going to let him win! I'm going to beat him!* I thought, snarling as I took another swipe at the stallion, striking shield instead of flesh. My hooves roared in pain as I struggled to get out of the way of his next strike. Looking back, this probably wasn't the smartest plan ever, but it was a plan. I let my gaze glance over at my companions who sat and waited for the right time to do anything. I winked at them as I turned my attention back onto Greed. All I had to do was keep the crowd's attention on me, and my friends could sneak away. Greed's entourage was so sure of my loss that they'd even allowed my friends to stay outside of the enclosure to watch me die.

Another hoof nearly struck my head, pulling me out of my thoughts. *Come on Star! Keep your head in the game! Move like a pegasi, sting like a unicorn!* I thought as I fluttered back out of reach of another kick. I had no idea if my friends had picked up on my idea, or what they were going to do, but all I needed to do was to get my hooves on Stargazer and this fight would be all over. Sure, I was playing dirty, but did anypony really ever expect Greed to as well? The thick of it was, I highly expected for the buck to cheat his way out of this fight somehow. I ducked and dodged again as Greed launched his entire body at me, crashing to the ground. I leaped back, trying to figure out what to do. *He's gotta have a weakness, something that can be used against him!* I thought as my eyes scanned our surroundings for anything that I could use to end this fight, otherwise I was definitely sure I was going to die. I'd lost a lot of blood already, and the gore wound was causing extreme pain every time I

moved. Finally an idea came to mind. *What if instead of attacking his body, I attack his horn? I thought. If I disrupt his horn, maybe I can get a blow in. After all, killing joke is magical in nature, so any disruption in the magic inside of his body would disrupt his shield ability!* It was worth a shot at least. The buck stood up from his crash, grinning maniacally.

“Hey big boy, why don’t you show me that small horn of yours?” I said, trying to goad the stallion into charging. I lifted a hoof and made a ‘come on’ gesture, grinning. “And I don’t mean the one between your legs either!” I added for good measure. Greed snarled as he pawed at the ground, ready to charge.

“You want the horn, you better be prepared to get the bull!” He growled as he lowered his head and charged at me. I braced myself for the impact, twisting to let the horn gore me head on. Greed struck true and I roared in pain as his horn impaled itself into my body. I gritted my teeth through the pain and reached down with both forehooves, clamping onto Greed’s horn. I twisted hard and growled as I exerted as much force on the horn as possible. Sparks began to discharge from it as I twisted, splattering my coat with blackness as Greed tried to pull back. His eyes widened as he realized what I was doing. We both snarled in intense agony as my twisting paid off and blood spurted from the base of the appendage. I let go and Greed pulled back finally, howling in pain as his very life force streamed down his face. His horn, while still attached to his head, was spurting blood every few seconds.

“You fucking bitch!” He screamed. “I’ll fucking kill you for that!” I jumped out of the way of his next attack and grinned.

“What’s the matter Greed? Didn’t think I’d find a way to beat you? I was serious when I said I wanted this fight,” I shouted back as I charged in at the buck. I decided to go low, and struck hard at the base of his shoulder with one of my forehooves. An electrical discharge emanated from where I struck as the buck’s shield attempted to form and then dissipated, the magic not able to hold up while the stallion’s horn was discharging life fluid. The blow knocked Greed back as he continued to howl. The crowd booed and roared at us as we fought, ever increasing in the escalation of their verbal nature. I glanced over at where my friends were, and noticed they had taken leave of the crowd, sneaking out while all eyes were on us. *Good, I thought as I turned back to Greed. It’s time to finish this then.*

I strafed left and right as I ripped past the unicorn, putting my full weight into a shoulder strike. The stallion tried to dodge as I slammed into him, pushing him off of his feet and to the ground. He grunted as he fell, rolling along the dirt. I stepped toward him and raised a hoof over his head.

“You ready to end this you fucking prick?” I said venomously. “I owe you hell for what you’ve put me and my friends through!” Through a blood caked face, the unicorn snarled viciously.

“Ready to end you, maybe,” he replied. “If I’m going to hell, you’re coming with me.” His horn began to glow and spark. Magic! He was going to try and use magic! With a horn that was twisted up and gushing blood? My eyes widened as I realized just what would happen.

“Oh fu—“ I started to say when everything around me exploded in pure white hot fury. What came next hurt. A lot. I was thrown back from the force of the explosion, flying through the air like a rocket. A massive ***crunch*** forced all of the air out of me as I struck dead center in the middle of the raider crowd. I couldn’t even what I landed on as I hit, coughing and wheezing moments later to try and regain some measure of breath. Screams of pain could be heard all around me as I struggled to stay with it.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Gunfire and shouting erupted all around me. I could hear the telltale ***crack*** of Steeljack’s rifle in the far distance over the ringing of my ears, giving me pause to try and smile as I lay there in intense pain. My friends were alive still at least, and that was all that mattered. I managed to force my eyes

open to see a slobbering insane raider standing over me with a twisted little knife. He glared in glee at me as he moved to bring the knife down with his teeth. He never even had a chance. In seconds, the bucks head exploded in a shower of gore, covering me in more brain matter. I struggled and managed to kick the rest of him away so that he didn't fall on me. Last thing I needed at this point in time was a smelly ass raider's remains laying on me. A shout drew me from my focus, but I couldn't really make out the words, my ears were ringing so badly. I tried to force myself up, but my body just wouldn't allow it. I was honestly amazed that I wasn't dead yet. I briefly wondered what had happened to Greed if I was still alive. He was the epicenter of the blast and there was no way he would have survived, not in his condition. Another faraway ***crack*** ringed above my blown eardrums, this one slightly louder but still very tinny sounding.

Next thing I knew, I was being pushed on and lifted, a soft green glow surrounding me. I struggled to move my neck to look at what was happening as I saw Violet Iris, her horn glowing and fierce determination in her eyes. I had never been prouder of my love than at that moment. Another ***crack*** sounded and I saw Steeljack, unleashing hell from his rifle at unseen assailants. *How many raiders were there?* I thought as I lay there, being shoved along by Violet's magic. *I wonder how many survived the explosion.* Silently I prayed to Celestia, thanking her for saving my friends lives when it counted. Finally I rested at Violet's hooves, and the familiar pinprick of a needle followed by a weak amount of pain relief flooded my system as she pumped a bit of Med-X into me. She leaned down and mouthed something that I couldn't hear. I slowly shook my head, feeling having returned to it at least. I tried my best to indicate that I couldn't hear her by pointing at my ears with my tongue. In retrospect, this may have looked a little silly. She mouthed something else as her horn glowed again, taking up Thunder Flash in her possession. An elegant beam of silver light blossomed forth from the tip of the weapon, traveling out of my field of vision, hopefully into a raider who deserved it. The ground below me shook and moaned as I could see out of the corner of my eye the buffalo Roa, charging at my friends with his sledgehammer firmly held in his teeth. I tried to cry out, barely squeaking as the buffalo got closer. Thankfully, Violet must have seen it on her E.F.S. because she turned and trained Thunder Flash on the giant beast. Once again she mouthed something, and fired. The beam weapon erupted with its silver stream of fire once more, hitting the head of the massive hammer. One minute, there was a hammer. The next, there was a pile of white steaming gelatinous ooze at the buffalo's feet, causing the buffalo's eyes to widen. Steeljack took the opportunity and fired a shot, hitting the buffalo in the leg and forcing it to the ground.

A shadow flew over me, bringing my attention to the sky above me. I could see the griffon, one of Greed's entourage, wildly flying about as it was firing at an unknown assailant. A bullet came from nowhere, hitting the griffon squarely in the wing, tearing feathers from it and spraying blood as the round passed through the wing and onward. I grinned as best as I could, my face numb with pain, as I pondered that it was probably Patch who was taking on the griffon, her sniper rifle aimed sharp and true. More ***crack*** noises rang out in my ears as I watched Steeljack fire again and again. Violet was standing over me, shouting and firing Thunder Flash at more unseen raiders. Suddenly Patch was over me, holding something small in her hoof. She lifted the item, a memory orb with the mark of three butterflies on it, and pressed it to my horn.

My... friends... I thought simply as the pain finally relented and I felt no more.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

Of all the memories I had been a part of thus far; this was at least one of the more pleasant ones it seemed. The Ministry Mare of Peace Fluttershy's body was airy and light, and a sort of radiance emanated from the lithe pegasus mare. There was lightness to her step, and at the same time a firm confidence that betrayed the mare's shy nature. My host trotted down the small forest lane, the sun above waning as the yellow mare stepped in time to the sounds of the forest around her. A large

mansion came into view eventually, sitting at the back of the small wooded glen. A statue of a graceful unicorn rearing greeted my host as she made her way up the driveway. The sounds of the forest dimmed and my host hesitated for a moment. She was thinking of running away, of just dropping off what she had come to bring, and then simply leaving. Something about this encounter frightened the shy mare; that much was obvious.

A surge of confidence re-emerged in my host as she stepped up to the lovely oak door that framed the front entrance of the mansion. She lifted a hoof and knocked loudly and clearly. A white unicorn mare answered the door, her mane purple with a white stripe in it. She smiled warmly at my host.

"Fluttershy, is that you?" the mare asked. My host nodded. "Oh dear, please come on in, you have no idea how good it is to see you." The unicorn waved my host into the mansion. Her mane was frazzled and her eyes were bloodshot. She appeared to have been crying for some good amount of time. I recognized her immediately as Twilight's mother from the funeral memory.

"Thank you Mrs. Sparkle," my host quietly said. "How... how is she holding up?" The unicorn mare waved for Fluttershy to follow her as she led her deeper into the mansion.

"She's... busy she always says. We only see her when she leaves for one of her Ministry trips or when she comes down to get a bite to eat. She doesn't talk to anypony, just gets what she wants and takes it back to that room of hers," The mare known as Mrs. Sparkle replied, sighing.

"And what about you and your husband?" My host asked, prompting a snuffle from the white mare.

"We're fine dear, thank you for asking. It's been rough, but we'll get by. Cadance has been very helpful and a joy to have around, but even she can't get through to Twilight," Mrs. Sparkle responded. We made our way down a long hallway that ended in a small door. "Please try to get her to come out. It's not healthy what she's doing to herself. We need her."

My host nodded as the older mare left my side and was soon out of sight. My host stepped up and rapped on the door several times with her hoof. No answer. Several times more. No answer. My host sight and pushed on the door. It opened easily, leading into a large laboratory that should have been impossible to fit inside such a tiny house. Fluttershy knew better than to question the impossible when it came to Twilight Sparkle. She challenged the impossible several times before breakfast each day. The pink-maned pegasus made her way across the room to a table and set of chairs where a very familiar purple unicorn was writing something on a chalkboard. Twilight stepped back and grimaced at the words on the board.

"No no no no no!" She shouted at the board. "No matter how many times I try it, it never works! Why does it never work?! All my theories, they're sound, it all fits together, so why doesn't it bucking work!"

"Twilight..." my host said meekly as she stepped up behind the studious unicorn. Twilight didn't hear my host as she continued to rant at the chalkboard.

"Even if I carry the x here, and then move this over there, it still doesn't add up to anything at all!"

"Twilight..."

"And that doesn't fit because if x is fifty-two then y possibly can't be six thousand, five hundred and forty seven!"

"Twilight..." my host's voice crept up a notch in annoyance.

"And if I take the square root of this, then this is wrong too! It's almost like I'm going to need to invent a whole brand new kind of math just to understand all of this!"

“Twilight!!” my host finally shouted, exasperated. Twilight turned with a shock.

“What do you want?!” she yelled, causing my host to tremble and shoot immediately underneath the table, holding her hooves above her head as she shook from fear. Twilight stuck her head underneath the table, glaring at my host.

“Fluttershy? What are you doing here?” The purple mare asked, causing further shakiness on my host’s end as she tried to squeak out an answer. Noticing this, Twilight’s glare softened. “Oh Fluttershy. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Come on out.” Carefully my host extricated herself from under the table and stood up.

“Sorry Twilight, old habits die hard I guess,” my host said. “You just startled me is all. Really I’m alright.” I smiled.

“What can I help you with? I’m very busy at the moment,” Twilight said, moving to the table and sitting down at one of the chairs. My host trotted over and sat down in one of the chairs opposite of the lavender unicorn.

“I... I just wanted to check up on you, see how you were doing,” My host squeaked out. The purple unicorn gave a grunt of frustration.

“Applejack sent you didn’t she? I told her the last time that I was just fine and that she should drop it,” Twilight responded, sounding increasingly agitated.

“Twilight, we’re all worried about you. It’s been three months, and we barely even see you anymore. Your own parents barely even see you anymore,” My host stated, exasperated at the behavior displayed by her purple friend.

“I’m fine Fluttershy. I’m doing just fine. I’ve been really busy lately is all,” Twilight replied, rolling her eyes. “I’m on the verge of a breakthrough Fluttershy I can feel it in my bones. This is going to be life changing for everypony.”

“What is it?” My host asked, surprised at Twilight’s upswing into her work talk. “Some new project?”

“Better. What I’m working on will improve the life of everypony in Equestria! I can’t really go too much into details at the moment, there’s still too much work to do,” The purple mare said, animatedly chattering as she stepped past my host and back to the chalkboard. My host sighed.

“But Twilight, you’re never going to figure all of it out if you shut us out. Please, I brought something for you... please?” My host said, eyes pleading with the unicorn. The lavender mare finally relented as my host pulled out a few items out of her saddlebags.

“What is it?” She asked, to the bright smile of my host.

“Well... I know how much you like that honey chamomile tea that is sold in Canterlot so I brought you some of that, and also this...” My host replied, revealing a small statuette, this one of a white unicorn with blazing blue hair. A plaque at the base of the statue held the words *Love Others*. Twilight’s eyes widened. “Rarity made it special, just for you. We hoped maybe... if you had a small part of him with you, you wouldn’t feel so sad all the time.” Twilight closed her eyes as tears began to leak out of their sides. Soon she erupted into bawling as she propelled herself forward at my host, capturing her in a hug.

“I’m... I’m so sorry Fluttershy!” The lavender mare cried as my host accepted the embrace. Fluttershy rubbed her hoof over the crying mare’s mane softly, not in a romantic manner but more of in a motherly manner. “I’m just... so lost... I miss him so much!”

“There there, it’s alright Twilight. We all miss your brother. We loved him just as much as we loved

you,” the yellow pegasus responded quietly. “But not letting your friends or your family in to help you isn’t going to make it any better.” The memory began to fade to black as the lavender unicorn cried harder and harder, letting out all of her anger and sadness into the tender embrace of my kind host.

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Bright white light filtered into my eyes as they slowly opened, warmth spreading across my face and neck. *Am I dead?* I thought as my eyes tried to adjust to the light. *Am I with the Goddesses?* I winced as I felt pain in my side from where Greed had struck me with his horn. Nope, definitely not dead, I thought. My mind quickly turned to my friends. Did they survive? Were they all alright? I couldn’t help but think about them as my eyes finally adjusted. The room I was in was very clean, for some strange reason. Crude medical equipment adorned the area directly to the right of me, the only sound the beeping the machines gave off every few seconds. I looked down my body, noticing bandages where my wounds had been. No pony else was in the room at the moment.

I wonder where I am, I said as I pushed myself up, wincing again at the pain and crying out just a bit. A creaking noise indicated that the door had opened and a pony entered as I flopped off of the bed to the floor below. My eyes arched up as I heard the pony cry out something, and then hooves beating the floor until they were next to me. I looked up, seeing Patch standing over me. She looked much the same, her blue mane ragged and unkempt. The only major difference was the eye patch over her right eye.

“Hey!” She called out behind her. “She’s awake! And... on the floor.” Shuffling of hooves and the door opening followed, and moments later I was lifted up and laid back onto the bed. Steeljack tipped his invisible hat as he took a seat next to the wall. A lump of green mare-y goodness hit me moments later as Violet crushed me on the bed, holding me tightly.

“Hey now... gotta let me breath sometime,” I said, chuckling as the green unicorn let up on her hug. From the state of her mane, and the bags under her eyes, I could tell she hadn’t been getting much sleep at all. *How long was I out?* I thought.

“Some plan huh?” were the first words out of Violet’s mouth, a wry grin appearing on her face.

“What happened?” I asked animatedly. “How long have I been out? What happened to Greed? The raiders? What about...?”

“Whoa there, easy darlin’ you’ll pop another wound open,” Steeljack interjected. “Violet will explain everything.” I turned to my marefriend and glared intensely. She grinned in return.

“Okay look. You had a good plan, okay? Poor execution, but good plan. Greed blew up and knocked you back. Right after that we pulled you as far as we could and tried to hold our ground against the raiders. A good portion of the freaks were wiped out in the explosion, or at the least severely injured to the point of not being able to fight. You were in a pretty bad shape, and we didn’t have any time to try any Med-X or any other chems. I remembered reading somewhere that memory orbs were sometimes used as temporary anesthetics, so I told Patch to grab one and force you into it. We thought we were goners, but then the NCR showed up,” the mare began to say. “Anyways, I guess the amount of gunfire and the fighting going on drew some attention to a few NCR patrols around the area, prompting Kirby to send in a strike force. The raiders have been dispersed, but many of them took to underground and went into hiding. We couldn’t find any sign of Greed’s body, not even a drop of blood. It’s like he just... disappeared.”

“Where are we now?” I asked.

“NCR Headquarters. Been here for several days now, waiting for you to wake up,” Patch responded. “You came out of the memory orb, but then you were unconscious afterward.” She smiled

warmly.

“And umm... what happened to you?” I said, pointing at the eye patch over her eye. Patch chuckled.

“Lost it during the fight with the griffon. Nasty sonofabitch he was. Might have been a she, not totally sure. He managed to get in close to me,” The green mare replied. I gasped softly at this, at which point she just smiled brightly. “It’s fine though. Doctor says it’ll heal; I just won’t have any use of it. I can still snipe though, use my left eye for that job. At the very least, I don’t need to close my right eye anymore to do that.” I blinked, not able to believe what I was hearing. One of my friends had just lost an eye for me, and was treating it as if it was no big deal. I grabbed Patch in a hug.

“I’m sorry,” I said as tears welled up in my eyes. “I shouldn’t have put you in that kind of position to get hurt like that...” Patch warmly returned the embrace and smiled.

“Hey... I meant what I said. You guys are my friends. I knew what I was getting into when I signed up for the job,” The green earth pony said as I released her from the hug. “Besides... speaking of jobs, I sort of need one.”

“I thought you were with the NCR?” I asked blankly, clearly confused.

“Yeah... but even with my skills an honorable discharge is still a discharge. Kirby wasn’t too happy about it either, but it wasn’t his call. Half-blind Security officers can’t do as good of a job as those with all their vision,” Patch said, chuckling. “Violet said I could tag along with you guys for a while.”

“Oh,” I said, looking crestfallen.

“Unless... you don’t want me to?” Patch said quietly. I quickly shook my head and smiled.

“No no no, not like that. I’m just sad you lost your job is all. You’re more than welcome to join us,” I replied nervously, thinking back to the morning I spent waking up sandwiched between her and Violet. Nothing happened! You hear me out there?! Nothing!

“Great!” The earth pony said, smiling.

“So... Greed’s gone then?” I asked, earning a nod from my friends. I sighed, content with the knowledge that I had managed to get rid of the crazy buck in the process. “What about the artifact?”

“The NCR picked it up, it’s in their hooves,” Patch said. “Why?”

“I’d like to get that back to the ponies it belongs to. They deserve that much,” I replied. “Is there any chance that we could get it?” A cough behind my friends answered me. I looked up past my companions and saw the Major. My eyes lit up like a star on fire.

“I’ll have you know missy, I control everything in this place. You say that thing belongs to some ponies you know? It’s yours,” Kirby said, grinning.

“Really? You mean that?” I asked.

“I’ll see that it’s added to your stuff before you leave, along with the caps you are owed for performing this service for us,” the Major responded. He saluted me and grinned, stepping out of my room and taking his leave of us. I groaned as I lay back on my side.

“Looks like I still have a little bit of recovery to do,” I said, chuckling.

“Should only be a couple more days, your wounds were pretty bad,” Violet said. “You really should get some rest. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Say... in the commotion of everything, what happened to Stargazer? You guys picked it up right?” I asked nonchalantly. My companion’s faces went white, as if they’d all seen a ghost. Why were my

friends all staring at me like that?

“Umm... about that. We umm... couldn’t find it,” Violet said blankly. I stared back for a few moments and imploded.

“What?!” I shouted angrily. “What do you mean you couldn’t find it?!” My gun! My beautiful amazing gun! The only thing I had that could shoot Discord! Gone!

“As in it wasn’t there. It’s almost like when we were captured, he took it somewhere away from our stuff,” Patch chimed in. My blood went cold and my eyes widened with realization.

“He’s still alive,” I finally said. “He’s still alive, and now... he has my gun.”

“You’re serious,” Violet said, stepping front of me. I nodded fiercely as I picked up my saddlebag.

“I am,” I replied. I moved to step out of my room, being blocked by the unicorn.

“No, I’m not letting you, you’re going to get yourself killed,” she said angrily. I sighed and stared at her.

“Violet. I love you, but I’ve got to do this. I’ve got to find him, and make sure it’s over. I owe that much to the ponies of Far Hills,” I said.

“But you’re not going alone, why do you have to do it alone?” Violet asked. After my brilliant deduction that Greed was still alive, I indicated to my friends the desire to follow and end the buck for good, as well as to retrieve my gun. I couldn’t leave such a weapon in the hooves of a psycho like Greed. It was imperative that I got my beautiful gun back. But after putting all my friends in such danger in the first place, I made my intention clear that I wanted to do it alone. Patch and Steeljack stepped out of the room, mostly because Violet shot me a glare that could kill probably every raider from here to Manehattan.

“I told you already. I almost got you three killed out there. It’s not fair to ask you to go with me now. Besides, it’s just Greed. I’ve already proven I can beat him,” I said confidently. Violet groaned.

“Yes, but if you’re right and he is alive, then he has Stargazer. Not something you really want to go up against now is it?” She replied, leveling her gaze at me. “Please... let us help you.”

“Violet, I know what Stargazer does... and I couldn’t... I don’t know what I would do if one of you got hurt by it. It’d be my fault, all over again,” I said, pulling my marefriend into a hug. “Please. I have to do this.” Violet sighed and embraced me back.

“Fine. But you better come back. We have a lot to... discuss if you know what I mean,” She said, flashing some eyelash at me. I blinked. Did she just come on to me? Yeah... I’m that clueless sometimes. I smiled hesitantly and kissed her softly. I really did love this mare, for all it was worth. And it was for her I had to do this. My heart had broken in half when I had seen her unconscious in that raider den, and when she had looked so disheveled and sad. I was intent on not letting that ever happen again. I stood up and pecked her on the cheek lightly as I walked out of the room, under the quiet gaze of my other two friends. Patch moved to say something as Steeljack stopped her with a hoof.

The walk out of the NCR hotel was a somber one. In the days that I had been out of commission, the NCR had called in Talon assistance and was actively scouring the streets for raiders and gangers, taking them into custody if they were willing and filling them full of holes if they weren’t. The city that had previously felt so dead the week before now was teeming with activity as the griffons made headway further into the city. This made the trek back to the raider camp at the crater a much easier thing. The

camp was now being repurposed for use for the NCR. Long gone was the art deco of pony body parts, but most of the stench remained. It was going to be a while before that cleared up I supposed. I merely guessed that based on my fame that I was allowed to go where I pleased, which turned out to be rather accurate. The officers posted at the camp merely waved me on in as I entered. I asked one of the officers for directions, and was pointed to where my fight with Greed had taken place.

I made my way to the small arena that was the center of Greed's explosive end to our fight. The area was still covered in rubble, and a large black mark stained the ground. I ran a hoof over the black ground, picking up a little soot as I went.

Hmm, I thought. That's odd. I decided to ask an old friend for a little help. *Spark? You there?*

Hmm? Yes? What do you want? The sarcastic spirit of Magic responded.

Look at this... what do you think? I asked the voice in my head, indicating the black marks on the ground.

Oh... yes. The fight with that... thing, Spark replied. ***That's very odd, but not unexpected to see in a normal unicorn.***

I think we've established that Greed was no normal unicorn, but what do you mean? I said. The voice chuckled.

Isn't it obvious? He teleported, Spark said, still chuckling. My eyes went wide, and I grinned.

Is there any way to track him? I asked. *Like... follow where he went to? If she had physical arms,* I supposed that Spark would have shrugged.

You'd have to be able to trace where his magic went. It's difficult, but not impossible, Spark responded. I nodded to myself and reached out to the ground with my horn. Yes, there were trace amount of magic here still. Even days after he disappeared, Greed had left a mark on the earth. I began to follow the threads in my mind, jumping from each broken connection to the next, searching for something, anything that would indicate the unicorn's position. Finally, a single silver thread stood out, trailing away and out of the camp and into the city. In my mind's eye I saw a dilapidated Church of the Goddesses sitting on a street corner. The thread ended there. My eyes opened with determination in them as I flapped my wings and took to the sky. My eyes scanned the skyline, and I spotted my destination. I flew like a bat out of hell through the city until I landed on the courtyard of the church. One of its spires was ruined, broken in half, revealing a staircase that effectively went to nowhere now. Stained glass windows, once beautiful and vibrant, were either now completely shattered or so dirty from the test of time it was impossible to tell what they were supposed to be. The large front doors of the place were ripped off of their hinges, indicating recent activity.

I cautiously stepped forward, heading into the open doorway. The hallways twisted and turned until I located the main sanctuary hall, a large room that extended back to the end of the church's lot. A massive balcony loomed overhead as I entered the darkened sanctuary. Twisted laughter filled the hall as I entered, a sign that I was in the right place. At the altar sat the devil himself. His formerly pristine white coat was marred to a charcoal grey because of dirt and soot. His mane was scraggly and unkempt. Dried blood stained his hooves and a wide maddening grin crossed his face. The unicorn's eyes were wide with glee and hatred as he stared me down. At his hooves rested Stargazer.

"You're so... predictable Ministry Mare. I took something of yours, I wanted it, so I took it, and now here you are... right into my lair," The mad unicorn said to the room. I growled and put a hoof up.

"Greed. It's over. You're finished. Give me back the gun, and we'll end this," I shouted. The stallion shuffled to his feet, his bloody horn taking up Stargazer in its magical grasp.

“Yes... let’s do that shall we,” The buck said, lifting the minigun. Deftly, he pulled the trigger and began to fire.

Shit! I shouted in my mind as I triggered my shield spell and moved to duck behind a few of the ruined benches. A blaze of blue shattered wood and impacted against my shield, triggering sizzling noises as the bullets struck it. Several bullets passed right through as the strength of my shield waned, soaring over my head. I turned and ran, making it around a stone corner. *It’s alright, I’ve got this. I just have to let him deplete out the core or tire himself out from holding it too long,* I thought to myself before a second thought suddenly occurred. I’d never actually fired Stargazer long enough to know how much it would take to deplete the starmetal core. Furthermore, I didn’t really know how fast the core regenerated itself! I became suddenly glad that Greed didn’t have a PipBuck, or else I would be splattered on the walls of this church. The gunfire broke off as I could hear wild cackling from the center of the room.

“Come on out Ministry Mare. I want to see you tremble. I want to see you shake with fear as I kill you!” The unicorn snarled.

“You won’t get that shot Greed!” I shouted from behind the stone. I levitated out the rifle I had brought with me. Inelegant compared to my normal fare, but it would have to do. It was now or never, that good old do or die time. I leaped out from my hiding place and triggered S.A.T.S., queuing up a shot at the buck’s head, hoping to catch him in his damaged horn. Time resumed and the rifle fired, slamming directly into the stallion’s face. An electrical discharge emanated from his head as his shield ability struggled to form, brushing off the bullet but forcing his focus on my gun to drop. I quickly went to try to lift Stargazer with my magic, only to have it pulled out of my grasp by Greed’s familiar glow. He snarled as he leaped at me, bringing the gun to bear. Another storm of bullets spewed forth from the minigun as I struggled to my move my rump to another safe spot. Stone and wood flew around me as I pushed myself around another column with my wings. Stargazer wound down and Greed spoke again.

“Stay still so I can kill you!” He shouted.

“I probably could and you’d still miss me! You’re a pathetic shot!” I yelled back, trying to goad the buck into action. I heard hoofsteps coming closer.

“Not going to fall for your tricks again Ministry Mare,” Greed said, stopping short of the stone column I was hiding behind. I snarled and turned out from behind my cover and pushed forward at the stallion. I let my horn glow, putting a little extra oomph into my voice as I stretched my forehooves out to strike the unicorn.

“MY NAME IS RADIANT STAR!” I shouted, catching the buck in the face with a hoof, sending me and him into a rough and tumble of kicks and punches. Greed snarled and slammed me in the side of my face with his right forehoof, drawing blood as I heard a ***crack*** from the jaw. Pain shot through my body as we slammed into each other. Greed finally got the better of me, pushing me to the ground with a forceful slam. I cried out in pain as the buck held me there, levitating Stargazer over the top of my head.

“Alright then Radiant Star. Any last words before you shuffle off this mortal coil?” Greed said, his eyes mad with rage. I stared up into the black barrels of my own weapon with fear. *I failed. I’m so sorry Violet... Patch... Steeljack,* I thought as I shut my eyes and waited for the end to come, but it never did. In fact, several things did happen, all at once as I shot my eyes open at the noises that occurred while they were closed. Greed cried out in anguish as Stargazer clattered to the floor next to me, and a blasting noise that hummed through the air passed over me. I looked up at Greed and saw that most of his left hoof was now gelatinous goop, dripping onto me as he screamed in intense pain.

“Get off of her, now!” An angry voice shouted. I looked up and saw Violet standing there, brandishing

Thunder Flash in her magic. She had fire in her eyes and determination in her stance as she aimed again and fired, grazing the unicorn stallion's mane, singing off several tufts of hair in the process. I snarled and moved to push Greed off of me with magic, finally extricating the screaming mess that was the unicorn to the floor beside me. I pulled myself up and grabbed Stargazer, running over to my lovely companion. Greed pulled himself up to his hooves, panting hard through the pain. He grinned, pointing to the wall and the stone columns around us with his gelatinous hoof.

"I told you already... if I'm going to hell, you're coming with me," He said, snarling. I looked up and saw bomb collars strapped to the sides of the wall and to the columns. Suffice to say, it was enough explosive to bring down the ceiling on top of us. But where was the detonator? There had to be one, otherwise why would he make such a threat? He grinned, catching my expression. He licked his lips and my eyes went wide. He swallowed it, which means.... shit. Violet glared at the buck and lifted Thunder Flash.

"I'm sending you first then," She simply said as she took aim and fired.

"Violet no!" I shouted to try and warn her but it was too late. The elegance of the beam rifle sent silver fire screaming across the room, hitting the stallion dead center in the chest, beginning the process of dissolution immediately. Greed shrieked in pain as his chest dissolved into goop, a gleam of silver appearing as his insides were revealed to us. A beeping noise emanated from his body as Greed laughed in death. A few moments later the world shook as bombs all around the church began to detonate. Stone and wood flew through the air, mixed with deadly cutting glass. And that was the least of the problems. Large chunks of rock began to fall as the building's support system could no longer sustain the weight of the sanctuary ceiling. I latched onto a very surprised Violet and activated my shield just before a really large chunk made us pancakes. I covered her with my wings and laid there, trying to keep my shield up as it was bombarded by debris and rubble.

I struggled with my magic, the pain of my injuries sustained during the rough and tumble with Greed finally catching up to my adrenaline. No! I thought as my shield strength began to fade. I began to push Violet along, using myself to keep her safe. Her eyes filled with fear as a rather large chunk of rock fell from the ceiling. I didn't see it as it passed through the shield, striking my head directly. The last thing I heard was shouting as I blanked out and fell unconscious.

I blinked as I stared down the hallway. *I really gotta stop doing this*, I thought as I wondered which door would open next. *I mean come on, why is it always me that gets knocked unconscious?!* The bare hallway stretched out before me and the torches hanging over the doors provided very soft light as I sat there, waiting for the next door. The ***fwoosh*** indicated a door further up the hallway on my left. I trotted up and pushed the door open, a creaking noise meeting my ears. I stepped out and into a Ministry office, where two purple mares that looked nearly identical were standing there arguing over something. One of the mares looked like Twilight, while the other looked like a desaturated version of the other, her coat almost a light grey color.

"No no no no! I'm not going to do it!" the grey mare shouted at the purple unicorn, who rolled her eyes in response.

"She said we have to, silly!" The other mare chirped excitedly before sticking her tongue out.

"I don't care. Spark can go buck herself, I'm not doing it!" The grey unicorn said angrily. They both seemed to be engrossed in their own argument and hadn't noticed me standing there just yet.

"Umm... hello?" I said, startling the two mares. The deep purple one smiled and bounced up and down.

“Oh, hi there! We’ve been waiting for you!” She proclaimed. “It’s just such an honor to meet you!”

“Ugh. Stop it would you, you’re embarrassing,” The other mare said, rolling her eyes.

“Who... who are you?” I asked, staring blankly at the two unicorns.

“Oh. I’m Harmony! And this cranky puss here is Disharmony! We’re twins!” The energetic lavender unicorn exclaimed. Disharmony shrugged.

“I’m still not doing it Harmony,” She stated flatly, staring off to the side and not directly at me.

“Dissy, you’re just a cranky cranky pants. Spark said you have to, so you have to do it!” Harmony said, grabbing the grey mare into a hug. Disharmony groaned and pulled herself away from the excited unicorn.

“Excuse me... but what did Spark tell you to do?” I asked. These two had to be the most confusing of Twilight’s emotions that I had ever met so far. What kind of emotion is Harmony and Disharmony anyways? That’s almost like getting a cutie mark for arguing.

“We were supposed to wait here for you because we have an important message for you. But Dissy is being a prissy,” Harmony replied. The purple mare stuck out a hoof and wrapped it around my neck.

“A message?” I asked, still really confused.

“Sure! You see Star, you’ve been super busy with thinking that you’re the only important pony around that you’ve neglected to see the Harmony in your friendship! Especially with that Violet, wowza have you seen the flank on her?” Harmony chattered excitedly. Disharmony groaned again.

“We’re supposed to remind you that we can’t exist without each other. It’s sort of like good, and evil. Order, and Chaos. You know, two sides of a coin,” Disharmony interjected.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to do it?” Harmony asked. Disharmony shrugged.

“If it gets you to shut up for a few minutes, then I’ll do anything,” The grey mare said before turning to me. “Listen. I could care less about anypony but myself. But you’re letting too much of me in, and that’s bad for both of us. Twilight did the same thing, and it nearly broke her.”

“What do I do then?” I asked.

“Let your friends in sometime. Don’t always dismiss their strengths or their weaknesses. They’re always there for you Star,” Harmony said.

“And as much as I hate to say it, don’t be so selfish all the time. You need balance, not all me all the time,” Disharmony chimed in. Harmony nodded along with her twin emotion, smiling brightly.

“I just... I feel like all I’ve done is put them into harm’s way. I’m a failure,” I said, with a defeated tone. Harmony giggled and hopped around me.

“Silly filly, it’s not just all about you, y’know. Your friends know what they got themselves into when they signed up for this. Stop blaming yourself, and let a little Harmony into your life,” She said grinning as she bopped off down the hallway.

“Ugh... there she goes again. I’d better chase after her before she causes more trouble. She’s been causing Anger trouble all week,” Disharmony sighed, starting down the hallway after the energetic mare. I blinked, and then blinked again.

“Twilight. You are so random sometimes,” I finally said as the world faded to black.

A green hoof was shaking me as I woke up. Violet was sitting next to me, tears in her eyes. It was

dark all around us. Debris was everywhere, and I couldn't even see where we were.

"What happened?" I said weakly. Violet pointed up.

"We're trapped. The whole thing came down, and now we're trapped down here. I've tried clearing away some of the debris, but there's too much to cut through, even with Thunder Flash," She responded, sniffing. I pulled myself up, ignoring the small pains I felt all over and grabbed Violet, and pressed my lips to hers fiercely. Her eyes popped open at the contact and then closed, smiling as our tongues mingled. After a few moments, we broke the connection, breathing hard. I looked into her eyes and smiled warmly.

"It's alright. We're going to get out of here, you and me. We just need to work together," I said. She nodded slowly as I stood up and looked around the area. We were trapped in what appeared to be an underground basement below the church. *I guess the damage was pretty bad*, I thought as I stepped about the area. Luckily we hadn't lost any of our supplies, and Violet had been able to carry both of our weapons along for the ride. Granted, most of our supplies did diddily squat in a situation like this. It was still something at least.

"How did you find me by the way?" I said as I poked at some of the rubble.

"Followed your PipBuck tag. Wasn't that difficult," She replied as she picked up our saddlebags and Thunder Flash. You can do that? Really? Oh shush, what do you know? What? You knew that could be done and you didn't tell me? Jerk! Anyways, without my harness, I just set Stargazer aside for the moment. I slid on my bags, and sniffed the air. It smelled sweet, and I could feel a breeze coming from somewhere.

"There's air somewhere coming in, otherwise we'd have suffocated by now. How long was I out?" I asked as I tried to follow the source of the air. I poked at a few rocks, causing them to tumble down and a massive roar to start up before quickly subsiding.

"Only a few hours or so. You really had me worried there for a bit," Violet replied, stepping up next to me. "Are you alright?" I sighed and lowered my head.

"I... I'm sorry I came alone Violet. I should have trusted your instinct. I should have trusted you," I said finally. The green mare hugged my side in appreciation. She smiled up at me warmly.

"It's alright. I'm sorry too. I should never have let you just go. That's why I followed you," She said. "Star... you can't do everything on your own now. You've got me."

"Somepony else just gave me that exact same advice," I said, seeing the confused look on her face. "More of Twilight's emotions. They talk to me sometimes when I'm asleep or dreaming. It's a little crazy sounding I know, but they're in there." I tapped my noggin as Violet nodded and nuzzled closely to me.

"I don't think that's crazy at all Star," She replied. I continued to pick at some of the debris, trying to find the right pieces that would free us from this underground death trap. After a few moments of searching, I found a hole where air was pushing through slightly. I looked to Violet, who nodded and brought up Thunder Flash. The beam rifle's silver energy careened into the spot, melting stone into goo instantly. In the dim light beyond the debris we could see a stairwell leading upward amidst even more rubble. Violet stepped through the hole first and I carefully followed her, trying not to knock too much more loose while carrying Stargazer through. The stairway was in disarray and was sealed shut by large chunks of rock that had fallen down into it. I tested the rock a bit with my magic and determined that there was a likely chance the whole thing might collapse downwards if anything was removed. Violet began to slowly carve a path using Thunder Flash up the stairs. I was relying more on her than anything with that beam weapon. *It might just be our only way out of this mess*, I thought as I

watched my love fire the rifle. My eyes traced up her legs and her flank, taking in her subtle beauty. I grinned as I watched her work.

“Star...?” Violet asked. *I must have been zoning out again*, I thought as I looked down, seeing her next to me. I looked back up and blinked. Wow, she was quick. She also had a frown on her face. Uh oh, incoming wrong time!

“Yes?” I asked softly.

“I... I killed him didn't I?” She asked. I blinked. I hadn't been expecting that question. She hadn't mentioned Greed the entire time. Had she been mulling over it all this time?

“Yeah... you kind of did. I don't think anypony would survive that kind of shot, let alone that kind of explosion,” I said. “Why? What's wrong?”

“I just... I've never, I've never wanted to kill somepony as much as I wanted to kill him at that moment,” She finally said after a slight pause. I sighed, and hugged her close.

“It's okay. He was a monster. He was evil. You know that right?” I said. “You did the right thing.”

“I... I know. I was just so mad you know... him standing over you with your gun, I just.... I felt like I was going to lose you,” My mare replied. I smiled softly.

“I felt the same way down in that Stable you know. I let my anger get the best of me. I let it get in the way of what was really important, and that was you,” I said. “Now then, are we clear enough to move this rubble?” She nodded and I stepped into the stairwell. Violet had certainly done a bang up job of cutting through the rock. Above we could see a room that possibly was part of the sanctuary of the church. We tread lightly as we navigated upward, finally emerging into the darkness of the sanctuary. A large hole in the wall revealed that it was night outside. Glass and metal were strewn about the sanctuary floor, which was mostly sunk into the basement below. We breathed a sigh of relief as I helped Violet up onto my back. I flew across the sanctuary hall, landing outside of the giant hole in the side wall and onto the street. The city felt empty in the middle of the night, nopony around to even notice us as we walked along the streets. It was an odd sort of quiet, one I didn't much care for, but was there anyways, almost taunting me.

“The NCR will have closed up the gates to the hotel for the night,” Violet said quietly as we traversed. “We should probably find someplace to bed down until morning.” I nodded in response as we came down a few streets over from the church. Several of the buildings held gang symbols but they were dead quiet. Too quiet. It was no surprise when several red blips appeared on my E.F.S. and gunfire came from one of the buildings. I shouted and tossed up my shield, warning Violet of the incoming danger.

“We've got company!” I yelled. Violet nodded, and brought up Thunder Flash, sending a stream of silver fire across the street at the abandoned building the gunfire had come from. The beam looked simply radiant in the night sky as it slammed into the side of the building, eating up small chunks of stonework and masonry as it did. I was about to join her defense when another spray of bullets came from the building on the other side of the street. Violet merely grinned at me.

“Back to back!” She shouted. I nodded and put myself rump to rump with her. I turned towards the other building and triggered E.S.A.T.S. Oh it felt so good to be back on good terms with my gun! Not having any actual targets to shoot at, I queued up several shots targeting the windows of the building. *Let's see if they're being interested and looking out the window*, I thought as I let the targeting spell drop and Stargazer unleashed its payload at the stone building. Windows burst and screams were heard from inside. I could hear similar screams behind me as Violet spewed hot fiery death from her beam rifle. We turned to each other and laughed. It felt good to be out here with just

her for some reason, like it was truly meant to be. Red blips on my E.F.S. disappeared as I lobbied round after round into the windows. Eventually only a few red blips remained. Those blips quickly turned yellow as a white flag extended out of one of the windows and shook fiercely. I nodded to Violet as we held our fire, grinning. The flag receded back into the building and the blips remained yellow. *I guess they don't want to fight us anymore, I thought. Funny how that works out.*

I looked over at Violet, who had pointed out an abandoned Macs Department Store down the street. Although the front of the store was absolutely ruined, it appeared the inside was actually not too bad. We made our way into the store, searching for a place where we could stay for the night. The store itself was dirty, but bearable. Several radroaches scattered as we walked through the old store. We stepped into the area of the store that was supposed to hold furniture and smiled profusely. Although they were centuries old and extremely dirty, there were several beds and mattresses strewn about the furniture area. Nopony cared too much about taking a bed with them when the megaspells dropped apparently.

"This will have to do," Violet said. "Maybe in the morning we can load up some of these and take them back to the hotel with us. Clean them up a bit, and they'd make good extra beds for the NCR to use." I nodded in agreement as we found ourselves a nice comfortable mattress to lie on. We laid there for a few moments next to each other and sighed.

"Violet?" I asked quietly. She looked up at me.

"Yeah...?"

"Thank you. For just being here with me. You have no idea how much I appreciate it," I said, smiling. She flashed her own smile. I nuzzled her neck, holding her closely as I gave her a small lick on her cheek, prompting a fierce blush from her as I kissed her lightly.

"Star..." she choked out as she reached up with her hoof, caressing my neck. I lowered my mouth onto hers and we kissed, letting ourselves go for the moment. A feeling quite like heaven shook through my body as we lingered in the other's mouth, finally breaking away to come up for air.

"You told me earlier you wanted to... what was the word... 'discuss' some things?" I panted as I kissed her neck, prompting a soft moan from the mare. I had been through so much in the last week that I almost forgot how good I had it sometimes. I had devoted friends who would put their life on the line for me, and a beautiful marefriend who loved me for who I was. Life suddenly didn't seem so bad at that moment in time. In fact, it almost seemed downright wonderful.

"Mmm... I umm... yeah... keep doing that," Violet moaned as I nibbled on her neck and caressed her body. Her breath had become short and she was panting hard. She turned around in my embrace and began kissing my neck as well. She slid down my neck with her tongue and grinned playfully.

"What are you – ohh!" I half said/half moaned as my love let her hooves further down my body. I clinched my teeth as her caresses became more intimate and softer with every nibble, kiss, and lick. Violet worked her way up the side of my flank and thigh, prompting several moans from me as she did. Her hooves finally came to rest at the base of my wing, where she began rubbing. It felt extremely good, I must say. That is, until the nibbling began there as well.

"Ohh!!! Oh Celestia!" I shouted as Violet worked her tongue and mouth over the base of my wing, taking great care with my feathers to keep them in place as she did. The feeling was beyond incredible, an electrical tingling shooting its way up and down my spine. I moaned and thrashed about as my lover worked; a fire building up in my nether regions. Violet moaned just as much as I did as she slid a hoof down my body. I sighed as my love bore down on my other wing, gnawing on the base and prompting me to moan even more. I was panting hard by this time as Violet grinned at me, continuing her delicate

work on my wing. Now bear in mind, I do preen. Preening is one of those deals you normally don't hear an alicorn or a pegasus talk about too much, but we do keep our wings in condition. Preening is typically one of those normal things, you think nothing of it as you bite and gnaw at your wing, putting feathers into place. But having another pony do that for you? Pure unadulterated heaven. It is absolutely one of the most romantic things a lover could ever perform for their mate. It is also highly intimate, as we don't normally just allow anypony near the base of our wings. It was with this intimacy in mind that I vocalized my excitement at Violet's act of love.

"OH BUCK YES!" I shouted as teeth pulled on feathers and tongue pushed them into place. I shook with sheer excitement as my lover worked her magic on me, my eyes lolling into the back of my skull. I felt like jelly in her mouth, melting at each twinge of pleasure. The fire inside me intensified as she continued her gnawing. I moaned and bucked and kicked and then lay there, sighing intensely. Finally, I managed to gather enough strength to pull my love into a fierce kiss as I smiled. We broke apart and stared into each other's eyes, wild with excitement.

"I love you," Violet breathed. Her mane was tussled and sweat glistened on her coat. She had never looked more beautiful than she did at that moment in time.

"I love you too," I replied as I nuzzled her neck, burying myself in her embrace. I giggled as she nuzzled back. For the first time in a long time, I was feeling like I was on top of the world. Only one thing could have made my life a little better at that point in time. Of course, I had to vocalize that want.

"You don't think we could find any chocolate syrup around this place do you?"

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Harmony and Disharmony: There's a careful balance in your heart maintained by the emotions of Harmony and Disharmony, however this balance can tip at any time based on your actions. Maintaining this balance allows you to regenerate AP 20% faster than normal.

Quest Completed! Greed Consumes All – Located and killed the raider Greed.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Quest Perk: Pony Sutra - You are experienced in the art of giving and receiving physical pleasure. You are more likely to have sexual encounters with specific characters.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 7.5: A Night for Love

“I’ve just been reading the most fascinating book about Hearts and Hooves Day. Did you know that this holiday got its start because of a love potion?”

Author’s Note: Just a fair warning, this chapter contains some mature situations. Why did I write this? Because I wanted to give Star a little break from all the bad things happening to her, and let her have a little fun. So if you don’t like this sort of thing, I totally understand, and you’re not breaking my heart if you don’t read it. This was mostly sort of a challenge to myself to see if I could write this sort of thing. So... if you’re offended by sexual situations (and by sexual, I mean two mares having pure unadulterated sex), please feel free to click Next Chapter and proceed onto Chapter 8.

(and by sexual, I mean full on explicit sex - with chocolate sauce)

“You want to do what?” Violet asked me, her stare blank as I grinned broadly. We were lying in each other’s embrace on a relatively clean mattress, in the ruins of a department store. Violet’s preening had left me panting hard, and I had just popped a very serious question. A question that would define our evenings together for ages to come. Of course, I asked where we could get some chocolate syrup.

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun, you’ll like it I promise,.” I said as I grinned. I could see the gears turning in her head. Finally she grinned back, pushing herself up off of me for a moment.

“Alright. Let’s see what we can find around here,” she said. I stood up, wiggling my flank at my partner and grinning. She giggled as we set off into the department store. Time had not been kind to the insides of the store. There were several holes where the floor had fallen apart, revealing the floor below it. We scaled upwards, looking for any sort of area of the store that could possibly have still preserved food. The power in the store was still functioning, but the lighting system was spotty on most of the floors. We were about to give up when Violet spotted a sign that said **Food Storage**.

We stepped into the part of the store, a wide floor with tumbled racks and shelves strewn about. Cans of old food that were preserved by the ages of time were laying everywhere. It was rather surprising I will admit that nopony had salvaged anything like this out of the store. I ran my hoof over several cans of food, noting that the food was still good based on the expiration dates. Man, those ponies back in the day sure knew how to pack food for every eventuality, including the apocalypse. Several rows of refrigerated units lined the back of the storage area. My eyes went wide, hoping we could find something here. I shuffled up next to Violet, who was shifting around cans and bottles here and there. I flicked my tail and grinned, hopefully making my intentions clear to my little lover. She rolled her eyes and I giggled.

“Is that all that’s on your mind tonight?” Violet said. I shrugged.

“Just... with everything that’s been going on lately, it feels good to just be around you, I guess.” I replied. It was true of course. After all, I had been through some crazy shit lately. Dealings with Discord, Greed, and my inability to be a good friend had really beaten me down in the past couple weeks. I needed some release, some sort of escape, if only for a night. I put on my best saucy eyes and grinned. “Besides... if you’re good maybe I’ll do you first.” A hint of blush was Violet’s reply to that, raising a flurry of giggles from me.

“Alright miss horny pants, cool your jets until we find what we’re looking for,” She replied, rolling her eyes again.

“Oh fine, just let me know if you find anything. I’ll go over there and look,” I said, pointing to the other side of the room. I walked over and began scanning the shelves. Canned soup. Boring. Canned Tuna? Eww, boring. Canned Soylent Green. They made that? Eww. Still boring. Boredom winning the fight with horny, I decided to flick my PipBuck radio on. The smooth svelte voice of DJ-PON3 filled the floor.

“Good evening Wastelanders, it’s your host DJ-PON3. Tonight is a very special night out there for all you lovebirds. You see, back in the day, ponies before the war used to celebrate this awesome holiday called Hearts and Hooves Day, and today my friends, is that day. But DJ you say, nopony has celebrated this holiday in over two hundred years! Why start now? Well my friends, we all could use a little love in our lives. If we’re ever going to rebuild this crazy little world, we’re going to need love to see us through.

Love is a strong thing, so take some time out today to tell that special somepony of yours just how much you love them. And if you’re still pining over somepony, work up the courage and tell them! You never know what just might happen.

Now, here’s a special little track for all you lovely lovers out there, in the form of some good old Sapphire Shores.”

DJ-PON3’s voice faded out just as the intro to the song gave way to a stompy beat, and I began tapping my hoof with the beat. Without thinking I began singing along, without a care in the world as to who saw or heard me.

“You think I’m pretty, without any make-up on,” I sang, smiling and swaying along with the music.

“You think I’m funny, when I tell the punch line wrong,” Violet’s voice rang out, jumping in perfectly on the beat. I turned to see her grinning and swaying with me.

“I know you get me, so I let my walls come down... coming down!” I finished, stepping forward to meet my marefriend in the center of the room. She closed in to kissing distance as the next lyric came up.

“Before you met me, I was alright but-” She sang, putting a little more sway into her hips.

“Things were kinda heavy, you brought me to life,” I replied, almost breaking down into giggles.

“Now every Hearts and Hooves Day, you’ll be my somepony... somepony!” Violet sang as the song kicked into a higher gear.

“Let’s go all... the way tonight... no regrets... just love...” We sang together, putting our hips into motion as we shuffled our hooves, circling each other in some primitive dance maneuver. *“We can dance... until we die. You and I, we’ll be young forever!”*

The chorus of the song came on as we began to dance and kick to the beat. We looked into each other’s eyes and chorused right along with it.

“You make me... feel like I’m living a teen mare’s dream, the way you turn me on... I can’t sleep... let’s runaway and don’t ever look back, don’t ever look back!” We belted out in harmony, giggling like two little schoolfillies as we plopped down on a nearby couch in a tangle of limbs and lips. The song continued on into the background as we lay there, grinning at each other.

“Oh man, I haven’t done that in ages,” I said as more giggles escaped my mouth. My head dropped as I noticed something near the back of the room. I pointed at it with a hoof.

“Hey... what’s that?” I asked. Violet stood and looked at where I was pointing. A bright grin crept across her face as she ran to the back and opened the freezer unit I had been pointing at. A cry of victory escaped her lips as she yanked something out of the freezer and came back to my side.

I couldn't believe my eyes as to what I was seeing. Out of all the things I had ever looted from ruins, pulled from the bodies of my foes, or seen in a shop, this stood alone. Almost glowing in an aura of unlikely beauty, such a find was beyond words. I nearly cried as I gazed upon the wonder and beauty of the bottle in front of me.

It was a bottle of completely preserved and refrigerated Horshy's Chocolate Syrup, full and unopened. I looked over at Violet and gave her the saucy eyes again.

"Now... where were we?"

A few moments later, we were laying in our makeshift bed, grinning at each other as I brought out the bottle of syrup. I set it next to us as I rubbed Violet's neck. She smiled softly and I began to nibble on her neck once more, breathing hot air onto her as I made my way down her back. Violet let out a happy sigh. I stopped at her flank, and looked up at my lover.

"Mmm... you look good enough to eat," I said seductively. Violet giggled.

"Wow, that was bad," She shot back. I made saucy bedroom eyes at her.

"Oh come on, you don't like my pickup lines?" I said, batting my eyelashes. I stretched out and kissed her thigh, working my way up to her cutie mark. I let my tongue out, running it over the green flames adorning her flank. Violet let out a soft moan as she adjusted her hips. She looked back at me with a fierce blush on her face. She was already breathing hard, but she nodded at me anyways. She lifted her tail, the revealed treasure of her marehood glistening in the spotty lighting. I grinned and picked up the bottle of syrup with my magic, lifting it above my lover's private beauty. I unscrewed the cap and took a whiff of the stuff. It smelled glorious, rich and chocolatey. I tipped the bottle, letting a thin line of syrup dribble onto Violet's flank. The syrup flowed down over her marehood, mixing in with her feminine juices. Violet let out a sharp gasp as the cold syrup hit her.

"Alright down there?" I asked, grinning. She panted hard in response. I took that as a yes and brought my mouth to bear on my love's flank. My tongue rolled across her flank, lapping up the chocolate syrup as I went. Violet moaned more as I moved up and down her thigh. The taste of it was incredible, but the best was yet to come. I paused a moment, savoring the flavor of my mare before moving up her thigh once more. I tentatively reached out with my tongue and lightly licked around the lips of my lover's pussy, a heavy moan emanating from her as I did. Her marehood tasted amazing, the chocolate mingling with her juices so well you couldn't tell which was which anymore. I let my tongue roll over her insatiable mound. Violet began to squeal like a filly.

"More!" She cried out as I moved to her clit, which was now swollen and tight. I reached out and began to suckle on it; drawing more squeals and moans from my lover as she banged her forehoof on the mattress. I felt her body tense up. She was very close. Grinning, I lifted my mouth from her, chocolate and mare juice dripping off my lips. I moved to exploring the folds of her pussy, pressing them open with my tongue. I slid my tongue inside experimentally, prompting another round of squealing from my green lover. Slowly I began to thrust, pulling my tongue out and pushing it back through the tight muscle. Violet began bucking into my probing, her cries getting louder with each passing minute. I felt my own warmth trickling down my legs as I continued to fuck my lover's pussy with my tongue.

"Ohh... fuck... fuck...!" Violet squealed as she began to shiver and shake. I withdrew from her slit and returned my attention to her clit, licking and sucking on it hard and fast. My love's body began to spasm and buck into my ministrations, drawing an intense squeal from her mouth. I continued to suck on her clit as I let my horn go to work, adding a little more chocolate syrup dripping across her flank

and into the soppy mess of her pussy and my mouth.

“Ohh... feels so good... harder... fuck me...” My love blurted, amidst her panting and moaning. I rolled my tongue off her clit and began to push my way back into her pussy which was now gaping and intensely lubricated. I forcefully tongue-fucked her hard and fast like she had so eloquently requested. Finally, she shuddered and shook, letting out an intense sigh as her marehood released a torrent of juices, the majority of them ending up on my face. Her hind legs splayed out from beneath her after the intense orgasm had wracked her body. Violet looked up at me with a grin as she pushed herself up off the now soaked mattress. She giggled as she regarded the stains.

“Guess I made a bit of a mess, huh?” She said as she gave me her own saucy sexy bedroom eyes. “Don’t think for one second you’re getting away from me missy.” She said, fluttering her eyelashes. I grinned in response.

“Oh? How do you want me then?” I said playfully. My own pussy was already boiling hot and wet, ready for whatever my love had planned for it.

“On your back,” She instructed, growling playfully. I couldn’t completely hide my grin as I complied with the stern insistence of my marefriend.

“So serious,” I mused as I rolled myself onto my back, taking care to make it comfortable for my wings which were firmly tucked in. I spread my legs for her, revealing my own swollen marehood. Violet grinned and brought up the bottle of chocolate syrup, drawing line with it all the way up my belly. She lowered her tongue and very carefully brought it down across the line, stopping just before she reached my pussy. She giggled and grinned as I stared at her blankly. Whereas I preferred the sloppy approach to this kind of sex (at least I’d like to think that’s what I preferred); Violet apparently enjoyed toying with me and took it slow. Slowly, she let her tongue roll along the top of my pulsing mound of mare love and I let out of moan of pure ecstasy.

“Ohh...” I uttered as her tongue lightly rolled down my folds before being pulled away, leaving me feeling a little annoyed. I looked up through my haze of pleasure at her and snorted. “Tease.”

“Oh we’re just getting started,” Violet responded, grinning. “Just lay your head back and relax.” I sighed and rested my head, closing my eyes and smiling. I opened once more as I felt something rubbing up against my marehood, something hard and pointed. I groaned at the touch of it, waves of pleasure shooting throughout my entire body. I looked down again, watching as my lover probed my folds with her horn of all things. *Is she going to do what I think she’s going to do?* I thought as I watched her carefully position herself. A grin emerged on her lips as she brought herself forward and launched her horn into my gaping maw. I nearly screamed at the feeling of being entered in such a fashion. Violet pressed in for a moment, letting my body get used to the idea of having her horn stuck into my pussy, and then began pressing deeper in. I squealed and moaned as she went deeper, until her forward momentum stopped in an explosion of intense pleasure. Slowly Violet began to rock back and forth, sliding her horn back, my inner walls clenching on it as she did. By this time I was so wet I was practically gushing all over her forehead and horn as she worked her magic on me. I groaned harder as Violet began to pick up speed, fucking me hard and fast. I bit my lip as the pressure built up inside of me, begging for release.

“Ohh Celestia... that feels so good,” I moaned as she continued to rock inside of me. I felt her shift a bit as she placed a hoof above her head onto my clit, using her rocking motion to work it at the same time. I groaned even harder from the added pleasure as my lover horn-fucked me into oblivious bliss. The fire inside of me was now overwhelming, sending shockwaves throughout my entire body as I was unable to take it anymore.

“Violet!” I screamed out through the pleasure. “I’m gonna... gonna...” I couldn’t finish the sentence

before the dam inside of me broke free, releasing waves of torrential pleasure all over me. I spasmed and jerked as my orgasm rocked my body. After a few moments of intense bucking, I felt Violet's horn slide out of my marehood. She climbed up me, crawling across my belly and to my head. I pulled her close and kissed her fiercely, smelling each other on our lips as our tongues danced a delicate ballet. I pulled out of the kiss, saliva dripping between our tongues as I brought her closer to me. I grinned and let Violet pull herself from my embrace as she began nibbling on my neck. *Oh the marks I was going to have after this night!* I thought as I brought my mouth down and began licking her horn, drawing a gasp of breath from Violet as she bit a little harder on my neck. She moaned as I sucked my own juices off of her horn, working my tongue up and down like it was a stallion's pride and joy. I drew down and started sucking on the phallic appendage harder. I could feel her heat rising again against my side, the warmth sliding out of her cunt much easier as I worked her horn. She cried out and began biting hard into my chest, causing several painful gasps to erupt from my mouth as I lost control of her horn. She pulled herself up and grinned as she turned away from me, shaking her rump at me as she did.

"Turn over," She instructed. I readily complied, turning over so that I was lying on my stomach. My legs felt sore and my pussy felt wetter than ever as I anticipated what she had in store next for me. She stepped over me and straddled my back as if she were riding me, grinding her marehood into my body for emphasis. Slowly she worked herself up to the base of my wings. Her horn ignited and brought down the chocolate syrup, dumping a large glob of it all around the base of my wings. Her first bite sent shivers throughout my body once more as she began to lick and bite the base of my wing, all while grinding her pussy against my back. The grinding motion alone would have been enough to send my cunt into overdrive, but adding the wing play on top of it started me gushing mare juice all over the floor beneath me. I groaned and squealed as she gnawed on my wing, mixing chocolate with feathers as she licked and sucked on the painfully stiff feathery appendage. I transitioned from squeals to short breathy screams as she worked her tongue all around my back and wing.

"Violet... ohh..." I moaned as she rocked back and forth, continuing her ministrations on my splayed out wings. Her pussy ground against me, and several gasps and moans emanated from her mouth as she tried to focus on my wings. I looked back up at her and grinned, drawing her attention. I nodded as she began to grind harder and I could feel her body beginning to tense up. She screamed, rather loudly I might add, as she came again in turn pushing me over the edge into my own orgasm which had been steadily building. We moaned and bucked until our bodies were so sore that we couldn't take it anymore. Violet flopped over on the ground next to me and looked up at me. She smiled softly as she reached up and kissed me tenderly.

"I love you," She said, drawing away from the kiss. I nuzzled her neck.

"Mmm... I love you too sweetheart," I replied. We giggled a bit as we realized just how dirty we were, but we didn't care. We laid there in each other's hooves, just caring about each other's presence at the moment. I sighed and snuggled with my lover, holding her close.

"Hey Violet?" I said finally after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah...?" She replied softly.

"Happy Hearts and Hooves Day."

Footnotes!

Radiant Star & Violet Iris: You didn't level up, but you had lots of sex so who cares?!

Chapter 8: A Step in the Right Direction

“Maybe I should start up a pony group to teach ponies about history. I bet everypony would love it!”

Dreams. Dreams are where we go when we are asleep, this is simple enough. But dreams are also gateways into a subconscious world that belongs to us and us alone. They can provide comfort in the middle of hard times, or they can provide nightmares in pleasant ones. Dreams also give us hope, hope that the future is not always as grim as it may appear to be. I sometimes wonder, did the ponies of the past dream? Were they too looking forward to something better? Did they hope in their dreams that the future would work itself out? Sometimes I doubt it. After all, the same ponies who could have dreamed of a better future spent their time destroying what chance there was at that future instead of building it.

My own dreams are fraught with distress and pain. It seems like every time I close my eyes now for sleep, I see anger and hate instead of hope. I wonder, when will it be my turn to hope for a bright future? Will I ever get that piece of joy I so long for? Or am I doomed, doomed to become a Goddess and live my life forever dreaming of pain? I wish I had the answers to these questions. My only hope right now is to keep moving forward. To keep moving in what I hope is the right direction.

With my friends at my side, who knows what dreams I can make come true?

“Star!” Violet screamed. I ran down the hallway after the sound of her voice. The doors around me were all opening at once, and ghosts of the past were spewing forth from them.

“Violet!” I yelled. “Where are you?!” I turned down the next hall, only to run into a dead end.

Shit! I thought as I turned back into the main hallway. Violet screamed again. *Where are you?!* I ran down the hallway again, looking for any sign of my marefriend, but there was nothing. The doors were all open now, and the hallway was filled with an endless number of purple mares milling about and paying no attention to me as I ran past them. I stopped dead in my tracks when I finally hit the end of the hallway and stepped into the abandoned church. There were various ponies sitting about on the benches, both known and unknown to me. I could see Steeljack sitting next to Patch right up front, the buck with his arm around the green mare. There was the Elder, laughing at the spectacle at the altar. Cross Tire and Brisk sat together near the back of the room, playing some sort of strange griffon card game. Several ponies who were dressed in bleeding rags sat nearby, one of them waving a pitiful white flag. Cherry Cobbler from Friendship City. Iron Sledge. The Stable Ponies from Stable 33. They were all here. My eyes drifted up to the altar. Standing there, presiding over this strange menagerie was the master of ceremonies himself... Greed. Violet lay at his hooves, crying and screaming my name over and over.

“Violet!” I shouted, glaring at the buck, who merely grinned ecstatically. “What’s going on here? I thought we killed you!”

“Kill me? Hah! You could never kill me!” Greed exclaimed, snarling. “I will live forever!” From out of nowhere he produced the statue that he had stolen from Far Hills. His grin widened as he turned the statue onto Violet.

“No! Let her go! Please! I’ll do anything!” I shouted and begged, crying my eyes out as I found myself at the buck’s hooves.

“Oh? Really now... anything Twilight?” A familiar voice echoed. I looked up and Greed had two

beady yellow eyes and was slowly transforming into a draconequus. Discord laughed heartily as he tossed the statue behind him. The statue promptly exploded in a burst of confetti. Violet screamed intensely as she disappeared. I turned and everypony else in the room began to disappear as well. Discord laughed as the room fell away and I fell into a black void that felt like death. I fell, and fell, and fell some more until I hit the bottom of a dark tunnel. The air around me was musty and damp. I lay there and I cried as the darkness swallowed me whole.

“Star!” Violet screamed again. I stayed there, my heart breaking into pieces at the sound of my love crying out for me. I stared into the void, wondering what would happen next. Was I going to die here? I couldn’t breathe or even move. I was paralyzed in fear that I would never see her again.

“Tsk tsk Twilight,” The voice of Discord and Greed said at the same time. An amalgamation of both of the beings appeared in the void before me. “You are all alone now, with nopony to love you or care for you. You should be happy. At least you will die without her seeing you suffer.” The being touched me and pain wracked my entire body. I screamed for what felt like eternity until the pain became so intense that the world went to white and I saw no more.

I awoke with a cold sweat, a fever pitching in my forehead as I struggled to remember where I was. I turned over and saw Violet, lying next to me. Her side was rising and lowering softly with her gentle breath, and small snores and whispers could be heard as she slept peacefully. I sighed as my mind turned over the terrible dream, trying to find some answers in the midst of the intense fear and pain that I had felt.

What a dream, I thought as I shoved myself up, looking about the dreary department store we had spent the night in. I brushed a bit of sweat from my brow as I got up, taking care not to wake Violet. Stretching out, I went to the window and looked out upon the city of Fillydelphia, the events of the evening prior (both good and bad) rushing back to me. I remembered the lengths that Violet had gone to for me, and I rejoiced in the fact that my marefriend loved me that much. My experience with Harmony and Disharmony meant something for sure. Twilight was trying to tell me something, that I shouldn’t ignore my friends, that I should embrace them and let them fill me with their strength. A groan behind me snapped me out of my stupor. I turned to see Violet, rubbing her eyes as she awoke. She smiled brightly at me after a big yawn.

“Hey,” She said sleepily. I walked over and nuzzled her neck, sighing.

“Good morning sweetheart,” I said sweetly. “We don’t have far to go to get to the hotel. I hope Patch and Steeljack aren’t worried about us.” Violet sat up and smiled as she began putting our things back into our saddlebags. I sat down next to her as she worked. We shared a knowing look between us briefly.

“Bad dream?” She asked, looking concerned. I nodded. She got up and hugged me and smiled. “Well, it’s alright. It wasn’t real so it can’t be all bad. Let’s get going. I’m starving.” My stomach growled in agreement. I couldn’t remember the last time I was this hungry. I grinned as I followed Violet down the stairs of the old department store, the spotty lighting illuminating our passage as we walked. We walked silently because nothing really needed to be said. After the night before, we had managed to ascertain on some level where we stood with each other. It was a good feeling.

The damp morning air greeted us as we stepped out of the department store. The street was bare, no signs of life present as we walked along towards the hotel. After an hour or so, the NCR headquarters came into view. We smiled as we stepped up to the hotel, the guards waving us in. It felt surreal entering the place, like we hadn’t been there in ages even though it had only been one day. The lobby itself was nearly bare as several ponies were just setting up their booths for the day’s marketplace. I

wasn't exactly sure where Steeljack and Patch had gone off to, but I hoped they were either near her room or ours. There was also no sign of the Major either. Must not be an early riser, I thought as we walked towards Patch's room on the ground level. I knocked on the door lightly, expecting the green mare to be right there. No answer. *Hmm, that's odd*, I thought, looking down at Violet who merely shrugged. We decided to head back up to the lobby and ask one of the guards if they had seen our friends. The first guard we met was very friendly, but also apparently very new and had no idea who we were talking about. We thanked him and made our way instead to the Major's office. If anyone would know where Patch and Steeljack got off to, it would be the Major. A few minutes later, I knocked on his door softly. A voice echoed from within.

"Come on in," I heard the Major's gruff voice call out. I pushed open the door to find him sitting at his desk, looking over what appeared to be paperwork. He looked up and smiled.

"Well, hello there Miss Star. What can I help you with?" He asked.

"Major," I said. "We're looking for Patch and Steeljack. Have you seen either of them since yesterday?" The Major nodded in response. Finally! Something going right!

"Patch and your friend hit the bar last night and then they went to bed. She should be in her quarters," Major Kirby stated.

"Well..." I started to say. "We just stopped by Patch's room, and there was no answer. I guess we'll try our room and see if Steeljack is there, and if he knows where she is."

"Please let me know if you find her. Patch... I feel bad for her. She's a good girl, deserves a heck of a lot better than this life in this shitty hellhole city. I heard that she was going with you," Kirby replied. I nodded.

"I promise I'll keep her safe Major. I know you care about her a lot," I responded, smiling.

"Now, I also have a few questions for you. We heard some explosions last night in the city, some old church down a ways. Know anything about that?" Kirby asked. I chuckled hesitantly.

"Uh... well... We found Greed. We fought, and then he tried to blow us up with a swallowed detonator. Attached a bunch of slaver bomb collars all around the church," I said.

"Greed? You mean that raider from the camp?" Kirby replied. I nodded. "I thought he was dust."

"Apparently he used teleportation magic when he 'exploded' at the camp. Got away, not clean, but got away," Violet chimed in.

"Well then, I'll have my boys start salvaging the area, see if we can find a body," The Major said, jotting a quick note down onto a piece of paper next to him.

"Tell them to be careful. There's a lot of structural damage. We nearly got trapped down there in the basement, thanks to all the damage," I said. Kirby nodded.

"Where will you go next?" Kirby asked. I looked to Violet.

"I'm not sure. Coming to Fillydelphia was supposed to answer a lot of my questions, but instead it's just raised more," I replied. "We do need to swing by Far Hills and give them back their artifact, but after that... I don't know."

"Well, it has been a pleasure working with you Star. If you ever need anything, the NCR will provide a helping hoof," The Major said, extending his hoof towards me. I took it and shook with him. "Oh by the way, I had that statue of yours sent up to your room for you as well." Violet and I exited the Major's office and looked at each other, confused.

"I wonder where Patch could have gone off to?" Violet asked. I shrugged in response.

"Let's go up to our room," I said, motioning for my marefriend to follow me. We walked silently up the stairs. Being truthful, I really didn't know where I was going next. After the things I'd learned during my stay here in Fillydelphia, the clues and questions swirled throughout my mind like a tornado. Most of all, I worried about seeing Discord again. Something in the back of my mind told me that it wouldn't be the last time I would ever see the drazonequus. I knew also, the next time I did it would not be a pleasant visit either. My mind rolled over the list of possibilities, any place the Twilight Society could have scampered off to. *Pfft, the Twilight Society*, I thought. *Maybe Life Bloom was right, and they're simply all dead.* My mind rested on Maripony and quickly pushed the thought to the back of my head. I still refused to acknowledge the place, remembering very clearly the pain that was held for me there. Going back to Manehattan was a bit of a bust as well. Hoofington... I knew Twilight had been to the city many times over the course of the war. The memories from the place were in the back of my head somewhere, fragmented beyond understanding. Personally I had never been to the city, having only heard scant rumor about how bad things were there. I highly doubted that the Twilight Society went there. Likewise, as Spark had said before, I doubted that the Twilight Society went to the old Ponyville Library. I groaned internally, tossing through the list like it was a fresh salad and yet there was still no clear answer. I soon realized of course, that I had been locked in an internal monologue for some time, as we had arrived at our room and Violet was poking me.

"Ow!" I said, mildly annoyed at the poking. I glared at her as I followed behind her into the room. It was dark and I could hear hushed tones as we stepped through the door.

"Hello?" Violet called out to the room, flipping on the light. A cry of "Wait!" came from the center of the room but it was too late. Violet had already flipped the light on, revealing two earth ponies we knew all too well in a very compromising position. Steeljack and Patch looked up at us from the bedroll, their faces red with embarrassment. Violet blushed too and looked away as I stared.

"Huh," I said blankly as I stared at my two friends. Their blushes intensified.

"Sorry we'll let you be for a second... umm come on Star! Stop staring!" Violet shouted. I cocked my head for a bit and stared more.

"Huh," I said again. I realized that I had never seen Steeljack really out of his power armor before. Actually, I hadn't even seen his cutie mark before. It was a picture of a silver hammer crossed over an anvil. I cocked my head further trying to get a better look as I was being physically dragged out the door by Violet. The door shut in front of my face, breaking me from my staring stupor. A few moments later the door opened and Patch waved us on in, her face still red as a tomato.

"We're so sorry you two had to see that," She said, averting her eyes from us as she did. "It's just... you left, then Violet left to chase after you. It was just us... and one thing led to another and we had a couple drinks and..."

"It's... it's okay Patch," Violet replied. Her face was rather red too. *What did she have to be embarrassed about?* I thought. "We thought something you know... bad had happened to you when you weren't in your room." Steeljack entered back into the room, his power armor intact once more. He averted his eyes too and sat down next to Patch. I sat and watched the spectacle of my three friends trying to process this newfound development.

"So does this mean...?" I interjected, motioning between the two of them.

"Oh... oh! Well umm... we haven't really given much thought to that I guess," Patch said. Steeljack remained rather silent.

"Well, I for one am happy for you two," I stated. Steeljack looked up at me and smiled. I nodded in

response.

“So...” The buck said for the first time the entire conversation. “What happened to you guys last night?” I sighed, and launched into the explanation of the previous night’s events. How Greed had been alive for sure, and how it was Violet who saved me from being turned into starmetal paste. I explained about the bombs and how we had gotten trapped. I glossed over some portions, saving Violet some further embarrassment. When I finished my other two friends were amazed.

“Well, I’m glad you two are alright,” Steeljack said finally after a few minutes. “We were kind of worried when Violet skipped out on us, and tried to follow her but she sort of gave us the slip.” Violet chuckled.

“Yeah... I was sort of really pissed off at you and worried for your life at the same time,” She said, laughing nervously as she looked at me. “I really didn’t think about asking either of you guys. That was selfish of me. I’m sorry.” Patch and Steeljack shrugged.

“It’s alright darlin’,” Steeljack said. “You did what you had to do for Star. Like I said, we’d have been right there after you, but without knowing where you went off to, and it getting so late the guards wouldn’t let us even leave the hotel.”

“Well, water under the bridge now,” I said. “The Major said he left us the statue so we can return it to Far Hills.” Steeljack nodded and produced the item out of his saddlebags, setting it on the table in front of us. The figure was beautiful, its bluish color shifting even though no light was affecting it other than the lighting above us. Its beauty was mesmerizing; I nearly couldn’t stop looking at it. The last time I had seen it had been at the Far Hills museum and only briefly.

“What’s it made out of?” Patch said, eyeing the figurine as well.

“Greed said it was made out of starmetal,” I replied. “It’s a very rare and difficult to work with metal from what I know. I’m surprised somepony was able to carve something so delicate out of it.” I stuffed the figurine into my saddlebags and grinned at my companions.

“Well now, let’s get ready to go shall we?”

After packing up our gear, having some breakfast, and also helping Patch pack her stuff up, we prepared to leave the NCR hotel. It was a bit of a somber egress for our new friend, since she had been with the NCR for some time now. As we passed through the doors she smiled brightly however, and trotted along with confidence. The patch on her eye had been replaced with a newer and fresher one. I mused on the thought that the piece of cloth over her ruined eye gave her a sort of an identity all her own, that she was somehow more than she was before. I grinned slightly as we pressed on into the city, Patch playfully trotting along and chatting up Steeljack with animated passion. I had meant what I had said before, I was truly happy for my two friends. Seeing them together made me feel a little flutter of hope that maybe things weren’t that bad.

A few hours later we arrived at the edge of Fillydelphia. I looked back at the ruined city, seeing the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub standing in the far distance. I was reminded of the events that transpired there and the visions I had seen in the past weeks. Questions plagued my mind at every turn as we made our way onto the road. If the Twilight Society truly existed, what was their angle in all of this? Did they want me to become their new Goddess, one that would be under their control and nopony else’s? The mere thought terrified me. With all the good that the Followers and the NCR had done in the Wasteland, if that happened nopony would challenge their authority. I realized at some point I was going to need to have a heart to heart with Spark about all of this, provided she would actually answer any of my questions in the first place.

We trotted along the road, enjoying each other's company and listening to the radio. The tangy sweet sounds of Sapphire Shores permeated our ears. I stepped in tune with the music and let go, trying my best not to show to my friends the worry and thoughts I carried with me. The song died down eventually however and was replaced by the smooth voice of our favorite DJ mare.

"Good afternoon Wastelanders! This here is DJ-PON3, giving you all the latest news and music hits for the travelling souls out there. Big news coming out of Fillydelphia my friends. Seems that the Ministry Mare paid that town a visit and she shook things up big time!"

Now I don't know exactly what went down out there, but my contacts tell me they've seen everything from the Mare herself going up against what appeared to be a draquequus to her taking down a whole mess of raiders camped in the heart of the city. Citizens living in Fillydelphia be forewarned, as that means there may be both an influx of raiders escaping from the NCR as well as the possibility of a draquequus in the area. Be careful out there and keep each other safe is the best advice that this old DJ can provide to you in these hard times. If you need to get out of the city or just get to safe haven, contact the local NCR or Talon company, and they'll make sure you get where you need to be.

*My last message here is from my lovely assistant Homage. She has a message for our friend out there, the Ministry Mare. *Ahem* Be strong, Be awesome, Be unwavering, Be kind, and Be smart. Hmm... sounds a little cryptic don't you think there Homage? Ah well, I'm sure the Ministry Mare will figure it out.*

As always my friends, remember to pass kindness on to those who need it, and not just because you feel like you have to but kindness for kindness sake. A little friendship goes a long way out there in the Wasteland. And now, back to your regularly scheduled programming. We're playing the hits, all the hits, all day every day from over two hundred years in the making folks. Right now though, we've got a bit of treat for you as we've got a new track that our resident songstress and all around good pony Velvet Remedy recorded just for us. Enjoy!"

The song blasted through the radio as we walked along, its beat a subtle chipper tune that spoke of better days. Velvet's voice never sounded more perfect, the undertones of her sweet sounding singing belying their true and pure nature. It was as if a Goddess had descended upon the Wasteland. I felt thrilled to hear a new song from the leader of the Followers, almost blessed as it were. Violet also appeared to be pretty happy with this, as she was nodding and trying to sing along as we walked. I chuckled and trotted up next to her, matching her stride with each step. Spirits were never higher for this group of friends. I feared at some point that this wouldn't last. I thought about Homage's message to me. *What did she mean by it?* I thought as we walked along. Not only that, it felt like some part of it was missing. My thoughts drifted to the phrases when I suddenly realized that they were the same as the ones on the figurines. *But if that was it, there was one missing still... she only listed five of the six,* I thought, trying to process the message. *What is she trying to tell me?* My brow furrowed in intense thinking, drawing a stare from my marefriend.

"Everything alright in there?" She said, stepping alongside me.

"Just thinking. It's about Homage's message. She's trying to tell us something, I'm almost sure of it," I replied.

"What do you think it is?" Patch said as she and Steeljack stepped up on my other side. I stopped for a moment and levitated out the two statues of the Ministry Mares.

"I think it has something to do with these and their inscriptions, but I don't know why she would be so cryptic about it," I said. "Problem is, there were six Ministry Mares. She only said five of the inscriptions. I'm having a hard time trying to figure out who's missing."

“Well, looking at it logically... we know that Rarity and Rainbow Dash are on the list, since we have those,” Violet said, processing the situation in her head. I could see the gears turning and I smiled. If anypony could figure this out, it would be her. “Alright, so if Rainbow Dash is ‘awesome’ and Rarity is ‘unwavering’ what would the others be? Well, everypony knows Fluttershy was the head of the Ministry of Peace right? So she’s ‘kind’. And... Twilight was a bookworm and an egghead so... ‘smart’? That only leaves –“ I cut her off before she could finish.

“It’s Pinkie Pie,” I said finally piecing together the puzzle. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was right. Applejack was strong, Pinkie was... something else entirely. “But why? What would that have to do with anything?” I couldn’t figure out why Homage would leave us a message that intentionally had to do with the pink mare, especially since it didn’t have anything to do with Twilight. I was terribly confused. I thought back to the memory orb that belonged to Pinkie, and how she had somehow managed to directly address me even though there was no logical way she should have been able to do so. Was there some clue I was missing? Violet shrugged at this as I explained the contents of the memory orb to my friends.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe we should go back to Tenpony and ask Homage directly? Maybe that’s what she wants in the first place is for us to come see her.”

“Maybe it’s some clue about the Twilight Society. I mean, they did leave all those memory orbs from the six right? And if all of those memories had to do with Twilight, then maybe there’s some other clue we’re not seeing,” Steeljack chimed in.

“Well... there is a Ministry of Morale hub in Manehattan. We could always give it a shot,” Violet replied.

“Alright, we’ll make that our next destination then,” I said, my companions nodding eagerly at the prospect of knowing where we were going next. By this point we found ourselves within sight of Far Hills. The small town looked a lot more vibrant than the last time I had been there. Ponies could be seen milling about the town doing their day to day business. It almost looked normal for a change. Plus there was no shooting. That was a plus! In fact some ponies were actually waving at us as we came down the hill to the town. A spot of grey caught my eye as I saw the mare that had stood vigilance over me when I was last here. She trotted up to us as we came into the town proper, a huge smile on her face. I smiled and waved at her.

“We were hoping you would return,” She said. “I never got to properly introduce myself. Name’s Shale.”

“Shale, it’s good to see you again. While you only know me as the Ministry Mare, my proper name is Radiant Star,” I replied.

“I see you found your friends,” The grey mare responded. I nodded lightly. “You really stirred things up around here after you left you know. Ponies never thought that we’d be so prosperous with the museum being open now and all.”

“Well, I have one more thing to add to your collection then,” I said, opening my saddlebag and floating out the starmetal figure. Shale let out a low whistle.

“You actually found it?” She said, her eyes wide with amazement. I grinned.

“I said I would, didn’t I?” I replied, grinning. Shale smiled and took the figure, setting it into her bags. “Also, since you didn’t get to meet them, these are my friends. Violet, Steeljack, and Patch.” The grey mare nodded in turn at each of my friends. Shale motioned for us to follow her, saying she wanted to show us the museum now. We strode along behind her, getting friendly waves and hello’s from everypony we came across. The museum itself looked to be in much better condition

than it had before. The Far Hills townsfolk must have spent quite a bit of time working on the place. Ponies milled around the courtyard as we approached. Several of them had shops set up to sell souvenirs and other items. Shale led us into the museum, grinning.

“What do you guys think?” She said as we stepped in. My jaw nearly dropped. Long gone was most of the rubble, replaced by clean floors. No more skeletons littered the floor and it looked like a majority of the windows had been repaired as well.

“Wow, it looks amazing,” I said, almost speechless. It was pretty amazing. We followed Shale over to the room where the starmetal figure had been living. She stepped in and set the figure back onto its pedestal. The light in the room hit the statue just right as the bluish metal swirled with the reflection upon it. A faint *click* emanated from the pedestal as the figure lowered into an indentation. The wall in front of us slid upwards into the ceiling, revealing a dark passageway that went downwards.

“Umm... well that’s odd,” I said, moving next to the passage. The faint smell of oil and fire that would typically come from a wall torch emanated from the passage below. “I wonder if it was supposed to do that.” Violet shrugged.

“Should we check it out?” Patch asked from behind Violet. “Could be fun.” I shrugged too and looked at Shale.

“Do you mind?” I asked. “Something like this could be something down there either worth salvaging or something that could try to kill you all. Either way it’s worth a look.”

“Knock yourself out,” The grey mare replied, smiling. I grinned back.

“Right then, let’s see what’s down there!” I exclaimed.

Fuck fuck fuckity fuck! Clop me in my fucking fuck! My brain raced a mile a minute as a spear shot out of the wall, missing my face by mere inches. I was too full of adrenaline to even come up with a proper swear. Who in their right mind creates a room where spears just randomly shoot out of the wall? It seemed rather silly to me. The spear continued on its arc across the room, clattering against the wall and shattering into shards of wood. I looked back at my friends for a moment. They had wisely chosen to stay in the entrance of the room. This was the third room we’d been through since descending into the tunnel below the museum, and we quickly found out that each room was filled with elaborate death traps. The first room actually had spikes that popped up out of the floor! We quickly figured that one pony could make it through the room relatively unscathed while the others waited until all the traps were activated. Whatever was down here must have been really good for somepony to go to these lengths.

We pressed on past the spear room and I gasped as we stepped into the cavern that the room opened up into. It was massive, a long winding path leading up to a humongous golden temple that was connected to the rest of the cavern via a bridge over a large underground lake. The water shimmered, but you could still see that the water was not pure. Traces of darkness in the water and the faint clicking of our PipBuck’s indicated this area was mildly irradiated.

“So... awesome...” I uttered as we filtered into the cavern. The path was large enough to accommodate all four of us comfortably. We trotted along, keeping our eyes open for any more traps as we came to the bridge. The bridge was simple enough. It merely extended across the water to the island. It was made of wood and appeared to have been well preserved for its supposed age. I placed a hoof on the surface of it tentatively, the wood creaking underneath my weight. It seemed to hold well enough as I put my full weight onto it, expecting it to crack and sink into the water below. Thankfully it did not. I started across and waved at my friends to follow after I had determined that the bridge

would hold.

That's when the radigator attacked. A huge red blip suddenly appeared on my E.F.S. directly beneath us. The bridge shuddered as a massive tail whipped up from the water, spraying us with the irradiated substance. The tail came down and slammed against the bridge, cracking the railing into two pieces. A roar resonated throughout the cavern as the largest fucking radigator I had ever seen in my life emerged, its jaws wide and drooling with saliva. There was no bone about it, this thing was hungry and we were on the menu. I wondered briefly how the beast had survived down here before I was nearly cut open by a swat of the beast's magnificent claws. I felt a sharp pain emanating from my rump as I was pulled back from the deadly cutting appendages. I looked back and saw Violet, who had yanked me out of the way by my tail, a glare creeping across her face. Oh, right. I was doing it again, talking to myself when I should be paying attention to the fight at hoof.

I ducked as another claw swept over us and drew out Stargazer. A sharp ***crack*** to my left indicated that Steeljack was wasting no time in firing upon the beast. His round swept harmlessly off of the radigator's armored hide however and the beast merely roared harder. Steeljack jumped out of the way just barely getting missed by the creature's tail as it swung it about. The bridge was beginning to show signs of damage as the beast attacked, claw marks and marred wood everywhere. Patch shrank back behind Steeljack and pulled out her sniper rifle. I let out a few rounds against the creature, a few of them striking home but not doing much damage. A flare of silver echoed over our heads as Violet let loose with Thunder Flash. The beam of silver fire struck the radigator's leg, burning it and causing some sparks to fly from it but not much other damage. I needed something, some form of distraction so we could make the thing vulnerable.

I leapt into the air, beating my wings hard as I did. I lowered Stargazer and let out a burst from above, the bullets slamming home into the beast's side. It roared and tried to swipe at me, coming very close to knocking me out of the sky but instead knocking me back. Sparks flew from the arm that Violet had struck with Thunder Flash. *Huh?* I thought. *Radigator's don't spark. They bleed.* I aimed and fired several shots at the arm, tearing through its leathery skin and revealing cold steel underneath.

"Shit, it's a robot!" I yelled down to my friends. *That explains why the damn thing is so big*, I thought, swooping down past the metal beast, laying down as much fire as possible before landing back onto the bridge. I motioned to Violet as I ran towards her.

"Violet, we need your gun up high," I said as I barreled into my surprised marefriend, tossing her onto my back before shooting back up into the air. I could hear her shouting as she gained a secure position so she wouldn't fall off. I heard Steeljack's rifle issue another ***crack*** as he let loose on the beast, trying to draw its attention away from the snack in the air. Patch took the opportunity to sneak off the bridge and positioned herself behind an outcropping of rocks. Her sniper rifle punched out a round, striking the metal beast in the eye. It roared with fury as the bullet struck, metallic goop bursting forth from the orifice. *At least it can be hurt*, I thought, as I stabilized in the air with Violet perched on my back. She brought up Thunder Flash and began firing along the back of the radigator, eating through skin that sizzled like pancakes when the silver fire touched it. A cheer rolled off of Steeljack's tongue as the creature thrashed about, sparks flying from every opening. I grinned, soaring in low and fast, Violet pumping burst after burst of fire out of Thunder Flash. A faint clicking sound indicated that the weapon was running out ammo soon. She floated out another set of spark batteries, reloading the beam rifle before beginning her assault once more. The beast began to spark and howl, smoke pouring out of every part of its body. Finally the monster shuddered and went still as the systems inside it failed. The massive mechanical creature lay there against the bridge, broken and sparking.

"What the fuck was that all about?" Steeljack said as Violet and I returned to the ground. I shrugged. We carefully made our way across the bridge, staying wary of the sparking monstrosity.

“Somepony with an unhealthy obsession for gators?” I offered, trying to come up with some explanation for the strange machine’s presence. Who in their right mind would populate an underground lake with a giant mechanical radigator? I couldn’t even begin to fathom the decision making process that went into that idea. It didn’t even seem like a good idea! I mean, giant radigator security systems? Prewar ponies, they were so fucked up. A poke at my side indicated that once again, I’m incapable of paying attention as I talk to myself. I followed behind my companions towards the temple. The temple itself was very plain other than the fact that it appeared to be made out of solid gold. Gold was something that was very rare, even these days in the wasteland. To see a whole building made out of the stuff, I nearly cried that we couldn’t chip any of the building off to take with us. Cautiously we stepped up the temple steps, making our way towards the entrance: a large round door inlaid with silver. We approached the entrance and the doors began to shift open, revealing a very modern looking hallway. It looked almost like a Stable’s hallway, with pale grey walls and various pipes leading deeper into the complex.

“What the...?” Violet said as we stepped inside the large hallway. It extended deep into the temple’s depths to a point where we were literally unable to see where it ended. Quietly we made our way down the hall, the lights flickering on and off above our heads as we walked. There was a wrongness to this place. It felt like it didn’t belong here. It didn’t take long for us to figure out why. The hallway ended in a large gear-shaped door that was lying against the opening. Despite the fact that the numbers on it had faded to the point where they could no longer be read, there was no mistaking the design that every one of these doors carried.

We had found a Stable.

“Who in their right mind builds a Stable underneath a museum, past rooms full of death traps, and guarded by a giant mechanical gator?” I said aloud as I used my telekinesis to move the Stable door away from the entrance. The dusty smell of decay wafted from the hallways. Patch looked visibly frightened as I moved to step into the Stable’s first hallway. She shrank behind Steeljack as we entered, her eyes shifting back and forth as she walked. Unlike Stable 33 in Friendship City, there were no propaganda posters (thank Celestia!), but instead the entrance of the Stable opened up into a large area containing several doors. Signs above these doors indicated where the Maintenance areas, Security, Archaeology (huh?), Living Quarters, and Overmare’s office were in relation to the entrance. I shrugged and indicated to head to the Overmare’s office first. Might as well find out what fucked up thing they were having these ponies do down here! We cautiously made our way to the Atrium, which was sparsely decorated. Our PipBucks began to chirp, indicating low levels of radiation as we walked. Erring on the side of caution, we took some Rad-X, saving the RadAway in case the levels got dangerously high. It was curious that there were no bodies even though the Stable door was wide open. I quickly rescinded that observation as we headed down the hallway to the Overmare’s office. Several skeletons, charred and black, lined the sides of the hallway. We cautiously stepped over them and eventually made our way to the office.

The Overmare’s office was... interesting to say the least. There were shelves all over the inside of it, each one housing priceless relics and pieces of art from all over the world. Sitting on the desk was a picture of a tan pegasus mare wearing a safari hat standing next to the one and only Rainbow Dash, albeit a little younger. It must have been taken before Dash became a Ministry Mare. The picture had the words *To my biggest fan...* written on it in silver ink. In the corner of the room was a skeleton of a pegasus. Its bones were blackened and brittle. If I had to guess correctly, she was most likely the Overmare. Looking around the room, I considered that the mare must have been the tan mare. This was somepony that Rainbow Dash had looked up to. I began shuffling around the desk as Violet and the others began searching the rest of the room for anything salvageable. The terminal sitting on the desk was another cloud-based terminal. I guess it made sense that it would be considering the pegasus

nature of the Overmare. I sat down and tapped a few keys on the terminal. A prompt for the login appeared. My PipBuck chirped and I tapped a few more keys, the diagnostics mode finally appearing. I scanned the lines of code for something that looked like a password.

The password ended up being ‘ahuitzotl’. Odd password, but whatever. The Overmare’s applications came up one by one. One of the systems was marked ‘External Security’ with a flashing red light next to it. I guessed that meant the gator outside. A second button popped up labeled ‘Safe’. I clicked it and a sharp click emanated from next to the desk. I looked down to see a safe open next to me. Inside the safe were a memory orb and several healing potions. I pulled out the healing potions and set them on the desk. I rolled the memory orb out and set it on the desk as well, motioning to Violet. She glared at me at first, saying nothing but then finally settling into a soft smile and nodding. She winked, indicating that her glare was playful in nature. The past few weeks had given us a lot of time understanding each other’s subtle looks, and I knew she would be okay with this. I informed Steeljack and Patch what I would be doing as well and then turned to the orb. Igniting my horn, I reached out and activated it, my world falling away into nothingness.

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What was with these things and sticking me into pegasi bodies? This one felt lean and muscular, a little like Rainbow Dash except with much better leg strength. My host was sitting at a desk in an office much like the one I had previously occupied, except it wasn’t the same room. Sunlight filtered in through the window as my host worked on paperwork, signing several papers concerning archaeological finds. A look at my hoof revealed that I was the tan colored mare in the picture with Rainbow Dash. A knock at the door shook my host from her focus on the papers in front of her. Her eyes rose towards the door.

“Come in,” She spoke, her voice smooth and sure. The door opened, and two mares stepped through. Ones I was deathly familiar with. Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash entered the small office. My host grinned as she stood up.

“Well, well, well,” My host began. “Look what the cat dragged in. What can I do for my two biggest fans?” My host cracked another grin at the two mares.

“Miss Do,” Twilight said. The purple mare had a very serious look on her face. “You know why we’re here. Our offices have tried to contact you several times over the past four weeks, and you have neglected to respond to our inquiries.”

“Miss Do... Wow, I haven’t been called that since I was in graduate school. I expected a little better from you Twilight. The reason I haven’t been returning your office’s calls is because quite frankly, I could care less about the war. My interests are purely science for science’s sake,” My host replied, motioning for the two mares to have a seat. My host swept onto her own chair. “But since the two of you are here, I’m assuming that I’m not going to be able to get away with just saying get out.”

“Miss Do.... Daring, we need those artifacts. They could hold great potential for our efforts in the Ministry of Arcane Science,” Twilight said softly. Rainbow Dash remained silent through the conversation. Her face was stern and unforgiving. What was she doing there anyways? I mean, I knew Dash was a big fan of the archaeologist, but this was purely a Ministry of Science affair it seemed. It had nothing to do with the Ministry of Awesome’s jurisdiction. This I gathered as much from my host’s thoughts and feelings towards the two mares in her office.

“And I’ve told you already, I don’t care about your war. I’m a scientist. I dig up parts of the past and put them on display for other ponies to ogle. I definitely don’t help you Ministry folk develop weapons,” My host said indignantly. Twilight’s gaze narrowed at my host. I could tell she wasn’t pleased.

“Well then. I told the Princess you might be this way, so she gave me all the necessary authority I need,” The lavender mare responded, producing a piece of paper. It was a royal order to seize all artifacts that the museum had collected, in effect shutting the institution down for good. My host seethed, balled the paper up and tossed it back into the purple unicorn’s face.

“You know what, I’m sick of your Ministries. All you ever do is take, take, take and you never give back to anypony else but yourself,” My host said, her voice seething with anger. “You want to put this institution of science right into the ground, then fine. Go ahead and do it. I don’t care anymore. Please excuse yourselves. Seeing as how I’ve got to now prepare all of these artifacts for transport, I’m going to be very busy. Don’t let the door hit you on the flank on the way out.” I turned away from the two mares and looked out the window. Twilight stared at my host, a cross look on her face as she stood up and left the room, slamming the door on the way out. Rainbow Dash strangely remained. She stood and stepped up next to my host.

“You know Dash, one of these days that mare is going to do something stupid,” My host said. Dash sighed.

“I didn’t want it to come to this Daring. I even pleaded with the Princess after Twilight asked about seizing your inventory, but she wouldn’t listen. Twilight’s the golden filly of the Ministries, the one with the big plans to end the war,” The cyan mare finally said. I nodded in response.

“Still, you know how I am Dash. Always free. I don’t want to be tied down by this stupid war. Did you hear they actually offered me an Overmare position in a Stable? Me?” My host said. Dash smiled and chuckled.

“Yeah, Scootaloo told me about that. I think you should do it. I’m not sure how much of this whole Stable idea is going to work out for them, but it would set you for life regardless,” Rainbow said.

“I’ll think about it. I just want to be away from all of this Dash. This war... it isn’t going to end well, for any of us. I’ve been to zebra lands, I’ve met their people, and I know their customs. This thing won’t end until we’re all bloody and dead,” My host replied.

“That’s why we need your help Daring. You know them. There’s still a chance this thing could end diplomatically,” Dash said, pleading with my host. My host groaned in disgust.

“Any chance you had for diplomacy ended when Littlehorn happened,” My host said softly, causing Dash’s eyes to widen.

“What would have expected us to do then Professor? Just let them slaughter innocent fillies and colts and say ‘hey okay we’re sorry too’?” The cyan pegasus responded, snorting. “Action had to be taken.”

“Action, Dash? Action? Those refugees were just that, refugees. They should have been shown kindness, not fear and paranoia,” My host snapped angrily. The argument between the two mares escalated. A knock at the door broke the two away from their discussion. Twilight Sparkle poked her head back in again.

“Dash? I thought you were right behind me. Come on, we’ve got important business to attend to,” The lavender mare said, glaring at my host once more before exiting the room. Dash started towards the door.

“Dash, wait,” My host said. Rainbow turned around and looked at my host briefly.

“Yeah?” The cyan mare asked.

“Still my biggest fan?” My host asked shyly. I could hear fear and uncertainty in her voice. Rainbow smiled.

“Always.”

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I groggily awoke from the memory orb, sitting in the chair in the Overmare’s office. My friends had been sitting around waiting for me to come out of the device. Violet popped up and gave me a quick hug.

“How long was I out?” I asked sleepily.

“Only about thirty minutes or so,” She replied. “Looks like this place was dedicated to the historical sciences... paleontology, archaeology, you name it.”

“That sounds about right. Look at the pictures. The Overmare was Daring Do, famous archaeologist and scientist. But if that’s her... what happened to them all?” I said, poking around on the cloud terminal some more, looking for any audio logs. It was pretty clean, like either somepony else had been here before us, or Daring hadn’t wanted anypony to find out anything about her. I was about to give up when I noticed a folder on the system that been shoved into a recycling bin in haste. I clicked on the folder, opening a veritable treasure trove of text logs. I looked for the most recent log, and pulled it up.

Overmare’s Log

902wrjfnclsnvczv-===qkdklaD

It’s been several weeks since I’ve last written in here. I guess I really should keep it up to date. I never was one for paperwork though. I can see Rainbow Dash’s face now... Daring Do, the great and powerful Overmare of Stable 110 --- oj32top3toj31tl...

I’m alone now, just me. When the Stable doors opened, we all rejoiced as we hoped for a better life on the surface. Imagine how hard it must have been to find out that the world we left behind was blasted and ruined. I cried myself to sleep the first night after the door opened. We quickly found out that the area surrounding us was still highly irradiated. Everypony around us kept dropping like flies; we ran out of medical supplies before we could save the entire Stable. Nothing seems to have worked, everypony just kept dying left and right. Now it’s just me... and I’ll be joining them all soon.

I can only pray that Celestia has mercy on us. We made our bed, and now we lay in it.

I looked down at the blackened skeleton and sighed.

“We should bury her,” Violet said, tears in her eyes. “She deserves that much.” I nodded in response numbly. Here was a pony that was dedicated to the works of history, to bringing them to everyone, not just ponies. A pony that in the end, died alone with no friends.

“Let’s check out the rest of the place and we’ll come back for her,” I finally said after a few moments of silence. My companions nodded and we set off once more into the unknown. Thankfully, this Stable had seemed like it was not like the others that had been uncovered. It was occupied by ponies that cared about history and science. Ponies that cared about making Equestria a better place. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them as we stepped by their skeletons on our way to the scientific wing of the Stable.

The Archaeology wing was just like it sounded. Instead of mechanical equipment and computers, there were artifacts and relics of days gone by arranged in rows of tables. Dust settled on age old items that most likely had dust on them already two hundred years ago. The moment we stepped into the room however, we all knew something was wrong. Something felt... wrong about the entire room. It was an unnatural feeling, one I had felt before outside of the temple before we entered the Stable. At the far end of the laboratory was a metal chamber that was closed and locked. A single glass window was set

in the center of its door. As we neared closer a small crack could be seen in the window. Immediately my PipBuck began clicking like mad as I felt the radiation wash over me. I looked over at Patch and my friends, all of which were looking a little weary and sickly.

“Umm... I think you three had better step outside and take some RadAway. I’ll check this out,” I said. Violet nodded and motioned for the other two to follow her. Patch looked relieved as they stepped outside the wing and chugged down a packet of RadAway. Within a few moments, they both looked a little better. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned back towards the chamber. The radiation was obviously coming from it. How did the ponies of the Stable not notice it? I deduced that this must be where the radiation was actually coming from, not outside like Daring Do had thought. It didn’t feel like normal radiation, at least to me. You see, since alicorns are products of magical radiation, we’re a lot like ghouls in that radiation actually makes us feel better instead of feeling worse or dying. So when I say this didn’t feel like normal radiation, it didn’t feel like normal radiation. I stepped up to the chamber and peered inside the window. Inside, sitting on a pedestal was a glowing blue cube connected to a power system. A bronze plaque on the side of the chamber revealed that this was ‘Project Lore’ or whatever that meant. I noticed a terminal connected to the chamber. I sat down and started pecking at keys, trying to see if it was working. Thankfully it was already logged in. A folder came up containing images of stars, meteorites, and figurines much like the starmetal figure that started this whole mess. Most of the writing was in a language I couldn’t read. An audio log popped up on the desktop. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I hit play. A thick female voice began to speak slowly.

“The special properties of the artifact are highly erratic. One day it’s completely engaging and doing amazing things. On others, it sits there... doing nothing. I am at my wits end. I keep telling Overmare Do that I believe this artifact is dangerous. We’ve detected trace amounts of radiation while the artifact is engaged, nothing harmful but anything that is made from the stars is bound to be deadly.”

I looked back into the chamber at the cube, and back to my PipBuck which had stopped clicking. The cube had shut off for some reason. *That’s odd*, I thought. The voice on the audio log said that the ‘artifact’, whatever it was... was erratic. They also said it was made from the stars. I looked again at the pictures. Was this thing made of starmetal? Maybe that was why the radiation felt so... off. It wasn’t just regular radiation. That would explain why the ponies living here hadn’t been able to curb the cases of radiation poisoning. I immediately thought to me and my friends. How much exposure was necessary? Was I risking myself just sitting here? I tapped around the keys trying to find some form of shutdown switch, but couldn’t see one. I was about to head around to the back of the chamber to disconnect the power source when I saw it in the corner. It was a figure, much like a pony and much more like a ghoul, but instead it had stripes. The zebra ghoul lunged from the shadows, its howl unnatural as it flew through the air at me. I leaped back and brought up a hoof, striking the creature in the face and stopping it dead in front of me. The thing growled as it stood up and I could see it was missing large patches of skin, revealing rotted flesh. I heard shouts from the hallway behind me. I figured my friends were dealing with trouble of their own. I released Stargazer and fired, populating the ghoul’s flesh with a small city of bullets. The beast’s body quivered as the rounds struck, obliterating body flesh as the thing fell to the ground.

Gunshots erupted from the hallway as the cube inside the chamber began to activate again, sending a fresh wave of radiation through my body. I grunted and moved back behind the device. There were no power cables, nothing to provide power to the chamber at all. *Of course...* I thought. *Why wouldn’t it be easy?* I headed back around the front, nearly running into another zombie, this one a unicorn pony. It snarled as I lifted my weapon to its head and fired, spraying its brains all over the ground. *Where the fuck are they coming from?* I thought as I stopped in front of the chamber, looking in at the still pulsing cube. *This thing must be calling them. That must be why it feels so... wrong.* I looked down at the lock on the chamber, figuring I was going to have to do this the old fashioned

way. I activated my telekinesis and began slamming into the chamber lock, busting it until it finally gave way. The door popped open and a foul wave of radiation blew over me. My PipBuck was now clicking insanely loud and it only felt mildly warm. I heard screams and shouts from the hallway. I looked behind me, seeing my friends locked in combat with several ghouls. They didn't look so good. Shit! I thought as I turned back to the chamber door. The cube pulsed more with its foul smelling power. I stepped forward and lifted Stargazer and fired. Then the world went white.

"Hey she's awake!" I heard voices around me as my eyes fluttered open. No strange dreams or nothing, that was sort of weird for me. I'd been so used to the intrusions of Twilight's emotions that it felt odd to not spend some time talking to one. Lazily I looked up and saw the smiling face of Violet. I smiled weakly.

"What happened...?" I asked, straining to get out the words.

"You must have absorbed too much radiation down there," A voice behind her said. I looked past Violet to see Shale, standing next to Patch and Steeljack. "Sounds like you guys had an interesting adventure."

"The ghouls... that... thing... what happened to it all?" I asked. Violet put a hoof on me and smiled.

"You did it, whatever that thing was you stopped it. As soon as you did, all of the ghouls stopped and disintegrated right before our eyes. What was that thing?" She asked. I pushed myself up so I didn't have to strain my neck so much to look at them.

"Some sort of artifact, made out of starmetal. The scientists... they were studying it," I replied, remembering the audio logs and pictures on the terminal. Whatever the thing was, it had felt quite wrong, like it shouldn't even have existed. "There were zebras there too. I'm guessing that this artifact somehow revived them, since it was emitting some sort of strange radiation." I thought about the radiation I had absorbed, plus the amount my friends had been exposed to as well. *Will they be alright?* I thought as my eyes scanned them. They appeared normal, the RadAway and Rad-X having done their job in purging the radiation from their system. Still, I wondered why I wasn't glowing like a candle. I must have bled off any excess radiation after the cube shut down permanently.

"Yes... a few of the zombies we fought were zebras," Patch said. "Must have been a multicultural Stable. There were several of those commissioned."

"That would explain the writings on the terminal I saw," I said, explaining the images and the audio logs to everypony present. "Why have zebras study something made of starmetal though? From everything I know, the zebras hated everything having to do with the stars. They were afraid of them."

"We may never know the answer to that question. We've reviewed all of the Overmare's records and there's no sign of the customary Stable-Tec message telling them what their experiment was. The artifact in question is gone, disintegrated into nothingness," Shale responded. "Your friend also asked that we inter the remains of one Daring Do, Overmare of Stable 110. We've got the perfect spot set aside for her." I nodded and smiled.

"Thank you..." I said softly. Shale grinned at me.

"Cheer up; you've just helped us out again Star. All of those artifacts and priceless relics will go into our museum. We've got crews down working in the Stable too, cleaning things out and getting it ready for specialized tours," The grey mare said. I cocked my head.

"Tours?" I asked. Shale chuckled.

"Of course silly. You find the last resting place, neigh the home of Daring Do, one of the greatest

minds of prewar Equestria to have ever lived and not expect us to capitalize on that just a little bit?" The mare said. I chuckled a bit.

"I guess not," I said. "I'm just glad that thing didn't get up here. Who knows what could have happened." Shale smiled and took her leave of us, letting me get some rest. I nickered softly at Violet, motioning for her to stay with me. She climbed up into bed next to me and nuzzled me closely while Steeljack and Patch smiled and left to find their own fun.

"I'm glad you're alright," I said softly to my love. She smiled.

"Of course I'm alright silly. It's me, what do you expect?" She said, grinning. I smiled weakly back at her.

"Umm... if it's not too much trouble..." I spat out. Violet looked up at me with concern in her eyes.

"Yes?" She said sweetly. I motioned to our saddlebags, which were lying on the floor.

"I feel like there's something I'm still missing. I need to see Rarity's orb," I said as I related the story of Daring Do's memory to my love. "Twilight was working on something big, and I think those artifacts had something to do with it. These orbs the Twilight Society left behind, they might be the key to understanding what she was working on, and what this has to do with me. Besides, it will help me sleep some, get some needed rest." Violet chuckled.

"Knock yourself out silly filly. Just make sure you come back up for air alright, I might be doing stuff to you while you're in there," She said playfully. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"You wouldn't," I managed to choke out. Violet grinned and winked at me.

"Try me," She replied as she brought out the memory orb, a glistening white orb with three blue diamond's emblazoned on it, and pushed it to my horn, causing my world to fall away.

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This was a unique feeling. Rarity's body was lithe and graceful, but strong at the same time. The lady held herself with such poise and pose that she deceived many with her true strength. At the moment, her body was shaking as she was pacing back and forth in the middle of an office in what appeared to be Canterlot, since I could see the castle outside the window. A knock at the door broke the white mare from her pacing. A stout young male unicorn with a pair of scissors on his rump peeked in.

"Lady Rarity?" The high pitched squeak of the unicorn said. "Mistress Sparkle is here to see you."

"Let her in darling Snips. And do take the rest of the day off dearie, I daresay you are looking quite peckish," My host said. The unicorn nodded excitedly at this prospect.

"Thank you Lady Rarity, I'll show her in now," Snips replied, pushing the door open for the lavender mare. Twilight was dressed in a nice black dress that accentuated her natural beauty in a way that even I thought wasn't possible for the bookworm-ish mare. Snips showed himself out the door as Twilight smiled at her friend.

"Twilight darling! It has simply been too long. And my, what fetching attire you're wearing today. Simply fabgorious darling!" My host declared, causing a giggle to emanate from the purple mare in front of me.

"Well thank you Rarity, it's good to see you too," Twilight said. My host motioned for the other unicorn to sit down.

"Now then, what can I do for you darling? Hmmm?" Rarity said as she lowered a pot of tea and two cups in front of the two friends. She poured the tea and floated one of the cups over to

Twilight. Twilight's gaze hardened a bit as my host watched her.

"I umm... I wanted to ask you something private if I may," The lavender unicorn said quietly.

"Certainly darling, you know you can always count on me to keep a secret. After all, it's my business to do so," My host replied, taking a sip of her tea. Twilight barely touched her tea, letting the hot liquid sit there in front of her.

"Rarity... what do you know about necromancy?" Twilight said blankly, causing my host to nearly spit her tea out all over the purple mare. She sputtered as she tried to formulate a response.

"N-n-necromancy? Why would you want to know about something like that darling?" Rarity said nervously. I got the feeling inside that Rarity knew more about this particular subject than she wanted to admit. "What is this really about?" Twilight looked away for a moment and then back with tears in her eyes.

"You know that figurine you gave me? The one of Shining Armor?" She said, the tears dripping down her face. My host nodded.

"Yes darling, I remember," My host replied. "Whatever would that have to do with n-n-necromancy?"

"I want to bring him back Rarity. There's got to be a way," Twilight said quietly so that nopony but Rarity could hear her.

"Twilight... you know as well as I do that he's dead. There's no way to bring him back darling," Rarity cooed softly, moving close and pulling her friend into a hug.

"You don't understand Rarity. I'm in the middle of a big breakthrough here. All it requires now is a little... dark magic..." Twilight admitted unexpectedly.

"What exactly have you been working on Twilight?" Rarity responded, letting her friend go and staring intently into her purple eyes.

"It's... complicated Rarity. I sort of..." Twilight began, sighing. "I've been working on something that mixes changeling magic with unicorn magic. It's a highly specialized spell, but it's not complete. I'm still missing some piece to it all. I can't really say much more than that." My host's gaze darkened.

"Changeling magic? Twilight, however did you get your hooves on that?" She said.

"We had an infiltrator in the Ministry a few months ago... I used the opportunity before I gave the creature over to Pinkie Pie for interrogation," The lavender mare replied. My host's mood soured before she began to speak.

"Twilight, I'm sorry... but I can't help you with this. I'm afraid I don't know anything about necromancy," My host replied curtly, standing up. Twilight stood up as well, nearly knocking over tea which was now cold as she did.

"I'm sorry too Rarity. Sorry I came here," Twilight said coldly as she stormed out the door. My host shook her head and sighed.

"I assume you heard all of that?" My host spoke to the empty room. A shimmer appeared to her right and a lanky male unicorn appeared beside my host.

"Yes Mistress Rarity," The unicorn said slowly. My host nodded.

"Excellent. Follow her, find out what she's up to. If she's going to attempt some form of necromantic transfer it could be disastrous given the nature of her strength. She could kill hundreds with a single spell if something went wrong," My host replied. The other unicorn nodded.

“It will be done Mistress,” The unicorn said.

“Thank you Snails. You’ve been such good help to me,” My host said as the memory faded back into white.

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I awoke to the dark room that I was in before, Violet resting next to me snoring quietly. I grinned slightly as I wondered if she had made good on her threat or simply fell asleep on me. I thought about the memory some more. Twilight developed the spell that included changeling magic and unicorn magic? If that was the case who else could have known how to perform it other than Twilight herself? Was it somepony close to Twilight? Why was Rarity so interested in what Twilight was doing? Millions of questions zoomed around my mind as I stared into the darkness. I sat there and thought about the whole situation until the sun rose and Violet stirred awake. She nuzzled me softly as we got up and began strapping our gear on.

After meeting up with our other companions and having a bit of breakfast, we made our way out into the town. Ponies around us waved and smiled at us as we walked along the road. Shale met us in the center of town.

“Well, you sure bounce back quickly,” She said, smiling. I grinned. “Thank you again for your help Radiant Star. We are forever in your debt. May our paths cross again someday.”

“Count on it,” I said, grinning widely. We bid the mare goodbye and set back out onto the road, the smooth voice of Sweetie Belle washing over us from the radio. The sun was high in the sky and things seemed a little better. We had helped out a whole town of ponies that were on the right track to rebuilding. The feeling was that of elation. And despite the questions that still plagued me, we still had someplace to be. As we walked, I wondered about the clue that Homage had left for us once more, as well as ruminating on the visions of Rarity and Daring Do. Twilight at this point in the war had some ulterior motive, something she was working on that involved her dead brother... but what was it? I thought for a moment that the project was the creation of the alicorns, but based on what we’ve been told in the Followers is that the I.M.P. project, while a national secret, was also no secret from the other Ministries. No... Twilight was clearly on her own on this one, for reasons only known to her. Trying to bring her dead brother back to life? Necromancy? The questions swam around my mind. Strangely enough, Spark was absent from my mind the entire time.

By that evening we had made it within sight of the great city of Manehattan once more. Fillydelphia seemed so far away now. I looked behind me, and saw the Wasteland stretching out in every direction. I nodded and turned back to the city at hoof. We set off down the hill leading into the city, our destination clear. The Ministry of Morale was responsible for a lot during the war and the majority of Pinkie Pie’s organization was making other ponies lives either happier or more terrifying, whichever one would prefer to call the endless interrogations and witch hunts that the Ministry actually performed. The center of the Ministry’s organization in Manehattan was the MoM hub located right above Hoofbeats, a popular night club during the pre-war era. Hoofbeats was where Pinkie Pie was herself the most, relying on her fame and power to bring many influential and famous ponies to the night club. It also had the fortunate happenstance of being directly located next to the Red Racer factory, which was a company owned by the famous Scootaloo of Stable-Tec. The Ministry building itself was bland and featureless, just another skyscraper that rested along the skyline of Manehattan in its day.

The sky was dark by the time we arrived even relatively close to the MoM hub and Hoofbeats. I kept checking my E.F.S. for any sort of danger, paranoid after the last time we’d been in this city and experienced the fun time that was bloodwings. The front of the club was masked by frames where

there used to be glass, revealing the inside of the ruined night club. We stepped through the frames carefully, stepping over any rubble that was near the entrance of the club. I gazed at the place in awe as I realized just how amazing this club must have been when it was still operating. The club was massive, expanding upwards of three stories high with a massive dance floor below the main mezzanine.

Violet pointed across the main area of the club at an elevator. “We should try over there. My guess is if we’re going to find anything it will be in the Ministry hub itself,” She said. I nodded as we made our way across the mezzanine. Blackened skeletons and pieces of broken robots lay scattered everywhere, almost as if somepony had cleared them aside before us. The elevator appeared to still work, but it was ridiculously small for the four of us. We opted to go in two trips instead. Violet and I would ride up first and then Steeljack and Patch would come up next. The elevator hummed as it took us up to the Ministry Office. A soft **ding** indicated we had arrived in no time at all. I stepped into the dark offices, noticing that many of the skeletons were lining the walls. A second **ding** followed a few moments later as Steeljack and Patch stepped into the hallway after us.

“What happened here?” Patch asked, looking in shock at the charred skeletons.

“Manhattan was hit by the balefire bombs in late morning,” Violet answered. “Being a Ministry hub, this building probably had some minor protection spells, but not enough to save anypony. They fried inside of here.” I shook my head. What a way to die, I thought as we continued walking through the Ministry hub, looking for some sort of clue as to why we were here. As I walked, I let the atmosphere of the place soak into me. It was odd, but some parts of this place felt very familiar. I could feel memories poking through of Twilight spending time at Hoofbeats and at the Ministry Hub with Pinkie Pie, before the drugs took over the pink mare and forced the two apart. I felt sad for Twilight, having isolated herself from her friends in the pursuit of some strange project. I considered the fact that the result of that project may have unintentionally ended up being me and I shuddered internally. What if it was true? What if I was some sort of crazy science experiment cooked up by Twilight Sparkle, finally coming to fruition two hundred years later?

The floors of the Ministry office gave way from cubicles to kitchens and from kitchens to large rooms filled with tables and paper where it appeared that workers of the Ministry sorted through and read letters that were sent within Equestria. Literally, Pinkie Pie’s Ministry knew everything about everypony in all of Equestria. I shuddered at the thought. Along the walls of the massive room, large propaganda posters bearing the visage of the Ministry Mare herself loudly proclaimed **PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU... FOREVER!** I stared at the posters, wondering what exactly I hoped to find here. I was almost sure that Homage’s clue had something to do with Pinkie Pie, but I wasn’t sure what. We searched the letter floor for any sort of salvage but found nothing. The next floor was littered with wreckage. The broken forms of sprite-bots littered every corridor of the floor. It was a well known fact that Pinkie’s Ministry used the devices for spying on ponies, relying on their innocuous nature to lull others into a false sense of security. Several offices lined the hallway of the last corridor. I stepped into the first one as my companions waited, finding a bland office containing nothing but a locker safe and a dead terminal. I bent down next to the safe and tested the lock. It was indeed locked. *Well, I hope that means there’s actually something inside,* I thought as I began to work the lock with telekinesis, intent on ripping it out of its socket. The lock twisted and turned and finally gave in as the door pulled from its hinges. I set the door aside and peered inside the safe. An explosion of color appeared before my eyes as I stared at the treasure within. A statuette of a pink mare sat in the safe, grinning widely as she could in a happy stance. Next to the statue was a note, written in pink crayon.

“I know you’re super busy Rose, but could you hold onto this for me? I would really appreciate

it. Loves, Pinkie.”

I smiled as I went to grab the statue with my magic. As I did I felt a surge of awareness roll across my mind, and I felt better than ever before. I pulled out the statue and lifted it up so I could see it. The text *Awareness! It was under “E”!* appeared on the base of the statue. I placed the statue of Pinkie Pie inside my saddle bag right next to Dash and Rarity where they could be together once more. I stepped out and grinned.

“Well, I found something at least,” I said, explaining about the statue of the Ministry Mare. We had determined there to be nothing else worth salvaging and were about to head back down to leave when I felt a sharp tugging at the back of my mind. I turned back for a moment, the tugging getting worse and worse as I stared down the hallway. There was something else here that was important. I could feel it in my very bones.

“Everything alright?” Violet said, looking concerned. I nodded slowly and began walking back towards the offices, the tugging in the back of my mind pulling me towards my unknown destination. “Star?” Violet asked as she began following me, a concerned look on her face.

“Yeah, I’m alright... I just... there’s something that I’m missing,” I said as I turned down the next hallway and trotted straight up to an unmarked office. I pushed open the door without a second thought. The inside of the office was very bare but was also very nice in retrospect. A large broken window that would have provided an exquisite view of the city lay at the center of the office. The office also had a kitchen, which appeared to be quite nice. A charred skeleton adorned the side of the wall next to the kitchen. A soft glow alerted me to the terminal on the other end of the room. A pink glow emanated from its monitor. I sat down and tapped a key. It was logged in still, sitting at a prompt and waiting for an audio file to start playing. Violet stepped into the room behind me.

“Star? You okay?” She asked. I looked up, smiled and nodded.

“Somepony left an audio file here on this terminal,” I said with assurance. “There’s something about this room I just can’t place Violet. It feels so... real. I don’t know what else to say, but it feels like I need to be here.” My marefriend nodded and gave me a careful nuzzle. I looked at the ruined terminal and tapped the enter key to begin playback.

“Hi Twilight. It’s me...” the audio began.

“I’ll do anything...”

I sat and listened to the recording over and over, several times as the reality of what I was listening to set in. Violet had let me be by myself. She began to understand as I stared at the charred skeleton at the other side of the room and then back to the terminal, which had now popped up a message.

Error: Connection to Maripony
Terminal # 42 failed.
Message not sent.

I stared at the screen trying to process what it meant.

“Pinkie Pie was my best friend,” A familiar voice echoed in the back of my skull. Spark sounded sad, an emotion that resonated immediately through my entire body. I stared at the skeleton, standing now as I walked over to it and looked down at the frail bones of what was once a pink earth pony. I knew for sure that this had been her. This was where she died, spending her final moments attempting to atone for the one great sin she had committed in her life: betraying her friendship.

She spent her last moments... trying to make up with you, I thought. And you... you... you never even

got the message. I looked down and I started to cry, tears wrenching from my eyes as I fell to my haunches in front of the blackened bones.

“I’m... I’m sorry Pinkie. I wish I could have been there for you... I wish... I wish we hadn’t fallen apart... I would have gone with you... I would have...” I said, choking out the words as my tears streamed down my face. My soul felt the pain and Spark cried along with me, the spirit of Magic's tears flowing out into my mind as she too felt the pain that resonated deep within us both.

I forgive you...

We sat there... and we cried because the world was over and Pinkie Pie was no longer in it.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up! PER +1

New Perk! Daring Acrobatics: Just like Daring Do, you are no longer afraid of dark caverns or scary chasms. You move up to 20% faster through cavernous and temple areas and you also never set off floor-based traps while in these types of areas.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Thunder Filly: Your skill with Thunder Flash has increased. +20% to Energy Weapons skills and +10% chance to hit hostile enemies while wielding Thunder Flash.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Companion Perk! Lovers Lane: As long as you are within range of Patch, you gain a +10 % chance to hit any hostile enemies.

Patch: Level Up!

Companion Perk! Lovers Lane: As long as you are within range of Steeljack, you gain a +10 % chance to hit any hostile enemies.

Chapter 9: What the Future Holds

“Two coincidences in a row like this may be unlikely, but it’s still easier to believe than twitchy tails that predict the future.”

Forgiveness. For a friend, forgiveness is the ultimate action that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are indeed friends. Friends forgive each other, almost without thinking about it. No action is so horrifying that it cannot be forgiven. I learned this the hard way, sitting in the middle of a ruined office while staring at the charred bones of a two-hundred year dead pony.

The truth in my heart is that I do forgive her. I forgive Pinkie, I forgive Twilight. They both suffered so much, losing each other’s friendship in the process. It was only at the end of everything that each had that tiny revelation to forgive. I wonder what might have been if the megaspells hadn’t cut short their reunion in life, only to prolong and extend their reunion in death. Would they have become friends once more? Would they have forgiven each other for the pain and hurt? As I sat there and I cried over the pink mare’s bones, I wondered briefly what would become of me eventually.

Would I forgive myself for the pain I had caused?

Hushed whispering from beyond the door reached the edges of my ears as I stared at the blackened bones. The tears on my face had long dried up as I sat and gazed at the remains of Pinkie Pie, the Ministry Mare. There was no more crying, that action having stopped only Celestia knows when. Probably when my tear ducts had shed all of their fluids. Now all I could do was stare.

“Is she alright?” I could hear Steeljack’s gruff voice attempt to be quiet fail pretty badly. They must have followed Violet after I left and found the office in which I now sat in.

“I’m sure she’s just fine,” Patch said in a low voice. Violet sighed.

“I’ll go check on her.” The door cracked open, and the green form of my love poked through. “Star...? Are you alright?” I looked back away from the skeleton and tried to force a smile.

“I’m... I’m alright,” I said, a sullen look forming in my eyes. “Violet?”

“Yeah...?” The green mare responded.

“Can you... can you give me a minute? I need some alone time,” I replied. Violet nodded and turned towards the door.

“Take all the time you need,” She said as she closed the door. I turned back to the skeleton and stood, walking back over to the terminal in the corner of the room. I connected my PipBuck and downloaded Pinkie’s final message to it for safekeeping. There was nothing else on the terminal of any importance. I sighed and shut it off, the soft pink glow disappearing from the corner of the room. Methodically I began to search the rest of the office, looking for some form of sheet or anything I could use to wrap the bones of Twilight’s friend. She deserved that much. I found a spare tablecloth in one of the cupboards in the kitchen that was just large enough. I stepped over and carefully lifted the charred skeleton with my magic and wrapped the bones carefully. Once they were all wrapped up, I stood and readied myself to leave the room in order to face my friends.

“**Star...**” Spark said from the back of my mind. The otherworldly voice had retreated back after the initial shock of seeing Pinkie’s bones and hearing her final message.

Spark. Are you alright? I asked the voice, genuinely concerned for the spirit that was actively trying to

take over my mind and body. I was certain that she was just as saddened as I was by Pinkie's final requiem, one that never had reached her friend in those final moments.

"I... I am. Thank you. I... I never knew you cared that much," The voice responded, her voice soft.

It's alright. I still don't trust you. You know that. Pinkie was close to her and thus close to you as well. It's understandable that you would be sad, I thought. *To be honest... it really pained me too.* Spark paused for a moment.

"Pinkie was one of the closest friends that Twilight ever had. It pained me to see Laughter do the things that she did to herself. The drugs and the parties hurt our friendship. To know that in the end that Pinkie tried to make it all better..." She responded finally.

Were the things that Twilight did and said any better? Based on what I've seen, she distanced herself from her friends just as much with this secret project of hers as Pinkie did with Party-Time Mintals, I said to the spirit. There was another pause, and then a sigh inside the back of my mind.

"Sometimes I wish that Twilight hadn't been so brilliant. She sometimes neglected to realize how much her friends really needed her," She finally said. ***"Her friendship could have saved Equestria. Instead she chose to focus on her 'projects'."***

What was she working on that was so important? What does it have to do with me? I asked the spirit. Now was as good a time as any to try and get some answers.

"Twilight knew for a good portion of the war that Rarity was involved in the creation of several necromantic magics, but declined to say anything. Twilight was... obsessed," Spark said.

Obsessed with Shining Armor? How does he factor into all of this? I replied.

"Twilight lost it when her brother died. The months after, she poured herself into a new project... a way to bring him back to life, a way to bring his soul back from the ether. Changeling magic was employed to change the subject of the spell to look like the pony who was being brought back. She never finished it though," Spark said, my eyes widening as she did. Twilight was researching on ways to bring back the dead, this I knew already. But not just bringing back the dead into their own body, but forcing another pony to become the pony she wanted: her big brother. The idea of such a thing nearly made me sick to my stomach. It was exactly what I was going through. I was slowly becoming what...? Her? Why then, if I was becoming Twilight Sparkle, was I still an alicorn? Twilight was just a unicorn, granted a terrifyingly powerful one.

Wait... she never finished it? Then what about me? It has to be the same spell. Do you mean to tell me that somepony else managed to finish it where Twilight couldn't? I asked Spark, anger rising in the back of my mind.

"Twilight never finished it because the megaspells dropped. I'm sure that anypony with access to zebra necromantic practices could have been able to finish the spell. And before you ask again... I don't know about what happened to you to cause this. All I remember from before is leaving Twilight, and then suddenly I was in your mind," The spirit responded curtly.

You knew, I thought, my mind seething with anger. *You knew, and you didn't tell me?*

"Of course I knew. I helped Twilight develop the spell after all. You were right not to trust me. Why would I tell you? Would you have believed me? You needed to see it yourself to understand," Spark replied. I snarled internally.

Why now? Why all of a sudden are you able to tell me these things? Why not before? I asked angrily. I was seriously pissed off at this thing inside my head. The fact that Spark had known all

about this the entire time really made me angry. I had been gallivanting around trying to find some form of clue and she had known all along!

“Because I can’t hold them back any longer. The Emotions... they’re getting stronger by the day. In turn, I am getting stronger by the day,” Spark said, before going silent once more. I pondered the existence of the necromantic/changeling magic that Twilight had developed. What if it was used in the wrong way? What would happen if the wrong pony was brought back? What would happen to me? More questions flooded my mind and this time I held even less answers. And what exactly did Spark mean about the Emotions? Getting stronger? I wasn’t even sure what she meant by that.

I regained my composure and took some time to look at myself in the mirror in the kitchen. I looked like hell. My mane was dirty and my coat matted down my face and neck from the tears. I took a quick moment to try and brush some of the dirt out of my mane, but it didn’t seem to make much of a difference. *I really need a shower*, I thought as I picked up the wrapped remains in my magic. I strode towards the door and opened it lightly, seeing the smiling faces of my friends sitting in the hallway waiting for me. Violet stood and stepped towards me, her smile beaming.

“Hey,” I said, smiling weakly. My marefriend stood next to me and nuzzled my side and I understood without saying anything else. It was her way of letting me know that I was supported, that she was there for me. I smiled, nuzzled her back and motioned to the wrapped bones. Violet nodded silently. She understood as well what I meant to do. The walk through the offices and down the Ministry hub was a somber one. I was lost in my thoughts, thinking about Pinkie and about what Spark and I spoke about. My mind drifted to Pinkie’s memory sequence and how the pink party pony had known I was watching her. Was this what she was waiting for? I couldn’t comprehend how the pink mare had known I would be coming to find her. Maybe this was inevitable. Maybe I was meant to find her. *Fate?* I thought as my hooves collided with the solid foundation of Hoofbeats. *Was it fate that brought me here? Or something else entirely?*

Once outside the club I located the nearest patch of dead grass and dirt. There never was much actual dirt in the cities, but there was the occasional tree that was planted into dirt patches. I found one such patch right outside the Ministry building thankfully. My horn glowed, and I ripped the dead tree from the ground as I began to carve a deep hole in the dirt. I grimaced and lowered the wrapped remains into the earth below me. I used my magic once more and pushed the dirt back into the hole, filling it completely. When I was finished, you couldn’t even tell there was anything there. *That won’t do*, I thought. I looked over at the nearby building, yanking a large stone from it and settling it in the dirt. Violet stepped up beside me and produced Thunder Flash.

“I’ve set it on a low setting, should be able to use it to etch,” She said solemnly, before stepping back. I took up the beam rifle in my magic and pointed it at the rock and began to work. The beam emitter was set so that the silver light was thin, cutting lines into the stone instead of outright disintegrating it. When I finished, I sent the rifle back to Violet, who caught it in her magic. I looked down at the stone, now adorned with a crude drawing of three balloons. I never was much of an artist, but it would have to do. The words had flown from me like a river, nearly prompting another round of tears from my already dry eyes.

Here lies Pinkie Pie. Best Friend. Forever!!!

May she find peace in this life and the next

I sighed and looked back at my friends. Steeljack and Patch nodded slowly, their silence a great form of respect for the dead mare. Violet merely stepped up and wrapped a leg around mine and held on tight. I gazed back at the stone for a moment before speaking.

“Time to go.”

The journey back through the city was silent and terrifying. We were lost. Not literally, but figuratively lost. There had been no clues, no cryptic messages about Goddesses, no DJ's sending us on wild goose chases. We were lost. Thankfully, this also meant we had some downtime. Taking refuge in a nearby restaurant (Horsia's! The finest dining Manehattan had to offer!), we laid out our things and began trying to figure out where to go next. I sat and stared at the map, trying to process each location in my mind. Inevitably my thoughts drifted to Maripony. I wasn't even sure if anything could be found there, since the facility itself was blown sky high by the Destroyer when the Goddess was obliterated. Hell, I wasn't even sure if we could all go there, considering the amount of balefire radiation that was potentially being given off by the place. I sighed and looked up at my friends.

"I'm out of ideas, what do you guys think?" I asked. Violet sat next to me. I could see gears spinning in her head.

"Most of the locations we've been to have had some connection to Twilight... but I think we're missing something," She replied, before smacking herself in the face with a hoof. "Star, it's so obvious! Why didn't we see it before?"

"What's that?" I said, looking at my friend with a confused expression all over my face.

"Twilight stored books she'd collected all over the place, but what's the one place she stored them at that we know about personally?" She said, watching me as the cogs finally clicked into place. My eyes widened and I smiled.

"Violet, you're a genius," I stated, prompting a blush from my love. Patch and Steeljack looked rather confused.

"Did I miss something?" Patch said. I grinned at my green earth pony friend.

"Not at all. Fillies and gentlecolt, we're going home," I proclaimed. The two earth ponies continued to look at me in confusion. I groaned. "Alright, Violet and I came from a town called Fort Knowledge. The place is mostly libraries... but they were libraries that Twilight used. Much of her collection is stored there. It's also one of the primary hubs for the Followers of the Apocalypse in the area."

"You think there may be something there?" Steeljack said. I nodded. It felt right, and I was glad Violet had felt it too. The town I had lived in was where all of this started of course. Something had to have been there. There just had to be something. I hoped with all of my heart that we were right. Eventually, after putting away the map and settling our things in for the night, I found myself lying on the bedrolls next to Violet. The green mare had pressed herself up close to my body for warmth. She looked up at me lovingly and smiled.

"Everything alright?" She asked softly. I nodded nervously.

"I've just been thinking," I started to say. "At some point, it's going to come up. Maripony. Eventually I'm going to have to go there." Violet nodded.

"I thought at much," She replied, snuggling in close to me. I loved it when she did that. For some reason, it made me feel safe. Yeah I know what you're thinking: big badass alicorn with a supergun, needing her little filly to keep her safe? Well, it's true. It's a good feeling, and one of the many reasons I love her so much. "When the time comes, you know we'll be there to help you."

"What if it isn't safe for you there? For all three of you?" I voiced my concerns aloud. Violet shrugged.

"Where isn't it safe for us?" She asked. "We'll find a way. I won't let you go there alone. I could

never... never let you face that alone.” I smiled as I lay my head down next to her. My eyes fluttered for a moment as they began to slowly close. I uttered one final breath before sleep overtook me.

“Thank you...”

Hallway? Check. Doors? Check. Crazy time again? Triple Check! I plopped down onto my haunches and sighed. Well, Spark had said the Emotions were getting stronger after all. *Maybe this is how it starts*, I thought as I waited for the door to open. The light ***fwoosh*** and ***creak*** echoed through the hallway, indicating my next doorway opening. I stepped into the past once more, surrounded by ponies in a crowd. It was the press conference from Pinkie Pie’s memory orb. The six Ministry Mares were standing on the stage, giving their impassioned speeches about the good they would inevitably do for all of Equestria. *Some good*, I thought as the vision Twilight finished her speech. She stepped off the stage and made a beeline through the crowd, stopping right in front of me.

“Well, now. Look at you. Here to witness the rise of greatness?” She said directly to my face, her expression a twisted smirk.

“And just which one are you? Sarcasm?” I asked blankly. The purple mare huffed. Ponies continued to mill about the room as the other Ministry Mares made small talk. No pony seemed to pay attention that we were even there.

“No, you fool. I am Pride, otherwise known as She who was great once, She who is great now, and She who shall be great in the future to come,” The unicorn boasted. “Pride is as much a part of Twilight Sparkle as my sisters are. She has always been locked away, but there are many moments where She gets her time to shine.” I groaned. Was this mare going to talk like this the entire time? It was extremely annoying. The lavender unicorn must have sensed my displeasure.

“Hmmp!” She said angrily. “What would a fool like you know anyways? Pride is important! Pride is relevant! Pride is required! Pride is —” I cut her off before she could say anymore.

“Isn’t that kind of the same thing?” I said flatly. This mare was trying my patience. “Look, I don’t care who you are... you could be Lust for all I care.” The unicorn made a disgusted face.

“Ugh, don’t even get Pride started on that ingrate. So dirty she is,” She replied, sticking her tongue out. I stared a bit in shock.

“Wait... you mean there actually is a Lust?” I said. This sounded like somepony I’d want to meet! I briefly wondered if it would be cheating if I had sex inside my mind with a living emotion. The thought flittered away as Pride began to speak again.

“Of course there is,” She began. Score! I thought as she continued. “Twilight is at her very base a regular pony. She has wants and needs as well as anypony else does.”

“You’re talking as if you’re still inside Twilight’s head and that she’s alive, but that’s not true,” I said. Pride chuckled.

“Can’t you feel it Radiant Star? She’s getting stronger. Soon she will rise from the ether, and Pride shall take her rightful place atop all of her other sisters,” She replied. I stopped for a moment and felt a presence. It was strong, but not that strong. It had sort of a pulsing to it as if it were a second heartbeat. *What was happening to me?* I thought as my heart began to race. Pride watched on in amusement.

“You see, you can feel her. She is there,” The Emotion remarked. She turned around towards the stage. “Pride will once again rise above all others!”

“Melodramatic much?” I said sarcastically, drawing a cold stare from the purple mare. “Geez, I never knew Twilight had this kind of emotion inside of her.” The mare snarled deeply at me and stepped forward, putting a hoof to my chest.

“That’s because she denied Pride! She was the best! The best unicorn to have ever lived! The things that she came up with, the magic that she knew.... She was unstoppable! And she knew it too! Instead of allowing Pride her time in the Sun, she denied Pride, pushing her to the back of her mind,” The mare shouted. The ponies at the party continued to mill about, not even noticing the mare’s outburst.

“Well I can see why,” I said. “You’re kind of a selfish stuck-up bitch.”

“Oh what do you know?” Pride snarled. I sighed and my eyes softened.

“Sorry. Look, I know it must have been hard to have been pushed back like that. How did it happen?” I asked quietly.

“There was another unicorn. She claimed herself to be the best in all of Equestria. She was ‘Great and Powerful’ she said. Pride urged Twilight to act, to show her up, but she wouldn’t. She refused to boast, to be prideful of herself. She refused her very nature,” The lavender mare replied. My eyes went wide with shock.

“G-g-great and Powerful...?” I uttered. I had heard that phrase before. Flashbacks to days past of murder, death, and destruction flashed before my eyes. An impassive blue alicorn stared back at me from within my mind, its eyes uncaring and unfeeling. I shuddered. The Goddess. The Great and Powerful Goddess. I thought about what the mare had said. The Goddess... no... Trixie had once met Twilight Sparkle before assisting the Ministry Mare in the I.M.P. project this much I knew. I didn’t know that Trixie’s presence in Twilight’s life would have had such a profound impact, one that would result in the creation of this emotion. Don’t get me wrong, everypony has pride. Pride is a good feeling when you are happy about yourself, but this? This was extreme. This Pride was corrupted, taking the concept too far. Twilight had absorbed more from her experience with Trixie than she ever really knew. This being even referred to itself in the third person just like Trixie did to her children. I watched on as the purple mare huffed once more at my silence and began walking back off into the crowd.

“Radiant Star,” She said as she stopped for a moment, her voice taking a more sinister tone as she began to speak. “Take a moment and relish your present. Because your future... it belongs to us.”

I awoke with a start, nearly knocking Violet over. She had been sleeping closely to me all night long it seemed. I sighed and snuggled in closer to her, thinking about Pride. Something was odd about the whole encounter. It felt... off for some reason. Highly unlike any of the other emotions I had met. I felt a lot like I did when I met Harmony and Disharmony, wondering briefly what sort of emotion Pride was. After a while, my mind inevitably drifted back to Maripony and the Goddess. *Why can’t I stop thinking about this?* I thought as Violet began to shiver a bit in the morning air. I extended my wing over my marefriend to keep her warm.

An hour or two later, we arose and began packing our things. I stayed relatively quiet as we stepped out of the abandoned restaurant and into the crisp morning air. I stopped for a moment and looked up at the city of Manehattan. Tenpony Tower stood in the distance. Part of me had half a mind to fly back there and find out what Homage really knew about all of this. Why send us to this Ministry hub? All it had accomplished was me ending up in tears. I glowered for a moment and turned away, following after my companions as we made our way out of the city. We stepped out of the city proper an hour later and back into the unending Wasteland that stretched on for eternity. It seemed so long ago that I

had stepped out of my home. To be going back there now was a lot like a dream. I missed the place, the dreary little libraries that made up the Fort. I knew in my heart though, that I wasn't going back to stay. I was going back for answers. Answers only the books locked in the restricted library could answer for me. You see, not every library in Fort Knowledge was open to everypony. Some of the more... delicate (and by delicate I mean dangerous) tomes were locked away in a special sanctum that only a select few had access to. I honestly had no idea how I was going to get access to it. It wasn't like I could just waltz into the organization I was only considered a junior member of and ask for access to their most valuable information. I decided for now that I would ask Violet about it later.

The walk along the road was tiring, and by the time the middle of the day rolled around the sun was beating down extensively upon our backs. I groaned through the heat, feeling like I would pass out any minute. *Sweet Celestia, when did it get so hot?* I thought as I stared at the sky. The grayish/blue sea of sky stretched out for miles. I sighed again, pulled out my canteen and brought it to my lips. No water. *Figures*, I thought. *Nothing is ever that easy.* I shifted my way up next to Violet and grinned at her.

"You got any water?" I asked, still grinning. She groaned a bit.

"You ran out didn't you?" She asked. I nodded sheepishly. Violet sighed and pulled her own canteen out and handed it over. I drank down a bit, conserving as much as I could before closing it up and handing it back over to my marefriend.

"So um... are you guys feeling okay?" I asked. Violet looked at me with a confused expression.

"What do you mean?" She asked. "I feel fine. Is something wrong?"

"Oh oh... no reason. I just was making sure," I replied, looking away from her and out into the Wasteland. I hadn't told my friends yet about the strange radiation that the cube in Stable 110 had emitted and I wasn't sure I wanted to. They all seemed to be fine, so I silently told myself not to worry about it. We continued along with little issues as we made our way up the road, bound for New Appleloosa. The small trading town was going to be our stop for the night.

Hours later, after much crying and whining (mostly on my part) we finally came in view of the town of New Appleloosa. New Appleloosa was a town with a lot of history behind it, having had a lot to do with the Destroyer and the Savior Velvet Remedy. It was also the home of one of the Wasteland's most prominent figures: Ditzzy Doo. Ditzzy Doo was a pegasus ghou! who was also the author of the Wasteland Survival Guide, a must have item for any pony surviving out there. Ditzzy was also a trader, and one of the fairest ponies I had ever met. I smiled, remembering the pegasus ghou!'s bright smile. I'd met her shortly before I met Violet. In fact, it was Ditzzy who had given me the job of clearing out some of the raiders that were threatening the very caravans that I saved Violet from. In a way, I sort of owed her. I briefly wondered if she would remember me as we began slogging our way towards the front gate, but then immediately remembered that I had completely changed color so that was probably not going to happen. The sun was beginning to set as we stepped up to the gate. The barrel of a rifle appeared over the top wall, pointing down at us.

"Business in New Appleloosa?" The voice yelled. The guard, a brown earth pony, stared down at us with cold steel in his eyes.

"Trading and then moving on in the morning," Violet called out. "We're with the Followers of the Apocalypse." The buck's eyes widened and he smiled as he lowered the rifle.

"Well alright then, come on in!" He shouted, motioning behind him. The gate slowly swung open and we entered the town. The guard met us down at ground level. "Howdy folks, welcome to New Appleloosa."

“We were hoping we might trade with Ditzzy if she was still open,” Violet said to the guard.

“Ah, Miss Ditzzy is out of town on business. If you want, you can speak with Miss Silver Bell in the morning. She’ll get you right squared away,” The guard replied. We nodded and thanked the guard for his time, heading on into town and straight for the inn. New Appleloosa was a friendly sort of town, and many of the ponies we passed waved and said hello. We arrived at the inn in short time and made our arrangements for the evening. As I stepped into our room and began laying out our saddlebags, I pulled out our map and sat down.

“If we keep at this pacing, we should be able to get to Fort Knowledge in two days at best,” I said, pointing at the general location of the town on our map. The town was nowhere near large enough to be recognized by any official organization since only tribals and Followers actually lived there. My companions nodded silently as they made their own preparations for that night’s sleep. I stowed the map away and set my bags off to the side, sidling into bed next to Violet, who had a sharp grin on her face.

“What?” I said blankly. She playfully growled at me. Oh.... That. I can deal with that... I umm... I gotta go now... gotta do stuff...

BANG

An explosion roared through the midnight air and the screams of ponies outside stirred me awake. *What in the hay is going on out there?* I thought as I pushed myself up from the bed. Another explosion sounded from outside, rocking the room we were in slightly. I stood and pushed on Violet, trying to wake her up. She turned over sleepily and looked up at me.

“What’s wrong Star? Go to sleep,” She started say as another explosion ripped through the air outside. Her eyes forced open immediately.

“Something’s wrong. Everypony up!” I shouted to the room, waking up Steeljack and Patch. The two grumpily started to complain, but shut up as soon as another explosion and more screams occurred outside.

“What in tarnation is going on out there?” Steeljack said as he pulled on his power armor. I levitated Stargazer up and clipped it to its harness. A sharp whine filled the room as Violet engaged Thunder Flash.

“I don’t know, but we should go see if we can find out. Somepony might need our help,” I said as I barreled towards the door and fell immediately flat on my face. I looked back to see Violet with my tail in her teeth, a grimace on her face. She spat out my tail and put a hoof to her mouth.

“If we just go bursting out there we’re gonna get killed. Do this the smart way,” She said. I grinned sheepishly and nodded as I pulled myself up. I slowly opened the door to our room and we headed outside. The air outside of the inn was filled with smoke. The acrid stench of fire could be felt upon my nostrils as we made our way along the side of the inn and towards the center of town. I could hear more screaming and moaning as we got closer. We stepped out into the center of town and saw a horrifying scene. Many of the buildings around the town square were on fire. The bodies of several ponies lay strewn about the square, large holes deep in their sides and chests. Several ponies were trying to get the fires under control, but were visibly shaken by the figure in the middle of it all. Standing at the center of the square was a vision of darkest night. Black carapace covered the figure entirely, from their hooves to their wings. It was a pegasus wearing Enclave power armor, I realized as the figure stepped forward. *This one pegasus did all this?* I thought, surveying the destruction before me. A loud ***thunk*** noise emanated from the figure as two battle-saddle mounted

missile launchers lowered from the unknown figure's side. One of the missiles flew from the launcher, lashing out and headed straight for **Absolutely Everything**, Ditzzy's shop in the small trading town. I snarled and lashed out with my magic, knocking the missile off course and out into the Wasteland. The pegasus turned and regarded us finally, a soft **hiss** noise coming from the power armor as the helmet receded back, revealing a jet black pegasus mare. A wicked grin crept along her face as she stared at us.

"Well, if it isn't the little pony that killed Greed," She said, flaring her wings out. "I'm impressed." I groaned. Of course she was here for me.

"Who are you?" I growled, lifting Stargazer up and pointing it at the black pegasus. A soft chuckle erupted from her mouth.

"Mmm... you are cute when you're angry," The pegasus replied, licking her lips. Before I could even think about that, she was in front of me in a blur. *Shit, she's fast!* I thought as the mare reached out and planted a kiss right on my lips. Her mouth was warm and inviting and I felt myself being drawn into it, her smell overpowering. I only came to after being knocked to the ground. The air above me split in two as something sharp and bladed passed over my head. I looked up to see Steeljack, who was apparently the source of my being on the ground. A grimace emerged on his normally impassive face as I stared at the slice across his chest. It wasn't a deep cut but it dug deep enough past his power armor to cause some blood to gush out. A snarl escaped from the lips of the pegasus, who was now standing back a few feet. Blood dripped lightly from the tips of wings that ended in sharp blades, and I could see what had happened. The mare had tried to lure me in with her wiles and then planned to cut me in half. I pushed myself up and looked at my grey friend.

"Thank you Steeljack. Are you alright?" I asked. He grunted and nodded, pulling out a syringe of Med-X. I looked over at Violet, whose eyes were wide with fear and rage as she tried to help the buck inject the pain killing medicine. She looked up at me pleadingly. "Steeljack, Patch... you have the best chance of helping the townsfolk. You go see what you can do. Violet and I will handle this here." My companions nodded and turned, heading to the crowd of ponies to see where they could help out. I turned back to the pegasus, leveling Stargazer at her. "I'm not going to ask again. Who are you and what do you want with me?" I shuddered as the jet black mare lifted a wing and reached back, licking off some of the blood from the bladed tips. Life force dribbled down her chin as she stared back wildly.

"Who? Little old me?" She said seductively. "I'm Lust. Nice to meet you. Your friend tasted... mmm... excellent by the way. Now if only I could get a taste of something a little more... exotic." That was it. I'd already had enough of this mare and she hadn't said more than a few words. Plus she had kissed me! Those lips only existed for one mare thank you very much! I brought up E.S.A.T.S. and began queuing up shots, hoping that my aim would be true. The spell dropped and time sped back up as Stargazer aimed and fired. Silently, the mare began to weave in and out, dodging my shots with relative ease. One shot punched through her defenses as she brought up a wing and batted away the round like it was a rock.

"Quite finished?" The black mare asked, grinning widely. "My turn." She rushed forward, wings extended as her helmet slammed shut over her face. The blades at the tips of her wings glimmered in the evening light. I struggled to move, lifting Stargazer and using it as a blocking mechanism, hoping that the weapon's extreme durability could withstand a blow from the crazed pegasus. The blades from the pegasi's wings came down hard, slamming into Stargazer. Thankfully, the minigun held against the strike as I turned it around, deflecting the mare off to the side. The black pegasus hit the dirt to our side. Violet floated out Thunder Flash and pointed it at the mare. A blast of silver fire flew through the air at the pegasus, who merely grunted and lifted a wing as she batted the beam energy away

harmlessly.

“Pitiful. A unicorn using one of our weapons. You really think a pegasus wouldn’t know how to deflect beam weapons? We designed them after all,” The black mare spat, her voice enhanced by the helmet’s emitters. A ***thunk*** noise sounded from her sides as two missiles shot out at close range, headed straight for us. Without thinking, I dove in front of my love and threw up my shield spell. The missiles erupted against the shield, forcing it to dissipate. I lifted Stargazer and fired, the spray of bullets again being deflected off of the strange bladed wings. *How was she doing that?* I thought as the helmet on the mare pulled back once more.

“Mmm...” She moaned. “That was pretty good. But you’re going to have to do better than that to beat me, love. You see, my wings are made of a very special material, one that is capable of deflecting most gunfire and even beam weaponry. In short... you can’t kill me that way, lover.” I glowered at the pegasus. I was going to have to find some way to get past those wings of hers in order to shoot her. *Great*, I thought. *Just what I needed. Another pony after my head that’s hard to kill.* I turned my attention to the pegasus mare, and launched into a tirade.

“What the fuck do you want from me?!” I shouted at the charcoal mare, which merely grinned and giggled. “And what do you have to do with Greed? Answer me!”

“Greed was a fool. He overextended himself and got what he had coming to him,” The mare huffed at the mention of the buck. Her gaze turned deadly serious. “However... we simply cannot allow for somepony like you to kill one of us and expect to get away with it. I’m here to finish the job.” Her wings made a slicing sound as she flared them out. She licked her lips and grinned at me.

“What do you mean ‘us’?” Violet asked, speaking for the first time since this encounter began. The jet black mare chuckled.

“Ah ah... spoilers. You’re not supposed to know that one yet,” She purred. “Enough small talk, it’s getting me all hot and bothered waiting here to kill you!” She flew off to the side, two more missiles firing from her battle saddle. Silver fire blew across the battlefield, turning one of the missiles into missile goop that merely splattered to the ground below it. I grabbed the second one with my magic and turned it back around at Lust, striking the ground just before her. The explosion knocked her back a few feet. I could hear a grunt of pain from the mare as she unfurled her wings. Violet and I stepped forward and lifted our weaponry. She cackled wildly.

“That fucking hurt, you bitch!” She shouted. Although I couldn’t see any visible damage on the outside of her power armor, I was sure that internally this mare wasn’t doing so hot. A snarl erupted from the pegasus as she lunged forward, her wing blades outstretched. I moved, but not quickly enough as she struck me, drawing a thin line of blood emerged from my side. I howled in pain as I fell backwards, nearly knocking into Violet, who was busy trying to track Lust’s movements with Thunder Flash. A bolt of silver fire erupted from her weapon, striking the pegasus in the leg. Another grunt of pain could be heard from the mare as she hit the ground and lay there. I pushed myself up, wincing at the pain in my side, which was screaming in agony. Lust pushed herself up, breathing heavily but otherwise she seemed to be healing right before our eyes. She turned and slashed out, nearly catching both Violet and I with her blades. She grinned wickedly, jumping into the air and flapping her wings as she took off in a flash. She was high in the air before I could even blink.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Get back here!” The pegasus snorted and hovered before us. A smile emerged from her lips as she sat there in the air, taunting us.

“We’re going to have to wrap this up a little later cutie,” She said. “It’s not fair to be outnumbered like that. I want you and me... one on one. If you get my drift.” She winked at me and licked her lips. I stared, mortified. A light chuckle escaped from the mare’s lips as she flew up and out of sight. I

shouted at the mare and growled as the pain in my side intensified until I dropped to the ground and my eyes fell to blackness. The last thing I heard was Violet shouting my name and hoof beats.

My eyes fluttered open as a flash of light pierced my retinas, searing them with its deadly brightness. My head felt like it was splitting open into two pieces and my side felt like somepony had taken fire to me and just spread it all over. I groaned at the light as I sat up. A sweet earth pony mare wearing a cute little yellow and pink outfit was staring at me, a flashlight in her mouth. She spat out the light and clicked it off, smiling at me.

“Well now, you’re awake finally,” She said. I nodded and looked around the room. It appeared to be the clinic. I looked back at the mare, clearly confused. She smiled again. “Your friends are waiting outside. You were really lucky you didn’t lose a lot of blood, but you’re healing up just fine. Here... take this.” The mare handed me a cloudy bottle of what appeared to be healing potion. I shrugged and downed the potion, a sharp burning searing my throat as the liquid slid down. I nearly gagged, bringing me immediately to my senses.

“What is this stuff?!” I shouted, hacking up a lung as I tried to get out my words. The nurse chuckled a bit.

“Healing potion. I mix it with apple schnapps. Helps it go down easier y’know,” The mare responded, grinning. I nearly gagged as the burning sensation gave way to the familiar tingle of the healing magic doing its work. “I’m Candi, the nurse here. You owe me about six hundred caps for this by the way.” I blinked.

“Umm... what?” I asked flatly. I quickly realized I hadn’t had to pay for most medical treatments I’d received up until now. Most ponies recognized me as the Ministry Mare and just sort of helped me out. *I suppose at some point the fame was going to die down*, I thought as I pondered the payment. I wasn’t really sure if we even had the caps for this. Candi nodded and grinned.

“Gotta make a living somehow darlin’,” She said. “Even off of the ponies that save the town. Of course, if you don’t have the caps, I’m sure we could work something out. Hold on and I’ll go get your friends.” The mare exited the room and came back, my friends in tow behind her. Violet leaped forward, tossing her forelegs around my neck and nuzzling me close. Candi gave us some time to discuss what happened with Lust.

“What was up with that crazy pegasus?” Patch said immediately after the nurse left the room. I shrugged.

“She called herself Lust. Said she was with Greed, or rather that Greed was one of ‘us’, whatever that meant,” I said. “What happened after she flew off?”

“Well, thankfully not a lot of the buildings were damaged. We managed to get everypony out and to safety. No real injuries. It’s almost like she was only here to draw us out,” Steeljack replied. I nodded.

“More like she was here to draw me out. She knew we would be here, which means she’s been following us,” I stated. I sighed for a moment, wondering what the insane pegasus Lust would try next. She was a strange one for sure, first kissing me and then trying to cut me in half. I couldn’t get my thoughts straight. A hoof wrapped around my leg and I looked down. Violet stared up and smiled. “I’m sorry about all that... and the kissing... and the stuff...” I said softly to her. She shook her head and smiled wider.

“It’s alright. She was psychotic. Don’t worry about it... if that wasn’t the last time we’ve seen her, we’ll get her next time,” She replied. I smiled and hugged her. This is why I loved this

mare. “Besides... how are you doing? The nurse didn’t say much the entire two days that you’ve been out.” My eyes widened.

“Two days?” I asked blankly. “I’ve really been out... two days...” My companions nodded. I groaned and flopped back on the makeshift bed. Why couldn’t I only get knocked out for an hour or two? Why does every time I get knocked out, I end up being out for days?! I sighed and propped myself back up. “Well, she said I’m in good condition and that I was lucky... and apparently we owe her six hundred caps for this.” Violet groaned at this as she began rummaging through her bags.

“I wish she’d have said something to us the two days you sat in here!” She shouted as she continued to look through her bag, groaning in defeat. “Figures. We don’t have enough.”

“Well, she said we could work it off in some fashion,” I replied as the nurse entered the room.

“No worries on the caps folks. Slight misunderstanding, somepony actually paid for your treatment,” She said to the room, an embarrassed grin on her face. I could tell that this wasn’t something that normally happened for her. I looked at the mare with a questioning look.

“Who paid for something like that?” I asked. A knock at the door interrupted us. Candi smiled.

“That would be her now,” She said, opening the door to my room. The pegasus that stepped through the door was decrepit and rotting, but had the widest smile you had ever seen on her face. Her wings were long torn to the ravages of time and her once blonde hair had withered down to barely anything. Still, the mare smiled on, her eyes crossed in a strange expression. A chalkboard hung around her neck. I breathed a sigh of relief as Ditzzy Doo entered my room, much to the surprise of my friends who had never met the pegasus ghoul.

“Hello there Ditzzy,” I said, smiling at the wall-eyed pegasus. She pulled her chalkboard off and wrote something down onto it. *I’m glad you’re ok*, the words read. Long ago, the ghoulish mare could talk normally. But after she had been kidnapped by slavers her tongue had been cut out, forcing the mare to speak via chalkboard from that point forward. It didn’t matter though. No matter how Ditzzy communicated, she was one of the kindest beings I had met in all of the Wasteland. “Thanks. Is everything alright with you?” The ghoulish mare nodded, and shuffled her writing off of her board, replacing the writing with new text. *Thank you for keeping my shop and my town safe*, it read. I smiled, remembering deflecting the missile from Absolutely Everything.

“So you paid for my treatment?” I asked the pegasus, who nodded promptly. “Why? We’ve barely ever even met...” The mare nodded and wrote something new down onto her chalkboard. *Ministry Mare. Need your help*, the board read. *Of course*, I thought. When Ditzzy had come back to town and seen the damage that had occurred, she would have found out that the pony that saved the town ended up being the famous Ministry Mare. I sighed for a moment.

“Anything Ditzzy. What do you need help with?” I said. My friends looked rather surprised at this. I looked at them and grinned. “Look I know we’re supposed to be on our way to Fort Knowledge and all, but we do owe Ditzzy for treating our injuries.” The mare excitedly nodded and turned to her chalkboard again; scribbling down direction for us to meet her at her store later and she would give us the details of what she wanted us to do. It took the ghoul a few times wiping and rewriting for us to get the entire picture, but I didn’t mind. You can only fit so much on a tiny chalkboard after all. Ditzzy smiled and waved as she left. I sighed again. This was going to be a very, very long trip indeed.

“Goooooooooooooood moooooooooorning Wastelanders!

This is your host DJ-PON3 with your up to date breaking news from all over the Equestrian

Wasteland. It seems our friend the Ministry Mare is headed north once more, as sources close to me tell me that the mare was responsible for protecting the town of New Appleloosa in dire threat. Everypony in the town is doing just fine, and thankfully there were no casualties other than some damage to a few buildings. Thank you again Ministry Mare for keeping our friends up north safe and sound!

In other news...”

The voice of the DJ trailed away as I turned the radio off and stepped out into the sun, following my companions up the road. For what it was worth, Ditzzy’s job was actually pretty simple. She had a caravan scheduled to go north on its way to Chicacolt, with a stop scheduled in Glyphmark where it would meet up with a group of Talons assigned to protect it. Unfortunately, Ditzzy didn’t have any security detail lined up for the trip to Glyphmark itself, so she asked us to accompany it. After we arrived in Glyphmark, we were free to go off on our own at that point. Naturally, with the route being on the way to Fort Knowledge, we agreed to the job.

So it was that we found ourselves in the hot sun once more, moving along slowly I might add, on the way to Glyphmark. The sun beat down on us from above as if Celestia was simply having a bad day. The caravan was transporting several crates of ingredients that were normally used in the making of Dash, a psychoactive chem that was produced and sold by the zebras living in Glyphmark. The town was also friendly to the Followers and hosted several alicorns there. I hoped maybe I could get some time to speak with one of them. I still hadn’t come up with a plan to gain access to the restricted section of the Fort Knowledge libraries. I wasn’t even remotely sure what I hoped to find there, other than hopeful references to the changeling spell that Twilight had been working on. The mare had to have kept some form of records on it, it was too unlike her not to do so. I focused as we walked, trying to remember and push through Twilight’s memories, but they were too jumbled to make any sense of. I thought about Pinkie Pie, and the clarity I had felt in the presence of her remains. Nothing seemed to help me push the information around into a coherent thought that I could actually understand.

The caravan stopped for the night on the side of the road and we set up camp. Violet and I set up guard around the caravan’s brahmin, while Steeljack guarded the crates. Patch was clever, disguising herself nearby, the barrel of her sniper rifle peeking out of her makeshift pile of blankets. The night rolled on endlessly as my love and I stood watch, the brahmin having drifted off into a nice peaceful looking sleep. I glanced at my marefriend nervously, prompting her to take notice and . I swallowed hard for a moment and spoke up.

“Violet... are you mad at me?” I asked cautiously. A soft chuckle came from the mare at my side.

“Why would I be mad at you?” She asked.

“Because of what happened with Lust... because she kissed me...” I stammered, not knowing really what to say. Violet sighed.

“Oh,” She said. “Star... it wasn’t your fault. But if you really want to hear it... I forgive you,” She replied, throwing her left foreleg and hooking it around my right. “Besides... it’s not like you enjoyed it or anything, right?”

“R-right,” I said, chuckling nervously. I didn’t want to say it, but in a weird sense I had enjoyed it just a little. Even though she was a little psychotic, that crazy mare’s lips were insatiable and warm. I felt disgusted with myself for thinking this, but it was the truth. We stood there for a few moments in silence, as I tried to formulate in my head what to say next.

“So you’re not mad at me?” I said blankly. Violet chuckled again.

“You’re silly,” She said, taking the opportunity to nuzzle my side. I smiled and stared down at my

lover, fantasizing about the things that I could do to her given the time we had in order to push out the disgust at my internal infidelity. A rustling noise and several red blips on my E.F.S. shook me out of my fantasy and back to reality. Stargazer shot up, pointing into the darkness. Violet's attention snapped to the issue at hoof as well, bringing up Thunder Flash in an instant.

"Who's there?" I called out to the dark Wasteland. Soft chittering noises could be heard approaching directly at us.

"Shit, radscorpions!" Violet shouted, firing a shot out into the darkness. Thunder Flash's silver fire illuminated the area in front of us for a moment, revealing several large radscorpions moving silently towards the camp. I ignited my horn, sending up a flare that would alert my other two companions. In response a sharp ***crack*** ripped from the camp, followed by the squealing sounds of a radscorpion dying. I silently thanked Celestia for Steeljack and his rifle as I moved forward and unleashed Stargazer's payload, spitting rounds into a particularly large scorpion that appeared out of the darkness first. The thing squealed loudly as blood burst from its body. It slumped over, dead before it even had a chance to get an attack in. By this time, the caravan ponies were all awake and moving to protect their cargo. None of these ponies were fighters; otherwise we wouldn't have been here in the first place. My E.F.S. was lit up like a Hearth's Warming Tree as I watched more blips appear. *Great*, I thought. *We stopped right in the middle of a radscorpion colony. Smart move there.* Violet jumped back, narrowly escaping the claws of several scorpions as she turned them to glowing ash with several bursts of silver fire.

"There's too many of them!" She shouted as we ended up back to back. "Where are they all coming from?"

"Must be a colony!" I shouted back, spreading Stargazer's fire across the crowd of radscorpions. The sounds of gunfire rang in my ears as I heard Patch's sniper rifle strike target after target. I had to admit, she was good at what she did. Several more ***crack*** noises resonated through the air as Steeljack poured ammunition at the invading arachnids. The amount of scorpions that were still alive was staggering. Violet was right though, there were simply too many of the beasts. I fired, hitting several more of the creatures before moving back to the caravan wagon.

"We need to get moving now!" I yelled. A few of the caravan ponies nodded listlessly, their eyes sunken in from the lack of sleep combined with being woken up in the middle of the night and having to fight for their lives. They had been keeping the swarm of scorpions away, but were visibly tired from the ordeal. A few of them lay dead amongst their fellows, blood pooling beneath their still bodies. I shuddered before turning around with determination in my eyes. I was not going to let Ditzy down I had decided. I flapped my wings and sped into the air, bringing my weapon to bear and dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time stood still long enough for me to finally see the large hole that the scorpion swarm was pouring out of. I let the spell drop and flew down next to Violet, who was panting hard. "Get back and regroup with Steeljack. I've got an idea. Think you can hold them off for a bit?" I said, grinning. She nodded and started cantering back to meet up with the others. I looked over at the brahmin and shook for a moment. Despite the best protection we could give, there was simply too many of the scorpions and several had broken through and slaughtered the two-headed cows. I leaped into the air, blasting another set of the armored beasts as I spread my wings. I flew through the cold night air and headed towards the hole in the desert.

The hole was large enough that I could see where we had stopped. It was indeed the entrance to a colony, a rather large one at that. I only had one chance at this. I opened my saddlebag, pulling out a few apple grenades we had managed to pick up in trading with Ditzy while in New Appleloosa. I hated to waste them all like this, but it was the only way to stop the scorpions from ravaging the caravan. I dropped the bushel of metal apples downwards, waiting for the right moment. As the apples neared the

lip of the hole, I fell into E.S.A.T.S. and queued up every shot right at the bushel of apple grenades. Time stood still and then resumed, Stargazer taking aim and unleashing its hellish fury downwards. A rather large radscorpion had just come over the top of the hole when the bullets struck home and the grenades detonated. The explosion rocked the Wasteland around it and blew radscorpion chunks everywhere. The rock inside the hole began to shake, caving in the entrance that the radscorpions were using to get to the surface. I whooped with glee as I flew back to the caravan. Though tired and shaken, the caravan ponies had managed to beat back the last of the creatures with my companions' assistance. Several of the caravan ponies began shuffling through the scorpion corpses, cutting off tails and harvesting the meat. It would more than make up for the cost of losing the brahmin, since the tails could be used to make potent anti-venoms.

I slumped down next to my friends and smiled weakly at them. Patch extricated herself from her hiding place and joined us in the center of camp. The rest of the evening we spent hunkered down near the wagon, paying close attention to the Wasteland stretched out before us. The smell of burnt radscorpion permeated the midnight air. It smelled rather terrible, enough that I figured that anypony crazy enough to sneak up on us now would probably vomit before even getting close. Despite the smell however, I still snuggled up close to Violet and smiled.

"Thank you, by the way," I said softly as I nuzzled her neck.

"What for?" She asked. She looked tired, her eyes baggy from staying up all night. Despite this, I had her full attention at the moment.

"Not being mad at me. I don't know what I would do without you," I said matter of fact. It was true; I really didn't know what I would do without her. She was an amazing marefriend and generally an all around good friend as well. She grinned as she replied.

"Probably get shot up full of holes," She said, giggling. I rolled my eyes and looked back at Steeljack and Patch. The two earth ponies had gotten up for now and were off helping the caravan ponies round up their supplies. Everypony was up and quite frankly, unable to sleep after such a night. It seemed as if it was just easier to stay up and watch the camp. I shut my eyes for a moment and nuzzled back into Violet, who kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"Get some sleep sweetie," She said softly. "You've done all you can for tonight." I gave a defeated sigh as I lay my head back into her side.

"I still feel like I failed though," I replied. "I should have been there. I could have saved them."

"No pony can be everywhere at once," Violet replied. "Even the Ministry Mare." I chuckled lightly at the use of my nickname.

"The Ministry Mare... heh," I said. "Is that all I really am now? Another faceless hero, trying to fight the good fight?"

"No," Violet said softly as sleep finally began to take me. "You're my faceless hero. And that's all that matters."

The next morning was mixed with grumbles and groans, as little sleep the night before led to grumpy grumpy pants all around. Even the normally quiet and reserved Steeljack was a little grumpy. The caravan ponies were thankful however, despite the fact that they lost a few workers and their brahmin as we got back onto the road, dragging the wagon with pure pony power thanks to a few volunteers. Violet and I helped it along with our magic, taking turns lifting and levitating the wagon along the way. We had buried the dead, both brahmin and pony alike. I felt a chill down my spine as

their bodies were lowered into the dirt. I should have done better, I thought, as I stared off into the morning sunlight. I took a deep breath, gave a defeated sigh and continued following the caravan.

By the afternoon time we had arrived in Glyphmark, a little worse for wear and very tired. The Sun was high in the sky as we stepped into the quiet zebra populated town. The caravan ponies had advised us that they would be able to purchase more brahmin here using the money they would earn off of the radscorpion meat and tails and thanked us again before leaving us to our own devices. I smiled, but still felt bad about the whole thing. Violet had calmly reminded me that if we hadn't been there, there wouldn't have been a caravan to make it to the town in the first place. I sighed and agreed with her. As we wandered through the town of Glyphmark, earning ourselves interesting stares from the townsfolk, I broached the subject of what we were going to do when we reached Fort Knowledge.

"Violet?" I asked, prompting a nod in response from my love. The four of us had stopped in the town square with the intent of locating the Followers temple. "How much do you know about the restricted section at the Fort?"

"Not much... I've never been in there, so I don't know what's in it. They don't usually let just anypony into it. Why?" She replied. I shrugged.

"I've got this weird feeling that what I'm looking for is in there... but I'm not sure how I'm going to get in," I said.

"Well, can't you just you know... break in?" Patch chimed in, setting Violet's eyes ablaze.

"And get kicked out of the Followers for stealing?!" She said rather loudly, drawing a few glares our way from the townsfolk milling about the town square. She softened up and grinned nervously. "Sorry, I just don't think that's a good idea."

"Yeah... didn't think about that," Patch said, rubbing the back of her head with her hoof. "So why are we staying here then instead of moving onto the Fort?"

"There is a Followers hub here where several members of the order live. They're working with the zebras on cultivating a way to change an alicorn from female to male," I said. "I intend to speak with one of them. Maybe we can get some support." We moved on from the square after asking a local merchant where we could find the temple. The zebra mare spoke in incessant rhyming, confusing me to no end. Violet fortunately was able to make some sense of her words enough to get us moving in the right direction.

A half an hour later, a small ways away from the town proper, was the temple of the Followers. The familiar sign of the Ministry of Peace greeted us as we eyed the building. It was an old abandoned MoP clinic, retrofitted as a hub and research lab for the zebras and alicorns working there. Behind the clinic, several fields of a certain blue flower extended into the Wasteland. Since the end of the war with the Enclave, the Followers of the Apocalypse had begun working with the new Ministry of Peace to retrofit and reopen clinics and hospitals once operated by the original MoP. It was a sign that things were getting better, they had said. Ponies could now find refuge and shelter from the Wasteland in the open and caring hooves of the Followers. The clinic in Glyphmark was special however, being solely operated by the local zebras and the Followers. It was here that Velvet Remedy's plan for our race to survive was taking fruition. The zebras were cultivating killing joke in hopes of using the blue flower to turn alicorns from female into male, allowing our race to procreate and survive. I had never really put much stock into this whole idea mind you. Being from a race of females typically led one to enjoy the company of other mares. Still, there was the survival of our entire race to think about. I suppose that in order for us to live on, we sort of had to have males.

"Stay close and don't wander off," I said as we approached the building, pointing at the fields. "You do

not want to get too close to those things.”

“What is it?” Patch said nervously. Clearly she had never seen the plant before, being from a Stable and all. Even her experience with odd jobs as a security mare most likely hadn’t taken the mare near enough to the Everfree to know what killing joke was.

“Killing joke,” I said before repeating myself. “Trust me. You do not want to get too close to it.” Patch looked shaken a bit as she hugged close to Steeljack, who responded by rubbing her neck and calming her down. I smiled at my two friends as the doors to the building slid open, allowing us entrance. I was amused by the fact that there were no guards. The front lobby was clean and white. Several posters for the Ministry of Peace adorned the waiting room walls, the smiling image of Fluttershy beaming out at us from them.

“You would have been dead before you even got near the door if you were hostile,” A feminine voice said from our side. I turned to see another alicorn, a dark blue one like I had been. “Our defenses are automatic.” I smiled at the other alicorn.

“Greetings, sister,” I said, bowing my head. Patch looked really confused at this display.

“Wait... she’s your sister?” She said. The other alicorn chuckled.

“No my dear. We of the alicorn race are all sisters to each other, as we were once all children of the fake Goddess,” She replied. She bowed her head back at me. “Greetings to you as well sister. You may call me Diamond Night.”

“Radiant Star,” I said, lifting my head back up and getting a good look at the alicorn mare. She was beautiful, with long light blue hair flowing down her mane and tail. Her coat glittered with stars, much like mine once had when I was the same color. Her eyes were a light teal color and they sparkled like diamonds. I caught myself staring just a bit before coughing and continuing to speak. “We are en route back to Fort Knowledge, where we are from.” Diamond nodded lightly.

“I see. Yes... I recognize the name. You are the one they talk about on the radio?” She said. My eyes widened. *Oh dear*, I thought and gulped. I nodded, prompting a chuckle from the dark blue mare. “Yes... I thought so. The Ministry Mare. You are doing fantastic things out there for other ponies.” I blushed a little at this.

“Well umm... I suppose so...” I stammered. Diamond laughed brightly.

“And so modest too! What pray tell, can I assist you with Ministry Mare?” The blue alicorn said. I blushed some more.

“Please, just Star is fine. We need some help. You see, I’m just a junior member... and I think there’s something inside of the restricted library at the Fort that I need to see. Something that would help with my unique... situation,” I managed to say. Diamond smiled as she followed along and finally sighed.

“I wish there was some way I could help you sister. I am unfortunately without the power to convince your Elders to allow you access to the restricted library,” She said softly. “I am here merely as a research assistant, helping the zebras to cultivate the blue flower.” I groaned in annoyance, prompting a chuckle from Diamond, who continued to speak. “I can however, provide you and your friends with mmm... bedding for the evening should you wish to rest. Relax and take a load off as one might say. I daresay it could be fun. It’s been a while since I’ve had somepony else like myself to talk to. I’m the only alicorn stationed here at the moment.” I noticed then that Violet had been staring at the night blue alicorn intently the entire time, saying nothing until that point in time. The look on her face was one of anger and distrust. *What is going on?* I thought as I looked to my love.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” She said curtly. I stared, my jaw nearly dropping.

"V-violet?" I stammered. My marefriend looked me dead in the eye and shook her head before turning to the other alicorn.

"Thank you for your time, but we need to go," She said, turning and heading towards the door. I looked at Diamond apologetically before following behind her. Steeljack and Patch followed suit after thanking Diamond for her time. Once outside, I stopped Violet for a moment in a fury.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked angrily. "She was just trying to help us." Violet stared at me, fire in her eyes.

"Something's not right with her. I could feel it from the moment she appeared," She replied. "You were too busy staring at her and blushing your face off to even realize it!" I scoffed at this.

"What?" I said, realizing what this was really about. Violet was a little jealous it seemed. "Please don't say that. Look, I'm sorry... okay I stared for a bit, but she really was just trying to help us."

"I don't care. Something wasn't right. It didn't feel safe," She said shortly. "If you'd rip your eyes off her flank for one second, you'd see that I'm right." I stared at her indignantly.

"Well... you're just being jealous and letting it cloud your judgment," I said angrily. "It's not like I like her or anything, Violet." Violet glared at me with death in her eyes.

"I'm not being jealous. That implies that I have something to be jealous of. Maybe I should be jealous, miss 'stares-at-flanks'! Why don't you go run off with her, and leave me alone!" She shouted before turning and storming off in the opposite direction back towards town. I stared as she went, trying to process what had happened.

"Violet!" I shouted, trying to catch up to her. She looked back for a moment.

"Go away. I'm not in the mood," She said venomously. Her eyes were ice cold and angry. I could also see tears crawling down her cheek.

"But –"

"No, Star. Go away."

"Fine. See if I care then. I can't believe you'd be so petty about this," I spat at her. I was furious at how she was acting. Like I was the bad pony here! "Why don't you stop being so foalish for once, and grow up!"

She glared at me, tears finally flowing from her face, and trotted off, saying nothing. I looked back at Steeljack and Patch for a moment, both of which had concerned looks on their faces. I slumped down onto my haunches in front of them, feeling my eyes wet with tears as I realized what we had just said to each other, and the feelings of hurt and pain came crashing down onto my heart. As if on cue, the clouds above us erupted with thunder, and rain began to pour from the sky. *Figures*, I thought as I sat there in the rain, crying hard.

"W-w-what have I done?" I asked to no pony in particular. Patch stepped up and hugged me.

"I'm going to go check on Violet and see if she needs anything okay? I don't think either of you two should be alone right now," She said point blank. "It's going to be okay. You'll be fine." She nodded at Steeljack, and trotted off down the road after my love. Steeljack remained, stoic and calm as he sat down next to me.

"So –" He started to say before I cut him off with a glare. I sat there for a few moments in the soaking rain, feeling like hell warmed over before I spoke.

"Go on... Go find Patch and Violet. I'm going to go stay with Diamond Night," I said, choking out the

words through my tears. Steeljack looked shocked.

“But... why?” He asked. I stood, clearing my tears for a moment.

“Because I have to know if she’s right or not,” I said, pausing. “I have to know that we’re right. And Steeljack?” The buck looked up at me. “Keep her safe, please. Until I come back.” He nodded as I began walking back to the MoP clinic, trying not to bawl my eyes out as I sloshed through the mud. The door slid open, revealing that Diamond Night was waiting for me. The blue alicorn had a smile on her face that widened even more as she saw me. It was like she was expecting this, I realized. I couldn’t even begin to process this information. My mind was far too gone from the emotional stress of my fight with Violet to even consider that there was something wrong with it.

“Changed your mind?” She said smoothly. I nodded weakly, looking down at the ground as she swept a hoof up, motioning for me to follow her.

“Excellent, my dear sister,” The night blue alicorn said as she smiled. A door opened, revealing a spacious room with a nice relatively clean bed inside. “Feel free to rest all you need here. If you need anything let me know.”

“Thanks...” I said blankly as I plopped onto the bed, letting the torrent of tears come out as I buried my head in the pillow, soaking the cover of it with salty liquid as well the rest of the bed with my wet body. Diamond Night gently rubbed my neck for a moment as I began to feel sleepy.

“There... it’s going to be all better now,” She said, smiling as she stood up. Her shadow cast over my body as she made her way to the door.

“Sweet dreams,” She uttered with a grin and turned off the lights.

This was so not where I wanted to be right now. The familiar hallway and endless doors stretched out forever and I groaned. I didn’t care about Twilight’s stupid emotions. I only wanted to find Violet and work things out. I was still rather angry at her for some of the things she said, but I know I was just as bad. The familiar **fwoosh** noise, accompanied by the **creak** of the next door indicated it was time to meet the next one. I stepped through and literally felt like I was in another world. A bedroom sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by three plywood walls. I blinked for a moment, realizing it was a movie set. In the center of the fake bedroom on the bed lay two very familiar purple mares. The two Twilights were caressing each other lightly and whoah--- did not need to see that! I averted my eyes from the spectacle of lovemaking for a moment when I heard a chuckle behind me. I looked back to see another Twilight, hooves up in a director’s chair with a beret and a megaphone.

“More action!” She shouted through the megaphone, inciting the two mares in the bed to kick it up a notch. The mare in the chair looked at me and grinned. “What? Don’t you like this sort of thing?”

“I’m... I’m not in the mood for that right now,” I said, a hint of sadness in my voice. *What is wrong with me?* I thought. “Besides... who the hay are you? What kind of emotion watches ponies have sex?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m Passion. Something that you desperately need, I think,” The purple mare replied. I groaned.

“What I need is to get out of here so I can go find Violet,” I stated. The unicorn giggled.

“Oh yes, her. Mmm... it was so beautiful watching you two in that department store. Such raw carnal energy you two shared,” Passion said, grinning widely. The moans and shrieks of the two mares behind us were increasing. My face turned red when I turned and saw what they were doing. I turned back to the sitting mare and glowered.

"Yes well... I suppose you're here to tell me what to do about it then?" I asked. The mare shook her head.

"Passion comes in many forms. It is raw and unbridled. It is also undirected, requiring the hand of Love to allow it to seek out its true nature," She said. "I can't tell you what to do. Unfortunately, you have to follow your heart and direct your own Passion."

"I love Violet, I truly do... but I messed up. I said some mean and spiteful things to her, all because I refused to listen to her. What if she doesn't love me anymore?" I asked, more to myself than to anypony else.

"If your Passion is true, then she'll accept you back. If not, well... life will move on and Passion will begin anew," The mare said nonchalantly. I slumped down next to the purple unicorn, and looked back at the movie set. The two mares in the bed had moved into high gear and were now screaming with passion. I looked back at the lavender mare in the director's chair and felt wetness dripping down my face. Tears welled up in my eyes as I turned my head towards the ground, crying harder than I ever had cried before. Amazing thing about dreams is that you can do things like that. Cry for hours internally and never stop. The pain was unbearable. My heart felt like it might explode any minute. A soft hoof rested on my shoulder and I stopped for a moment. Passion stared down at me and smiled. She cooed softly, pulling me into a hug.

"Shh... It's ok. It's ok," She said quietly as I cried into her neck. "It's going to be alright."

"But... but I fucked up! I should have listened to her!" I shouted, choking the words out through my tears.

"Yes... you did. But you have to face up to that when you see her, otherwise things might not work out the way you want them to," Passion said.

"How... how do I do that?" I managed to say. Passion smiled widely.

"You have to show her a little *compassion* my dear. Apologize. Tell her how it made you feel. Tell her how much you love her," She replied. I nodded, clearing my tears and turning on my determined look.

"I'll do it," I said. "I'm going to go right to her as soon as I wake up and tell her how sorry I am!" The lavender mare clapped her hooves on the ground for me.

"That's the spirit!" She said happily before picking her megaphone back up. "Harder! Faster!" I groaned as the two mares in the bed shrieked louder, bringing the dream world to a crashing halt as I woke up.

I awoke with a startle, feeling a mare's hooves on my back, massaging me. I let out a sigh. I was still lying on the bed in the MoP clinic. I moaned for a moment as the hooves caressed me lightly, pressing into my back and neck. I realized I was very tense, and that this was highly relieving.

"Violet...?" I said, reaching my head back to see the mare. *Did she decide to come back on her own?* I thought. My eyes widened when I saw it was Diamond Night. A sweet smile rested on her lips.

"Oh, hello. I hope you don't mind but you were just so tense, I thought you might need this," She said smiling wider. I pulled out of the other alicorn's grasp and stood.

"No. Sorry, but I can't do this. That green mare I was with earlier? She's my marefriend," I said angrily. "And now I have to go find her and apologize for all of this." The other alicorn chuckled, turning from a soft laugh to a sinister cackle. I stared at the mare with a confused expression.

“That, I think... is where you’re wrong,” She said, standing up and blocking my exit. “It’s rather the complete opposite I must say. You’re going to stay right here.” I stared hard at the mare, trying to figure out what she meant. My eyes widened when I realized that Violet had been right. There was something off about this mare. She felt different when I stared past the shiny blue coat and starlit eyes, which were now miniature supernova staring right back at me.

“What? What do you mean?” I asked weakly. “Diamond... what’s going on here?”

“Ahh... yes. That was my name wasn’t it? Before I shed that hideous ideal of myself and became the mare I am today,” The mare said, a sickly sweet grin emerging on her face. It was the kind of grin that shook you to your very core.

“What did you do with Diamond? Who are you?” I said, stepping back from the crazy mare. The other alicorn picked up my saddlebags and pulled out a familiar case.

“You know... I had a bit of time to look through your things while you were asleep. And I think I’ve finally came up with the best way to subdue you, Ministry Mare,” She said, ignoring my questions. The case flipped open, revealing the memory orbs from Tenpony Tower.

“Stop that, put those down!” I said, feeling even weaker than I did before. *Why am I stuck here? Why am I not just getting past her and getting out of here?* I thought. The feeling I felt was quite like when Discord had attacked. I couldn’t move or think as the mare moved closer with the case. I tried to move my feet, but couldn’t even lift one of my legs to move. I was stuck, paralyzed with fear in front of the wicked mare. I briefly wondered if I was maybe under some sort of spell, that this ‘Diamond’ had cast some sort of enchantment on me that forced me to stay. She lifted out the orb I hadn’t viewed yet: the one with Twilight’s cutie mark. The ball glowed purple as she twirled it around on her hoof. The five pointed star etched on the side glimmered, as if in anticipation of being near me.

“Funny story about these things. I can tell which ones you’ve already viewed by the magical markers left on them. You haven’t watched this one yet,” She said, grinning evilly as she stepped up close to me. I could feel her breathing on my face, but still couldn’t move or do anything about it. “I tried before to get through to you, wearing that silly costume of that purple mare inside your head. Didn’t I tell you that your future belonged to us?”

“What do you mean?” I said, as I stared intently at the blue alicorn.

“Oh please, I’ve been following you since you killed Greed. It was I who tipped off Lust about your stay in New Appleloosa, and I who put the bug in Miss Ditzzy Do’s ears about hiring you to come to Glyphmark,” The mare said. I felt like I was stuck in the middle of some bad villain monologue, the kind where the hero gets away at the last minute. I quickly realized however, that unlike in the movies... I wasn’t going to get away from her. She had me cornered. “Yes... you see? You are mine now. I knew you would defeat Lust, or at the very least send her home with her tail between her legs. I swear, that pathetic mare is only good for one thing. Where was I? Oh yes... once I knew you were on your way to Glyphmark, it was no small task to take care of the research staff stationed here so that I could meet you instead.” The monologue continued as I began to feel weaker and weaker by the minute.

“Who...?” I managed to say weakly. The alicorn mare smiled widely, her eyes wild with fire as they turned a sinister red. Pointed teeth emerged from her grin as she stepped towards me. I cowered under the mad mare’s gaze as she lifted the memory orb in her hoof, high above my head.

“You wanted to know who I am? You can call me Pride, and I’m the last thing you’ll ever see,” She replied, her smooth voice turning sinister sounding. I shouted out at as the mare brought down the memory orb onto my horn, and my world fell into utter blackness.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Lustful Intentions: Staring at flanks has made you a naughty, naughty filly. -10% damage and -10% to hit against same-sex hostile targets.

Spark Level: 50%. This is how much Spark has control of your body.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

New Perk! Deadshot: You have an uncanny knack at hitting your target with a sniper rifle. Your chance to hit hostile enemies is increased by +10% and you suffer no range penalty on your aimed shots.

Chapter 10: Ghosts of the Past

"Supernaturals"? Spike, the word supernatural refers to things like ghosts and spirits and zombies, which are as make-believe as curses. This book is just a bunch of hooey!

Memories. What are memories? I used to think that memories were the experiences we made in our life. Recollections of times both good and bad. But what happens when the memories you've experienced in your lifetime simply don't belong to you? I've been pondering this for some time now, thanks to the memories of one Twilight Sparkle that have soared through my mind. What happens when you can't trust your own memories? What is real and what isn't?

Sometimes I wonder why the ponies of the past bothered to make their memories available via memory orbs. Was there some reason that these ponies wanted these memories to be seen? And what if... what if that reason was so that we wouldn't repeat their mistakes? So that the next generation wouldn't do more damage to the world than what has already taken place? I shudder at the thought of such a thing. If the ponies of the past didn't want their mistakes to be repeated... why make them in the first place?

I wish I could trust my memories, but now... now I can't trust my own mind. It is slowly becoming another's, and I can't even begin to wonder how or why I am going to make it through this. All I can wonder is why? Why me? Why am I so important?

And why am I all alone...?

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I was falling, and not falling at the same time. A distinct feeling of weightlessness accompanied me as I descended, feeling nothing and everything all at once. A dark void stretched out beyond all I could see. *What is going on here?* I thought as I regarded the void, pondering its nonexistence. *This doesn't feel like a memory orb...* My thoughts were wild and jumbled as I tried to process the events that transpired before this... nonexistence came into being. Diamond Night had tricked me. Violet had been right about the blue alicorn, which made me feel even more furious with myself. I had turned away the mare I loved for one who proved to be false. I wanted nothing more than to die right there. I knew I couldn't though. If I did, I would never get the chance... never get to tell Violet how sorry I was. Never get to see those shiny green eyes of hers ever again.

No... I could not give up. Not for one second. If there was a chance I could see her again, I would take it.

As I was pondering the revelation behind Diamond Night and my loss of love, I became aware that my falling had slowed considerably and that I was touching down onto something solid. I looked down and saw nothingness, the black void. Yet, strangely it felt sturdy and almost like a floor. Before me, out of the void arose a road. The road was simple and winding, paved with purple brick. *How odd*, I thought as I looked down the road, which seemed to go on forever. Above me in the void a message painted out in gold lettering.

The Goddess of Twilight awaits. Delay and all is Lost.

I sighed. I was getting tired of these messages. Who was leaving them? How were they doing it? Was it the Twilight Society, or somepony else? Giving up on my thoughts once more, my eyes returned to the road. I stepped forward cautiously, resting a hoof on one of the purple bricks. The road seemed to shimmer with various colors of purple the instant I set down on it. I pushed forward once

more and stood fully on the road. I looked back at where the golden message was, the letters now having dissipated back into the void. I stared back down the road and began to walk. If this was my only way out of this, I would have to press on.

I walked, and walked, and walked, and walked some more. Quite frankly the walking got tiresome after a while. Not tiring per se, as I never felt tired the entire time, but rather boring in a sense. Weren't memory orbs supposed to be... you know... memories? Why was this one special? Why was I even in my own body? The mess of thoughts jumbled in my mind as they interspersed with Twilight's memories. I thought of Spark and what she had told me in Manehattan. She was right of course. The memories, the emotions... they were getting more frequent and less scattered. I was beginning to remember whole periods of time during the war... memories that belonged to a pony who wasn't me. I was terrified of it all. Terrified I was going to become somepony else that wasn't even remotely like me.

The road began to wind more and more as I began to wonder why I was following it. Why couldn't I just fly over the road to the end? Another thought struck me as I considered this option. What if the road had no end? Was I doomed to trot down it forever? No... there would be an end, I had decided. The end would be when I woke up, or when Pride finally decided to kill me. Maybe she had already and this was my penance... to walk an eternal road for all of time. Maybe there wasn't such a thing as living with the Goddesses in the afterlife. Maybe we all were just like I was now... alone. Suddenly I felt so very alone for the first time since being here. I realized with great sadness that maybe I wouldn't see anypony else ever again. I thought about Violet and how much I missed her and her fiery but tender nature. Steeljack and his gruffness. Patch and her free spirited individuality. I quickly realized how much I would miss my friends.

I also realized that internal monologues while walking along a road would lead inevitably into me walking into something. As I smacked my face into the wall before me, I also realized that even in your own head... walls hurt when ran into. A lot. I sat up, rubbing my forehead and checking my horn to make sure it was alright. No real harm it seemed, just a scuff. Still, my head was on fire. I looked up and saw a stone door, waiting for me to open it. Just a door at the end of the road and nothing else. The door was connected to nothing! I pushed myself off of my haunches and stared at the door, forcing it to try to open with telekinesis. The door complied, swinging inward into a room. I stepped in and my jaw dropped. The room inside the void was humongous. Scientific instruments of all kinds were everywhere, from simple measuring tools to grand telescopes that peeked out beyond the confines of the room. A massive globe sat in the middle of the room, glowing points emanating from various areas on it. Beyond that, a row of large wall computers took up one section of the room. This place looked like it was something out of a science fiction novel. Standing at the middle of it all, clad in a white lab coat and glasses was a very familiar purple unicorn. Her back was turned to me as she was perusing some equation on a chalkboard, humming a little tune to herself as she did. I stepped in further, my hooves making a loud clacking noise against the shiny flooring. The mare turned and her eyes widened as an expression of panic began to form on her face.

"What...?" She uttered. "Oh no no no this is bad. This is really bad." She ran up to me and began looking me over before finally coming face to face with me. "You're not supposed to be here yet!"

"Huh?" I said, clearly confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're not supposed to have viewed this orb yet," The lavender mare replied. My eyes widened just a bit as I took in the sight of the mare. She was no longer the younger pony that I was so accustomed to seeing in my mind. This unicorn was old, grey streaks blazing through her hair along with her purple and pink. Her eyes looked old and yet at the same time surprisingly bright. I realized this wasn't a memory or an illusion. This was the real deal.

"You're her aren't you?" I asked finally after pausing a moment to take in this new information. The mare smiled, and nodded slightly.

"Yes," She said softly. "I am Twilight Sparkle. Pleased to finally meet you Radiant Star." I slumped to my haunches in front of the mare whose life I had been experiencing all this time and began to do what came naturally to me. I cried. Twilight's eyes widened further as she sat down in front of me.

"What's wrong?" She asked quietly. "Are you alright?"

"I-I-I just... I just don't know what to say," I choked out. "Here you are, and all this time I've been dealing with your memories and your emotions and I don't even know if I'm supposed to be angry with you or what I'm supposed to feel!" Twilight's eyes softened and she smiled.

"That's because you're not supposed to be here yet," She replied. "This is the final step. The final place you are supposed to come before the transformation is complete."

"Transformation?" I managed through the tears. "Into what?"

"I can't tell you that yet. You are still far away from truly understanding it all. You need to come to it naturally. If you don't... the results could be catastrophic," Twilight said. I cleared away the last of my tears as I listened to the old mare and sighed.

"So this thing wasn't a memory orb?" I asked. Twilight responded with a shake of her head.

"The device looks and functions like a memory orb to other unicorns and alicorns, but to you... it allows you access to this place," The elder mare replied. "You were supposed to arrive here a long time from now, when you fully understood the ramifications of the transformation. It's when you're supposed to make your choice."

"I'll have a choice?" I asked, pondering what that could mean. The mare nodded.

"You will," She responded. "But only when you are ready to make it. Now tell me... how did you arrive here? The orb was supposed to be locked to not allow you entry until you were ready." I nodded, and explained what had been happening recently and how Pride had tricked me and forced the orb onto my horn. Twilight nodded and brought out her notepad for a moment, writing down some notes. When I finished, she smiled.

"Well, the good news is that I should be able to send you back, and hopefully relock the orb. I am guessing that your mental state at the time the orb was forced onto you was enough to forcefully break it," She said after a moment.

"But what if I don't want this Twilight? I've been dealing over and over with your emotions and your memories. I don't know what is real anymore!" I exclaimed. Twilight sighed.

"You're going to have to trust me alright? It will all work out in the end. Can you do that for me?" She said softly. I stopped for a moment and regarded the old mare. She looked hurt and tired. I sighed and finally nodded lightly. She smiled, a creaky old smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"What do I do until then?" I asked, drawing the gaze of the lavender unicorn. "I mean... I can't just wander around aimlessly. Are we right in going back to Fort Knowledge? I'm not even sure where I'm going to be when I wake up... and what about the Twilight Society?" Twilight chuckled.

"The Twilight Society... heh," She said. "Stuck up bunch of snobs they were. I remember them well."

"You knew the Twilight Society? But I thought..." I replied. Twilight smiled.

"Their roots go back farther than the end of the world Star. Their humble beginnings began in the Ministry of Arcane Science. Fanatics they were, thinking I was some sort of Goddess to be

worshiped. You've seen for yourself what they became in the Wasteland. They scrounged for every piece of arcano-tech that I developed and hoarded it for themselves," Twilight said bitterly.

"And now they're gone... why?" I said, trying to get some answers. I honestly didn't know how long I had here with the ancient mare and I wanted to make the most of my stay. Twilight sighed.

"The one thing they did right... I can't say Star. Not yet at least. However I can say that Fort Knowledge is a good place to begin that search. I can't... I can't keep you here any longer. The longer you stay the more you risk the transformation becoming complete. Right now, that would be bad. Very, very bad," The purple mare said. "It's time we sent you back out."

"But I have more questions!" I said as the walls in the room began to dissolve. Twilight's horn was glowing.

"When you wake up... you won't remember me. You'll only know that your next destination is certain. May Celestia walk beside you, and may Luna protect," Twilight Sparkle said as the last thing I saw before darkness overtook me was the glow of her horn. I screamed my insistence at the mare, my words catching onto nothing as they refused to erupt from my mouth. Eventually silence took over completely and I melted away into the sea of black.

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I heard muffled voices as my mind struggled to return to consciousness. Two voices... and they were arguing heatedly. My eyes fluttered open to reveal that I was in a dark grey room, filled with medical equipment. The familiar three butterflies belonging to the Ministry of Peace adorned one of the boxes in the room. Was I still in Glyphmark? No... that would be too stupid of Pride to stay there. My friends would have realized the duplicity of the night blue alicorn and would have come running back there immediately. I looked down to see that I was strapped to a table with metal bars. I tried to use my magic to rip off the bars but nothing happened. I tried to teleport, but nothing happened. *Why is my magic not working?* I thought as I tried once again to teleport away from the place. The muffled voices continued beyond the edge of the room. I couldn't really make out what they were saying. Suddenly the voices silenced and I could hear hoof steps coming to the door. The door flung open, revealing the mare herself. Pride stepped through, grinning widely with her sharpened teeth. Her eyes were red with murder. Standing behind the alicorn, visibly nervous from being in her presence, was Lust of all ponies. She had an indignant look on her face that masked the fact that she was afraid of the mare in front of her. If Lust was afraid, then this pony was a force to be reckoned with.

"Ahh... you are awake. How interesting it is that I was unable to pierce your dream state. Even memory orbs count as dreaming," She said, her voice silky smooth and yet sinister all at the same time.

"What the fuck are you?" I breathed out. "And what do you want from me?"

"Oh... such language. What a naughty filly. Somepony must be punished," Pride replied. Lust grinned and started to speak.

"I'll do it –" She began to say before Pride cut her off.

"Silence... filthy ingrate. I don't even know why you are here. Your job is finished now," The alicorn said, snarling.

"She's my mark, I should be the one that gets to kill her!" Lust said, pouting. If she wasn't psychotic, I'd almost label the expression as sort of cute. "After a little... fun of course." *Ewww*, I thought, disgusted by what the jet black pegasus would consider fun. I was lost in my disgust that I almost didn't expect Pride to lash out and strike the mare. She did so with intense force, striking the pegasus on the face and knocking her against the wall. A small trickle of blood poured from the mare's nose as

she slumped against the wall, the blow having knocked her unconscious.

“Now then, no interruptions... where were we?” Pride said, grinning.

“Look, I have no idea what you want with me, but you’ve got the wrong mare. I’m nopony. I’m not important,” I stammered out, pleading with the mare. She cackled wildly.

“Please... I’ve seen your dreams Ministry Mare. I know exactly what you are. You are far from the wrong mare,” The blue alicorn responded. “Twilight Sparkle. Hmm... I wonder what that must be like... to carry all of those thoughts and memories around in your head like that.” I narrowed my gaze at the mare.

“How? How do you know so much about me?” I asked, earning myself another chuckle from the mare.

“My special talent is dream-gazing, or rather dream-walking. I can enter the mind of a pony through concentration and insert myself into their dreams,” The alicorn replied. Obviously this pony had never seen any of those old Pony Joe serials where the bad guy tells the good guy their plot and the good guy uses that information to get away. Then again, I’d never seen any of them either, only read about them in books. I groaned as I tried to figure out an escape plan. I had to keep her talking.

“How do you do that?” I asked trying to play this as coyly as I possibly could. Pride snarled.

“Like I have to explain myself to you, insolent fool. All you need to know now is that you are mine. I’m sure by now you’ve noticed that you can’t use any magic?” The alicorn said, grinning. Her spiny teeth were practically grinding together in enthusiasm. I nodded as it was about the only thing I could think of at the moment. “Excellent. Now that you are awake I can begin the second phase of my plan.”

“Why are you holding me if you just plan to kill me? Why not do it and get it over with?” I shouted angrily. I had had it by this point. I was quite frankly, a little pissed off. Pride sneered at me.

“Because you would do no good to me dead. Greed had it all wrong you see. Your power is special, but he didn’t know how special it truly was. I’ve seen your thoughts Ministry Mare... and I know exactly how powerful this spirit inside you is. I want that power,” The night blue alicorn said. I sighed. Was everypony like this going to be crazy and try to come after me? At that moment in time, I almost missed Discord. Almost. At least the draconequus was sporting about the whole thing, even if his plans for my power involved the chaotic reign of the Equestrian Wasteland. Who knew what this psychotic alicorn had in store with this supposed power I had. I found my mind wandering for a moment, attempting to figure out what was so damn attractive about this supposed power. If it was so great and all, why hadn’t it worked out for me? What had it done for me lately? Oh wait, that’s right... it got me cut open and made me lose my marefriend. Thanks a bunch Twilight! You’re a great friend!

I realized I must have been stuck in the back of my head again when I caught Pride just sort of staring at me blankly. I was doing that a lot lately it seemed. I looked up at the mare and smiled weakly.

“What...?” I asked. The mare groaned.

“You stopped paying attention didn’t you?” She asked flatly. I paused for a moment, and then nodded. Pride groaned angrily.

“Listen closely then. You are mine. Your friends, your silly little marefriend, they’re not coming for you. I’ve seen to that. As soon as I figure out how to tap that power inside of you, then... oh yes then I will kill you,” The alicorn said, grinning evilly.

“You’re wrong. My friends will come for me,” I said forcefully. Pride cackled venomously.

“Oh really? After what you did to your pathetic excuse for a marefriend? I saw the whole thing. It

was quite lovely watching the daggers shoot from your mouth at her. I didn't think that the famous Ministry Mare could say such a thing," She said.

"You shut your mouth about her," I snarled. The alicorn's eyes widened.

"Or you'll what? Hurt me? Please. I'm dampening your magic. As long as I'm conscious, you won't be doing a thing to me," She replied, turning to the prone form of Lust. She groaned and kicked at the pegasus, jolting her awake.

"Wha...?" Lust said, groaning as she stood. Her eyes rested on me and Pride and immediately went wide with fear. "I'm... I'm sorry!"

"It would do you well to remember your place in things you feather-brain. I am the stronger, the strongest of us all. Don't you forget that," Pride said, towering over the pegasus, who was now cowering before the night blue alicorn. My mind jumbled with thoughts of the two. Lust and Pride... and Greed? Some sort of strange coincidence possibly? Just who were these ponies? Lust bowed before Pride and sighed.

"As you wish Master," She said, a hint of something hiding behind her voice. Was that sadness? It was strange to see the mare that had nearly cut me and my friends in half prostrating herself before the alicorn. It made me wonder again just how powerful Pride really was to hold such sway over the lascivious pegasus. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

"Get up. I have a job for you," Pride finally said. Lust straightened herself up and stared at the other mare. "You are going to ensure her friends will not come for her. You have my leave to do whatever you want with them, including the green unicorn mare. Make it extra special for her." Lust grinned wickedly.

"No!!" I shouted, tears forming in my eyes. "What do you want with me? I'll do it... just don't hurt her!" Pride laughed, ignoring my pleas.

"Go now Lust, show our little ponies that we mean business," She said, grinning. Lust nodded and turned towards the door. Pride returned to her instruments along the wall when I noticed that Lust had turned back and looked at me. A wink, subtle and quiet came from the mare's face. A small smile emerged from her mouth as she quickly resumed the wicked grin she had previously worn. *What was that?* I thought as the pegasus turned back to the door again and left, leaving me alone with Pride once more. The alicorn seemed to be engrossed in her instruments, tweaking knobs here and there and pressing a few buttons. I found my mind turning to the events that just transpired. What was the wink from Lust all about? It didn't feel like it was malicious at all... in fact it felt rather... oh what's the word? Friendly! Yes, that's it. But why? What would Lust have to gain from helping me? Surely all she would do would earn the wrath of the alicorn in the room. I caught myself staring at Pride for a moment and decided to try my luck at figuring these ponies out. If I was going to die I was going to at least learn a little bit about my captors.

"So... what exactly are you?" I said nonchalantly. Pride hesitated a moment. It seemed my question had caught her off guard. After a few moments of silence, she spoke.

"I'm like you. An alicorn. One of the first actually," She said quietly. I sensed that she was remembering her time with the Goddess. "But I am also different than you. A new kind of alicorn. I do not question it; this is simply how I am."

"If you're an alicorn like me, you really are my sister... so why do this? Why?" I asked pleadingly. The alicorn mare refused to look down at me and simply stared at the instruments before her.

"It's not that easy. One day I looked up at the sky and realized what I was. I am Pride, vanity incarnate. What happened before is merely inconsequential. What happens now is all I care about," She replied bitterly. "Your kind ceased being my sisters the day that I accepted my destiny as the one and true Pride. I do what I must, because I have to. It is my nature to grab for power."

"But... how? How did this happen to you? Greed had told me that his abilities were a result of killing joke... was it the same for you?" I asked hesitantly. Pride turned her gaze at me coldly, her red eyes staring deep into my soul. Oh Celestia, if looks could kill this mare could set your heart on fire.

"Greed? Greed lied. As he was want to do. Greed lied about a good many things. Still, I am impressed you managed to kill him. The others... they were not so pleased that one of our numbers had been dwindled. I admit I am surprised I haven't had to fend them off yet," She said.

"The others? You mean there's... more like you?" I said, swallowing hard. *Great... a whole group of impossible to kill ponies after me?* I thought. My day could just not get any better it seemed.

"There are. Seven of us to be exact. Well... six now," Pride responded with a grin.

"Why tell me all of this?" I asked, wondering what the mare's game was.

"Because I'm going to kill you anyways. I might as well take some... ahem... pride in my work so to speak. It is of my nature to boast," The alicorn mare said. "Despite the fact that Greed was a fool, he did one important thing in his death. He gave us you. And now your power shall allow me to gain ultimate power over everything!" The mare cackled wildly. I could see what she meant about it being in her nature to boast. It seemed to be all she did. I felt rather sorry for her, having been pushed into a role of evil. Pride stepped towards the door and looked back. "I shall return. I have... matters that require attending."

After she left I lay there on the table and pondered the alicorn's words, trying to piece together the puzzle in my mind. I wished for a moment that I had a memory orb to sink into and that everything would be alright, but I knew it wouldn't. *Why bother trying to fight it?* I thought. The sharp grey tones of the room around me did nothing to ease my mind as I thought about Violet and our final conversation. Was that really how her last memories of me would end up? Yelling at her for trying to warn me? Sure, I was angry at her... but for the wrong reasons. Violet was right and I had paid the price for it, ending up in this trap. I thought about the Twilight memory orb, wondering what I had seen there. I couldn't remember any of it, which was strange. Usually I remembered the contents of a memory orb. I made a mental reminder to watch the orb as soon as possible to try and remember it.

Hours passed by as I watched the clock on my E.F.S. roll on. In the time nothing had happened, nothing had entered the room and no Pride coming yet to kill me. It was strange, lying there with nothing to do. At one point, I tried to contact Spark, but the spirit was deathly silent. I considered that whatever field or magic that Pride was using to dampen my magic was also dampening my connection to her. I realized a bit that this saddened me to an extent. I had grown used to the spirit's presence by now, and at the very least she would have been somepony to talk to while waiting for whatever Pride had planned for me. After the few hours of waiting, I quickly decided that it didn't seem like anything was going to happen for a while, so I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Smoke and the acrid stench of burning filled my nostrils. I opened my eyes, finding myself in the middle of a military base. Large vats of dark swirling liquid lined the room. I was no longer myself. A glorious anthem of voices arose in my mind as we spoke together with one voice. We were all connected because of the being contained in the vats. We were Unity, and we were one. Nothing could stop us. We would spread our message all across the Wasteland and everypony would join us.

We stood facing forward, watching with soulless eyes as the Great and Powerful Goddess spoke to her. We watched silently as the mare spoke in her mind, showing us things from the past. Then there was panic. The Goddess was afraid. In turn we were afraid. She told us to flee. The pegasi entered the room, trying to make an alliance. They picked the wrong time. The Goddess thrashed and screamed as we began to fly. We flew hard and fast, moving at the will of the Goddess. The Goddess cried out to us, her children, her final goodbyes. Her last act was to save her own.

In a flash of light so intense it burned your eyes even in peripheral vision, the Goddess disappeared. Hurt and pain and anger washed over Unity as the Goddess died. The screams of her agony were so intense that every one of her children felt them for miles. Then there was a serene calm as Unity fell away and my mind returned. Confusion cut in as I struggled to figure who I was, why I was flying away, and why I had wings in the first place. Even though Unity had fallen, I still felt the pain my sisters felt at the loss of our beloved creator. Memories fluttered in and out of my mind, but they were jumbled and blurry, preventing me from getting any real feel on what they were about.

I flew around, taking in the sights of the massive crater that now rested where Maripony once stood. I had the distinct feeling that there was something still down there. The sight of the now destroyed facility was heart-breaking. In my confusion I wanted nothing more than to desperately feel the Goddess again, to feel Unity with my sisters. I realized that this memory was my own. I truly never remembered much from my time immediately after the death of the Goddess. So why was I seeing it now? I set down on the lip of the crater, drinking in the radiation as I stared down into it, the weight of the situation crashing down all around me. A sense of despair formed around me as I tried to process what I had just lost.

The Goddess was dead. My entire reason for living had fallen apart in a matter of minutes.

I felt warmth, a sensation spreading throughout my entire body as I stared down at my hooves. A shimmering rolled up my legs as my coat began to change color. I was turning purple! A smooth voice emanated within me, begging me to be calm. I let the voice carry me away as the sensation filled me with peace and serenity. I felt confused, why hadn't I witnessed this before? What was different about now? The sensation continued until I was completely transformed. I felt my body move of its own volition, flying through the air once more. It was headed into the heart of the destruction. A few moments later I appeared before a small grey unicorn mare that was still alive amidst the wreckage. My horn glowed and lifted her from the despair of the destruction, and deposited her onto a cart being flown by a glowing pegasus. The mare said some words that I couldn't hear and then lifted her leg, showing me her PipBuck. My body stayed there, impassive as it watched the mare. The unicorn finally lowered her foreleg and my host nodded impassively once more. The warm sensation began to flee my body as fast as it had come, and I felt my body in flight once more, settling down on the far edge of the crater as the unicorn mare and glowing pegasus flew off into the distance. I stared down and felt my body returning to normal as my blue coat began to appear. The calming voice quietly thanked me as I felt its presence removed, leaving me staring at the crater once more.

It was a strange feeling not being in control of your own body. I wondered what it all meant. I picked up my hooves and began to flap my wings, taking to the air once more. There was nothing more here for me. I sighed as I flew, watching Maripony get farther and farther away. The world below me began to drift away, fading into darkest black as I woke up.

I awoke again to the stench of burning, this time a reality. I gazed across the room, seeing nothing but the drab grey tone I had been accustomed to for some time now. A muffled explosion sounded from beyond the darkened room. *What's going on out there?* I thought as I tried to push myself up, meeting the metal restraints as I did. I remembered quickly what I was doing here and the dream I had just

had. I had never before dreamed so vividly about my time in Unity or about the end of the Goddess. It was an event I wished to put behind me. I had refused to think of myself as a soulless killing machine any longer. But something about the dream felt very real. It felt like almost like it actually happened.

I looked down at the restraints and tried to feel with my magic. Amazingly enough, my horn began to glow... weakly at first but then stronger as the restraints fought against my telekinesis. Eventually the metal bars could not restrain me any further and they ripped off, flying across the room and smashing into the wall. I pushed myself off of the table and stood, my hooves shaking. I took a step forward and nearly fell over. My body was weak it seemed. Nevertheless, I pushed forward to the door. I put my ears against it, trying to hear if there was anypony coming and then silently pulled the door open. The hallway was dark and long, running perpendicular to the room I was in. Other doors lined the hallway as I crept along, but they all appeared to be locked. The hallway ended into a massive door that was just barely open enough for me to fit through. I stepped onto the other side and my eyes widened with fright.

I was standing on a catwalk high above the hangar, a large row of vats lining the floor. Shimmering liquid sat in each of the vats, reflecting the spotty lighting from the ceiling above. The foundation of the room was cracked in two pieces, as splashes of the liquid ran along the flooring. There were other catwalks lining the room, many of them hanging away from the wall. Several of them lay on the floor of the hangar in pieces. I nearly died at the sight of it all. My PipBuck was clicking a bit, indicating varying levels of radiation as I jumped from the catwalk and glided to the floor below.

No... not here. Not here, were my only thoughts as I stepped into the wreckage, stopping for a moment to look up at the vats. *This can't be... this place... this place should be completely gone... this shouldn't even be here!* My mind shouted. Another muffled explosion sounded in the distance, causing the hangar to shake a bit from the impact. I ignored it as I stepped up the catwalk leading to the vats. I stared down at the shimmering liquid, remembering a young unicorn that had been stuffed into the sickly looking stuff. I put my head down and tears flowed, remembering the one thing I never wanted to remember: my own transformation. I couldn't remember much about my past life before I became what I am, but one memory always stuck out. I had cried for the pain to stop beforehand. I had cried that I didn't want to go into the disgusting vat. And then... there was Unity. Unity had cared for me, but I had not cared for it. Not since she died. My tears flowed for the little unicorn in the back of my mind. Another one joined her as Rarity told me that I had to be unwavering. I tried to smile through the tears but found it hard to even formulate happiness in this place. This is where who I had been had died, and where who I was today was born.

I slumped down, sitting there for Celestia only knows how long, looking into the vats and thinking about just ending it and stepping into one. I was pretty sure that even for me, the amount of taint the vat contained would kill me. Another explosion rocked the hangar as I sat there; shaking stone and metal from the walls as one of the catwalks fell and hit the ground below it. I tried to process what had happened. Pride certainly had moved me after all, but she had moved me to the one place I never wanted to set foot in again. Maripony Research Center sprawled out before me, a living reminder of my horrific past. *Why?* I thought as the tears began to fade. *Why is this place even here?*

I almost didn't even notice the blip on my E.F.S. coming up behind me. I turned and snarled, lashing out with a telekinetic strike intent on ripping apart whoever it was. The figure dropped to the ground as my strike went over their head. The figure stood and jumped at me. I growled, readying myself for an attack. Two forelegs wrapped around my neck, pulling me into a fast embrace. I looked down in surprise as my vision cleared enough that I could see who it was.

Violet. She had come for me.

The green unicorn had latched herself around my neck. Tears flowed freely from her eyes.

“Star... it’s me, it’s me. It’s okay, it’s me,” She said, sobbing. I sat there, surprised and unsure of what to do or say. Violet pulled back, her eyes watery and her smile bright as she looked me in the eyes. “It’s me... it’s okay. I’m here.”

“V-V-Violet?” I stammered. “Is it... is it really you?” She nodded. Another explosion rocked the distance, causing another shake to occur inside the hangar. “But... but I... why?” I put my head down and rested it against her shoulder, tears beginning to form once more.

“Star... shh... it’s alright. We have to go now though. You and I can talk later... right now you need to be strong for me. Can you do that?” She said. I pulled my head away and nodded slightly. A light chuckle interrupted me before I could say anything else.

“Well, it seems your little friend found you. How quaint,” The silky smooth voice of Pride emanated from the room. The night blue alicorn appeared at the far end of the catwalk. I stood and stared at her angrily.

“You,” I said, staring down the alicorn, who merely chuckled.

“Yes... me. Hard to believe your friends would go to such lengths. No matter. You will still be mine, regardless,” Pride said. Violet stared coldly at the mare. I felt my magic begin to wane again. I growled and ignited my horn, ripping one of the catwalks from the wall. The feeling left me and my horn continued to glow.

“No!” I shouted. “You do not get to do that again! If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it right!” I leapt at the shadowy alicorn, who grinned and leaped back at the same time. I touched down on the catwalk in front of her.

“So forceful,” The midnight mare responded. “You are really something. It will be a lot of fun breaking your will.”

“Why did you bring me here? This place shouldn’t even exist!” I screamed at her, feeling power pour into me as I did. *What’s happening to me?* I thought as the blue alicorn chuckled again.

“I rebuilt this place from memory. I never wanted to leave Unity, don’t you see that? Unity was glorious! We were together, you and I sister. Now... with your power I can recreate it, and seat myself firmly at the top of the chain. I will become the new Goddess!” She shouted back, the first time I had really heard the mare raise her voice at me. She wanted to recreate Unity? That was why the... oh Goddess. She planned on using me to create new alicorns, to recreate glorious union.

“You’re insane!” I shouted back. “You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“See for yourself. The process has already begun,” She said, pointing to the vats. The liquid inside swirled with color. I groaned... *I have got to be seeing things*, I swore to myself. I looked back at Pride and snarled.

“You’re making taint? How?” I asked. The midnight blue alicorn grinned profusely. I had no idea how she had done it, but if this stuff ever got out... it would be very bad for the rest of the world. A new Goddess would be very bad indeed, especially one that had the potential to be even more evil than Trixie had been.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Pride replied. That was it, I had decided. No more miss nice alicorn! I leapt through the air again, striking her in the side with a hoof. She didn’t move, didn’t even block. She took each blow as I kicked at her, just grinning wider each time. *What the fuck is wrong with her?* I thought as I laid another hit into her side, knocking her to the ground.

“You know...” She said, her mouth bloody and her eyes wild with fire. “You forgot somepony was here.” My eyes widened and I turned, seeing Violet standing there. Her eyes were cold and

impassive. My eyes pleaded with her, that this was a pony that had hurt both of us, but her eyes kept staring straight at me. Then all of a sudden, they widened as something wrapped around her leg. A bluish tentacle emerged from one of the nearby vats, wrapping itself around Violet's back leg. It began to pull and yank, dropping Violet to the catwalk with a massive clatter.

"Violet!!" I yelled as my marefriend's eyes began to show fear.

"Star!!!" She shouted back as the tentacle pulled hard, lifting her high into the air above the vat. Violet struggled against the thing's grip as another tentacle reached up out of the vat and grabbed her other back leg. Slowly the two tentacles descended. It was a scene I felt like I was watching in slow motion. I ran, and ran, and made it to the edge of the catwalk. The tentacles dropped faster as Violet outstretched a hoof to me. I put out my hoof as well, trying to catch her.

I never made it in time. Violet's body fell into the swirling liquid, a sickening ***splash*** accompanying her descent into the taint. The liquid rippled with the force of her impact, splashing taint over the edge of the vat and onto the floor below. After a moment, the liquid went still. I turned to Pride, my eyes ablaze with fire.

"**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!**" I shouted, letting my magic amplify my voice as I moved towards the fallen alicorn. "**WHY? WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!**" The midnight mare laughed wickedly, an insane giggle creeping out of her mouth. I snarled and began to slam my hooves into the alicorn repeatedly. I didn't care anymore. I was going to murder this mare, just like she had done my love. She had taken Violet away from me, and she deserved no quarter. I growled and bucked and bit as I slammed into her, drawing blood and breaking bone. All the while, the mare giggled insanely as if something inside of her had broken.

"**SHUT UP!**" I screamed, continuing to hit the broken alicorn. She giggled louder.

"**SHUT UP!!!!**" I said, igniting my horn and lifting Pride into the air. "**YOU TOOK HER AWAY. NOW... YOU WILL DIE.**" I brought her up above the vats and dropped her, a second ***splash*** filling my ears as she hit the taint filled vat. A sizzling sound accompanied the alicorn's descent into the liquid. I moved over to the vat that Violet had fallen into and fell to my haunches. Rage filled my eyes and anger ruled my heart as I sat there, beating at the catwalk beneath me.

"Give her back! Luna damn you, give her back!" I snarled as I pounded away, not caring for anything but the thought of seeing my love one more time. The liquid began to ripple and I paused for a moment, wondering if my prayer had been heard. A green light emanated from the liquid as a pony rose out of the vat. Covered in writhing taint, the pony regarded me impassively. The green alicorn spread its taint-filled wings, and opened its mouth to speak. When it did, its voice sounded like a million others all at once. Green tentacles erupted from its sides, reaching towards me.

"*You are going to LOVE ME,*" The being said as the tentacles wrapped around my legs and dragged me into the vat beneath it.

"Wake up! Star... dammit wake up!" A voice emerged out of the void. It was somewhere above me. *Am I dead?* I thought as I regarded the blackness around me. *The last thing I remember...* My eyes widened. I remembered Pride, and Violet being dragged into that sickly vat of taint, and then her coming out of the vat and dragging me down into it. But if that was the case... why was I still thinking? I could feel myself still, I wasn't dead. I was still alive.

"Star!! Wake up. Please, come on guys, help me get her off this thing," The voice sounded again from above. The blackness felt quite like space in a sense, in that I was able to float freely in it. I pushed

myself up towards the voice. It sounded concerned, and it kept calling my name. Why would it do that? Who would be concerned for me? I was alone... and nopony ever cared for somepony who was alone... right? Right?

“Star... please... please wake up... I need you...” The voice continued. I floated towards it some more, the voice getting louder as I did. I kept moving towards it, until it was deafening in my ears.

My eyes opened weakly as I tried to figure out where I was. Above me were two teary green eyes, attached to the most beautiful face I had ever seen. Violet stared down at me and smiled. Her eyes were red with tears. She had been crying for some time it seemed. I moved to push myself up but she stopped me.

“Whoa, easy there. You’re okay... you just woke up. I’m here now, it’s going to be alright,” She said, choking out the words.

“That... that’s what you said before...” I managed to say. Violet shook her head.

“It was a dream. All just a dream,” She replied, moving out of my way so I could see clearer. I was in the same similar drab grey room as before. Standing behind Violet were Steeljack and Patch. Behind them was another pony I had trouble making out. My eyes widened as I realized who it was. I didn’t recognize the mare outside of her armor, but her wings were the same, bladed all the way down to the base.

Lust.

“What are you doing here?” I said coldly, past Violet and aimed right at the jet black pegasus. Her eyes turned immediately to the ground.

“I... I... I brought your friends here,” She said finally, soft and quiet.

“Why...?” I asked. “I thought you wanted to kill me.”

“Pride did a lot of mean things to me. I didn’t want her to gain that kind of power. She didn’t deserve it,” The mare responded coldly. “So I went and found your friends and brought them here. Plus... you are kind of cute.” Violet glared at the mare at that remark. I nearly giggled, but I couldn’t believe it. Lust actually helping us? *What was in it for her?* I wondered as I turned to my other friends.

“Where is *here*?” I asked aloud.

“We’re still in Glyphmark,” Steeljack grunted. “The MoP clinic had a back room that went down into a laboratory. That’s where we are now.”

“And Pride?” I said. Violet shook her head.

“Not here. But based on the state we found you in... she must have been really torturing you,” She replied. I sighed, and pushed myself up off of the table, ignoring Violet’s protests.

“I’m okay, really. I’m fine,” I said as I sat up, trying not to remember the events of the dream. I looked to the other three in the room. “If umm... if you don’t mind... I’d like some alone time with Violet please. If that’s okay with you...” Steeljack and Patch nodded, and Lust merely grunted as she exited the room. Patch walked up quickly and hugged me before leaving. Steeljack simply gave me one of his tips of his invisible hats and followed his marefriend out. Violet sat down next to me and looked up at me expectantly.

“So I –“

“So I –“

We both started at the same time, talking over each other as we began to speak. We stopped, and

giggled for a moment.

"You go first," I said. Violet blushed.

"No, you... you go," She replied. I took a deep breath and sighed.

"Okay... I umm... I'm sorry Violet. I was wrong. I almost lost you because of it too. I wish I could take back the things I said, but I can't... if you don't want me anymore... I'll understand," I said, tears forming in my eyes. Her hoof touched my cheek and brought my gaze down to her face.

"I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have let my anger get the best of me. It nearly cost me you as well. I said some pretty mean things that I shouldn't have. Forgive me?" She said, her tears flowing freely. I smiled, and I nodded. She reached in close and I felt her lips touch mine. Electric jolts shot up and down my body as we kissed. We held it for a brief moment, before pulling away. I grabbed her into a hug and smiled.

"I'm sorry," We said at the same time. Realizing again what we had done, we laughed.

"Celestia look at us, we're sitting here crying like two little silly fillies," I said finally. Violet laughed brightly. I smiled. I missed that laugh so much. Our laughter must have broken enough of the tension that our friends felt safe enough to enter the room once more. Steeljack and Patch entered with Lust trailing behind. I turned my attention to the jet black mare.

"I don't know why you did this really. But... thank you," I said, drawing a surprised stare from the pegasus. I smiled.

"I... I don't know what to say," She stammered. "I half expected you to hit me or something. Your friends tried to shoot me several times before I could prove that I just wanted to talk." Violet chuckled nervously.

"To be honest... that's what I felt like doing, but you stood up to Pride. What will you do now?" I asked the mare. She shrugged.

"I don't know to be honest. Maybe we'll meet again, and you'll have to kill me then," She said, grinning. I scowled.

"Does this mean you're still going to come after me at some point?" I said. The mare grinned widely before turning for the door.

"Maybe. But not for the reasons you think. You're a lot of fun Ministry Mare. Pretty cute too," Lust said. Violet scowled at her. "But when I do come... be ready for me, okay lover?" Her wings flared out and I could see her wings much closer. Her wings were encased in steel armor ending in vicious blades. Something about the way she moved them seemed to be completely natural to her. I grinned.

"That's a promise," I said. The door opened and the mare left. I turned back to see my friends, smiling at me. Violet had picked up my bags and floated Stargazer over into my loving grasp. While I missed my marefriend a bunch, I really missed my gun! The weight of the dream was slowly lifting off my shoulders as we prepared to leave the facility. A few moments later, we stepped back into the sun of Glyphmark. I felt amazed at the sun's warmth spreading over my body as I emerged from the shadowy facility. Of course, there was no sign of where Lust had run off to. *What a strange mare*, I thought as we walked back to the center of town.

"So... what happened with Lust?" I asked as we made our way to the nearest inn where we had already procured a room. Okay so was out for definitely more than one day for that to happen. Why do I always end up on the short end of the stick there?

"Well umm... we were looking for you, and we couldn't get in to the Ministry of Peace clinic. We were about to try and bust our way in when Lust showed up. She was right about the whole shooting

part; we definitely tried to shoot her. I expended several clips just firing at her. Her wings really do repel gunfire did you know that?" Patch said animatedly, waving her arms for great effect. "After we realized she wasn't trying to fire at us, we stopped firing at her. Then she just kind of started... talking I guess."

"Well... I have a feeling it won't be the last we'll see of her or Pride. Furthermore, Pride told me that there were seven of them including her, Lust, and Greed," I said, imparting what information I could about Pride's boasting while she had me in captivity. "To top it off, Pride's special abilities are dream-walking. So if anypony has any bad dreams... we'll know she's still following us."

"What about you? What kind of dreams did she make you have?" Violet said quietly as we got ready for bedtime. I chuckled nervously as I slumped down onto my bedroll.

"I... I umm... yeah..." I stammered. "Sorry, I'm... I'm just not ready to talk about it yet." Violet's eyes softened as she realized she struck a nerve.

"Sorry. When you're ready, I'm here alright?" She said, smiling. I nodded.

"Thanks..." I said, laying my head down next to her. I smiled as I realized how happy I was to be back in her presence. I've said before that Violet's presence was extremely calming and this never rang truer than it did right now. The scent of my mare filled my nostrils as I placed my head right onto her. "Love you Violet."

"Love you too Star. Good night," She responded as I drifted off to sleep.

This was beginning to get old! I thought as I stood in the hallway once more. The hallway never ceased to end it seemed, lined with doors that held emotions and feelings and I just wanted to be rid of it!!! I sat down on my haunches, wondering what would happen if I didn't go into the door for once. However, I knew in the long run that would never happen because I would always go into the door. My curiosity would always get the better of me it seemed. The same old ***fwoosh*** and ***creak*** met my ears and I turned to the next door and entered. A sprawling laboratory spread out before me. I recognized it as the laboratory from the memory orb that belonged to Fluttershy. It was Twilight's basement lab in her parent's mansion. Amidst the chaos of the lab was the same purple unicorn, running about from place to place, a terrifyingly stressed look upon her face.

"Oh no no, I'm going to be tardy! This experiment simply needs to get done five minutes ago!" She shouted, running over along the wall and pressing a few buttons on the computers lining it. She turned and saw me, her eyes widening.

"Oh no, I have no time for you. I'm going to be late. I can't do this right now!" She said, rushing past me. I stared at her as she moved, confusion spreading across my face.

"Huh?" I asked. "Who are you?" I swear, these emotions got stranger and stranger with each new one. What would you even call this mare in the first place? The purple unicorn stopped at one of the tables, pushing a few beakers around and dumping some of their contents into a larger beaker. She cried out triumphantly as whatever solution she had mixed together turned a dark purple and green. She set down the beaker and looked back at me, her face still a bit... off. She looked crazed. Her mane was straggly and she looked like she hadn't slept in days.

"I'm P-P-Panic. Now if you'll excuse me, I really need to get some of these things done! I'm going to be TARDEEEE!!!" She said ending in a loud shout.

"Tar-what?" I asked, crossing my eyes for a moment.

"Tardy, you know... late? I'm going to be late! Oh so late. The Princess was expecting this report five

minutes ago! If I don't get it done, oooh I don't know what she'll do to me!" The crazed unicorn exclaimed as she resumed her rushing about the lab, stopping only occasionally at each station she had set up. I sighed, and placed myself directly in her path as she began to run back to the beakers.

"Panic. Stop for a moment. I know for a fact that you won't be late. The Princess sent me to watch your experiment, so you can't be late since I'm here already right?" I lied, hoping it would keep her attention for at least one moment. Wrong. Instead the mare's head nearly imploded more.

"What?! She sent you? Oh no, but I'm not ready yet!! Please don't banish me, or put me in a dungeon, or banish me then put me in a dungeon in the place you banished me to!" She cried out, dropping to the floor at my front hooves. I smiled for a moment.

"I'm not going to do any of those things," I said softly, placing my head down near the panicky mare. "Now tell me... what's really wrong?" The mare's eyes remained widened as she began to speak. *I guess that's simply how she is*, I thought as I listened.

"I was supposed to show the Princess my experiments I've been working on. It's a new kind of magic, something that will let us cure ponies who get hurt on the battlefield... but it's not ready yet. I'm still missing some important pieces!" The emotion spewed forth rapidly. I began to wonder how this mare got anything done with the babbling she was doing.

"Curing ponies? Isn't that a function of the Ministry of Peace?" I said, continuing the lie and trying to sound official.

"Normally, but I figured something o-out. I-I f-f-figured out how to contain a pony's spirit so that it can be brought back to their body," The lavender mare said. I narrowed my eyes at this. Containing a pony's spirit? This had to be the same spell. I had to play this smooth so that the mare didn't realize who I was. If she did, I wouldn't be able to get any answers.

"And how does this... containment function? Is there some sort of spell that's cast?" I asked. The mare picked up a piece of chalk with her magic and pointed at the chalkboard. I followed her over to it and she began to spew forth about a gazillion equations onto the surface of the chalkboard, blinding me with science as she spoke about containment and spirit control. To be honest I had a hard time keeping up with it all.

"- and then the only thing I really need is that damn book that Rarity has, but she refuses to acknowledge its existence!" The mare finished in a huff, panting hard as she did.

"Book?" I asked casually, hoping to pick back up on the conversation at hand. "What book?"

"Oh," The lavender unicorn deadpanned. I got the distinct impression she wasn't supposed to say anything about that, but in her panicky nature let something important slip. "Umm... nothing, nevermind!"

"No, please tell me. I'm interested," I said carefully. I needed to keep calm now, and not let my anger get the best of me.

"Okay," The mare said after a moment's pause. "Rarity won't tell me anything about it, but I know she has it. It's some sort of book on Zebra necromantic magic." I nodded. I knew exactly which book she was referring to. It was a book that was now gone, thanks to the Destroyer. Painfully I remembered watching the grey mare toss the Black Book into the vats at Maripony. I had been there, I knew what it was and why the Goddess wanted it. The answers that such an item held were limitless for the now dead Trixie. It was rumored that Rarity used the book herself, unnaturally prolonging her life. Unfortunately it didn't stop her from being killed in Canterlot when the Pink Cloud fell. How could Twilight's spell have been finished if the Black Book was destroyed? I briefly wondered if

maybe there was a second book somewhere. I made a mental note to keep an eye out for such a thing, and also to ask Spark at my earliest convenience. “But please don’t tell the Princess about it! I don’t want Rarity to hate me!” A pleading look crossed the crazed unicorn’s face. I smiled softly at her.

“Don’t worry. We’ll keep that one between you and me, okay?” I replied. The unicorn’s face seemed to calm for a moment before returning to the same crazed look she had before. She began to flutter around the laboratory once more. My response must have assured her that her work and her friend’s secret would be safe. I calmly watched as the lavender mare began another test involving several test tubes and some shimmering liquid. I recognized it immediately. *Taint*, I thought. Otherwise known as the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion (casually shortened to I.M.P.), taint was the stuff that made myself and my sister alicorns out of existing ponies. Taint was a very radical substance, and was largely responsible for the alteration of many species in the Wasteland. Bloatsprites for instance, were what you got when you mixed taint with a parasprite. It was most definitely not a substance one just sloshed around. With all that I had seen lately, the sight of the liquid so casually being mixed with other liquids in test tubes highly unnerved me.

“Panic?” I asked, catching the attention of the mare. “What are you doing with this stuff?”

“What? Oh the I.M.P. right. Just minor testing of its special properties is all. I’m working on that project as fast as I can. Please please please tell the Princess we’re almost ready for clinical trials. Once we get out to Maripony we’ll be able to test it properly,” She said frantically. I nodded in response, satisfying the panicked mare’s ego for a small while at least. I stood and addressed the purple unicorn once more.

“Well... Thank you for showing me everything. I will be certain to get a report to the Princess on everything,” I stated, trying to sound official in my speech. The mare nodded excitedly.

“Oh thank you thank you thank you!” She said animatedly before her panicked expression took hold once more. “Oh I almost forgot, I have to do this other experiment too!” I groaned and turned towards the door of the laboratory. The door was missing. *Great*, I thought. *Now what?* I turned back and looked at the other mare, who was continuing her work in her panicked fashion, paying no attention to me. My gaze fell upon the now missing door once more. I couldn’t recall a time when I’ve been blocked from going back to the hallway. Granted the dreams would usually end by now... so why was I still here?

I walked up to the area where the door had been and touched the wall. It was completely solid. It was the strangest thing ever. A coughing noise behind me interrupted my scan of the wall. I turned and saw the one I had been dreading seeing in my dreams. The midnight blue alicorn stepped forward, grinning evilly.

“We have unfinished business you and I,” She said smoothly. I stared down at Pride, who was standing there as if it were the most casual of things.

“Get out of my head. Now,” I said angrily. Panic continued her ministrations in the background, not even noticing us anymore. Pride chuckled smoothly.

“And why would I want to do that? Your head is so much fun to laze around in,” She replied. I snarled at the midnight mare.

“Get out. And stay out. You come after me, and I will make sure you go to Tartarus for what you did to me,” I shouted.

“Are you referring to your little dream about your marefriend dying? Pish, I have things much more fun than that in store for you,” The midnight alicorn responded. I’d had enough of this mare by now, I decided. I made a new resolution, right then and there to find this pony and end her. She had put me

through hell, and she deserved just as much right back.

"I swear to you that I will find you. And when I do... I will end you," I said angrily. Pride cackled at this.

"If you want that chance, then come to Chicacolt. I will be waiting for you... but be forewarned, the Blustery City will test you many times before we meet again," The alicorn said. "Now then, wake up wake up little Star. I will see you soon."

A cold sweat drenched my forehead as I woke up. I looked down and thankfully noticed that Violet had shifted enough that I wasn't sweating all over her. She was still asleep it seemed. I smiled and sighed as I considered Pride's words. Regardless of whatever happened next, I would find her and make her pay for what she had done. If that meant going to Chicacolt, then I would do it. I briefly wondered what she meant by the city testing me. I had heard many rumors about the Blustery City in my time. Some said that the bombs that hit there were enough to kill but not enough to damage buildings structurally. Much of the city was still intact, having fallen prey to gangs of raiders and slavers over the last few years. I blinked as I processed these things in my head. *How do I know so much about that city? I've never even been there*, I thought as I pushed myself up, taking care not to wake Violet. I stepped to the window of our room and looked out at the town of Glyphmark. Thoughts of Chicacolt and Fort Knowledge swam through my head. I still had yet to come up with a plan for getting access to the restricted sections. I decided that we would just have to wing it.

A murmuring noise behind me indicated that Violet had awoken. The shuffle of her hooves followed as she stepped up to the window next to me.

"Everything alright?" She asked softly. I nodded and smiled. I looked back at Steeljack and Patch, who were still sleeping comfortably in each other's forelegs.

"Can we take a walk?" I asked Violet. She nodded and followed me as we stepped out of our room and began walking through the sleepy town. None of the town's inhabitants had arisen yet, it being quite early in the morning.

"I... I want to tell you something," I told her once we were alone enough to not be overheard. She nodded nervously, perhaps probably wondering why I was doing this. I began to speak, talking about the strange dreams I had in Pride's captivity, how she was in them and how she had effectively died. A soft gasp escaped my lover's lips as I arrived at this part, and tears formed in her eyes. I continued to speak, talking about my dream the night before and the confrontation with Pride. I mentioned about going to Chicacolt to confront her. By this time the sun had begun to form in the sky above and the townsfolk had begun to filter into the town square.

"That's... Oh... Star... I'm so sorry," Violet said, grabbing onto me and pulling me into a hug. "I didn't know. Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I... I didn't want to. It was too much. But now, I don't have a choice. I'm going to find Pride and end it once and for all," I said coldly. "She almost tore us apart, and made me think that you were dead. She deserves no less." Violet grimaced and nodded. We made our way back to the inn where Steeljack and Patch were waiting for us. They had our things already packed up.

"Where'd you two run off to?" Steeljack huffed.

"I had some things I needed to tell Violet. Listen you two... I really appreciate what you guys have done for me... for us. After we're done at Fort Knowledge, we're going to be heading to Chicacolt," I said firmly. "I have reason to believe that not only are there answers there, but a certain alicorn that we

have unfinished business with.”

“Let me guess... Pride?” Steeljack replied, raising an eyebrow. I nodded. Patch grinned.

“Yeah! We’ll get that mean old alicorn and then umm... I dunno... do something?” She said, ending in a sheepish tone. I laughed as I nearly fell over. Forcing myself to stand back up and keep a straight face at Patch, who was now red all over, I smiled profusely at the green mare.

“Yes Patch... we will,” I said, grinning. I grabbed my stuff and latched Stargazer to its harness. We started along down the road out of Glyphmark and onto the way to Fort Knowledge. As we walked I clicked on my radio, letting the smooth sweet sounds of Sweetie Belle carry us along. Things seemed to be better for us as we moved farther away from Glyphmark, the memories of what had happened in that dreadful place migrating out of mostly everypony’s thoughts. Everypony but me... I still could feel the pain from watching Violet fall into the taint and then rising again as some monstrosity. I couldn’t wipe the image from my mind. It stuck with my mind as we walked, gnawing at the back of my head like some gnawy... thing. Shush, I know that’s not a word. Every so often I would steal a glance at my love, hoping she wouldn’t notice my nervousness. Of course, that meant she did, falling back to speak with me as Patch and Steeljack kept trudging along the road.

“You okay? You keep staring at me kind of funny,” She asked, smiling.

“Sorry... I just... I can’t stop thinking about the... dream,” I said quietly. “It keeps coming back to me. Goddesses Violet, you have no idea how real it felt.”

“No... you’re right, I don’t... but you shouldn’t let it get to you Star. I’m here, and I’m alive. Isn’t that all that matters?” She replied. I sighed, and nodded.

“I suppose you’re right. I just need to let it go right?” I said brightly. “No sense dwelling on the past.”

“Right, in that case then... TAG!” Violet said, hitting my left side with her hoof. She squealed joyfully and galloped forward, pushing through Steeljack and Patch and up the road. I snorted in response.

“Oh. It. Is. On!” I exclaimed, flapping my wings and taking to the air. I gotta admit, Violet’s a fast little filly when she wants to be... but me? I’m at least twenty percent faster. I landed in rear of her as she moved to dive out of the way. I grinned, tapping her on the rump.

“Tag! You’re it!” I shouted. I could hear giggling behind us from Patch. Violet stood up and grinned, making a beeline right for me. I jumped into the air over my excited fillyfriend as she crashed right into Steeljack. “Hey I guess that makes Steeljack it now!” I called as I landed again. Violet grunted at me.

“No fair, cheater!” She called back, sticking her tongue out at me. Patch meanwhile had moved away from the now ‘it’ Steeljack who calmly put a hoof to his forehead. He reached out and tapped Violet on the shoulder, grinning.

“It,” Was all he said, as he moved back away out of Violet’s reach. Violet groaned and tried to chase after the other two, giggling as they managed to stay just out her hoof’s reach.

“Dammit! Why am I always it?!” She shouted as she tried to tag me on the leg. I grinned and moved out of the way, keeping her at hoof’s length as I did.

“Because it’s always so much fun to mess with you like this. Besides, you started it!” I exclaimed as I took to the air once more to keep away from my silly mare. This behavior continued on for at least another hour when we quickly realized the strenuous activity from running around and flying (in my case) was making us quite hungry and a little winded. We decided to stop for a few moments to catch our breath and eat. Finding an abandoned utility station on the side of the road, we sat down and looked at our map, plotting the rest of our course out to Fort Knowledge and eventually to Chicacolt.

After a relatively uneventful meal and an even more uneventful few hours later, we crested over the final hill overlooking the small town of Fort Knowledge. The town looked much as I had remembered, its various libraries hidden behind the makeshift metal walls that made up the Fort. In the distance I could see the temple of the Followers, and several alicorns hovering about the walls on guard duty. I smiled and looked down at Violet, who was grinning to. Despite what we had gone through, it was good to be home, at least for a little while. We made our way down the slope towards the town, chatting about what we hoped to find when we got there. We approached the gate as two alicorns came out to greet us.

“Greetings fair sisters,” I called out and bowing my head to the two guards. The two bowed in turn.

“Radiant Star. Tis been too long since you have been home,” One of the two alicorns (the blue one, I for the life of me could not remember either of their names) replied. I nodded and smiled.

“We are not staying long unfortunately. We would like to have lodging for our two friends here, and then I must speak with the Elder. It is of grave importance,” I said. The other alicorn (a green) nodded. She motioned for Steeljack and Patch to follow her as we followed the blue towards the temple. The atmosphere of the town felt a little... different so to speak as we followed behind the blue alicorn. The townsfolk seemed to be normal, as they milled around their business as usual, but something felt off. I couldn’t place a hoof to it, and judging by Violet’s expressions as we neared the temple she felt the same way. The stonework of the temple of the Followers came into view soon. The blue stopped at the front gate and stood to the side.

“The Elder has been expecting you for some time. You may enter and see her,” She stated. I nodded and thanked her as we walked past into the temple courtyard. The Elder had been expecting me? Why is that? It didn’t make any sense. How could she have known I was coming back here? More questions swirled around in my mind as we made our way through the halls of the temple, finally arriving at the sanctuary of the Elder. I cautiously knocked on the door.

“Enter,” The voice on the other side called out. I lightly pushed open the door. I realized for a moment I had never broached the sanctuary of the Elder before. It was a private place that only the Elder priestesses of the Followers were allowed. The room itself was spacious and elegantly designed, the windows depicting graceful stained glass of various ponies. It looked like almost like a shrine of sorts. The Elder herself sat in the middle of the room on a beautiful red chaise lounge. Two large cushions lay in front of her. She motioned to them as we entered into the room.

“Please. Sit, make yourself comfortable,” She said. I moved and sat on one of the cushions as Violet sat next to me. “Now then. You are probably wondering why I knew you were coming.”

“Actually... I am. How did you know that we would return to Fort Knowledge?” I asked calmly. The Elder smiled.

“The reason that I continue to remain Elder is because I am gifted with a form precognitive vision my dear Star. To be perfectly clear, I saw that you were coming in my mind,” She replied. “You come seeking answers to questions that you have about yourself.”

“Yes... I was hoping that maybe I could get access to the restricted library. There may be tomes in there that can tell me what I need to know,” I said, putting on a pleading look across my face. I hoped if I sucked up enough that maybe I could get the access I needed. The Elder nodded along as I spoke and paused for a moment.

“I... I figured you might say something like that,” She said finally. “Know that while you are an initiate member, we are well aware of the good you have been doing in the world. This ‘Ministry Mare’ that the DJ has made you out to be has not gone unnoticed. Therefore, we arrive at an

impasse. You see, we have a problem... a problem that only you might be able to handle.”

“What sort of problem?” I asked. What could I possibly do that the Followers needed my help with it? I had a bad feeling about whatever it was. The same kind of off feeling I had while we were walking to this place. Furthermore, I had been planning on just hinging my entire plan of getting into the restricted library. To ask and just be given access was sort of strange. There was something I had to be missing here.

“You see... the restricted library is hidden deep within the nearby mountain. A beast most fowl has settled there. We know not what it is; only that it is dangerous. It has caused our small town many problems including some that resulted in the deaths of several of the town’s ponies, and has eluded us every time we have searched for it. We will allow you access to the restricted library on one condition: slay this creature so that we may continue to access the knowledge stored in our most sacred of libraries,” The Elder said. I blinked. A creature? She wanted us to take care of some beast that had moved in? Well... that sounded sort of easy... right?

Fort Knowledge was located in a small valley in the shadow of a large mountain chain. Inside of the mountain was a hidden labyrinth, a maze of books and tomes that made up the restricted section of the library. The Elder had explained to us that this library contained many volumes of prewar secrets, including some personal journals of the Ministry Mare of Magic herself. I was elated to know that there was a slim chance of finding out any answers, but at the same time I was worried about what sort of creature could elude the alicorns and cause so much trouble. After we met up with Steeljack and Patch, I explained what was going on. A few hours later found us trotting up the mountainous path, following the map that the Elder had given to us.

“So this thing just sort of keeps disappearing?” Patch piped up as we made our way up the rocky foothills.

“That’s what the Elder said. She said they can never get a look at the thing; even the ponies that got attacked by it were unable to identify it. The ones that died though...” I replied. The Elder had explained that the ponies that had died by the thing had been violently exposed to some form of chemical agent, reducing their bodies to bloody messes in mere minutes. Whatever this thing was, it was brutal in its attacks. The mountainous path ended at the base of the great rock, giving way to a cavern carved in the side of the stone. We entered into the cavern, the light of day replaced by the soft glow of the torches that lined the roughly hewn walls. The path led deeper and deeper into the mountain, until it stopped completely at a large metal door. A large rusty chain lay on the ground before it next to a massive padlock that appeared to be broken. The door was slightly ajar, the dim light from inside the facility emerging from within as we approached it.

I stepped forward and pushed the door open the rest of the way. A soft light washed over us as we entered; the torches that lined the walls more frequent. I began to wonder what sort of creature could hide in this kind of light until we reached the end of the hallway. A stairway descended downwards into the darkness and I realized that the light was less frequent down there. The bottom of the stairway opened up into a massive room, lined with rows and rows of bookshelves. Large tomes and books hung from every rack, dusty from the ages of time. Stylized lettering lined the ends of each row, showing what kind of books were in that row. There were several large rows devoted to Daring Do. I smiled and chuckled at the thought of Twilight storing her entire Daring Do collection here in this giant library. Another row was on the study of Magic. I was thoroughly amazed at the amount of knowledge stored here. It was incredible. We moved down one of the rows, looking at the books for any titles that stuck out. The library was quiet and still. I started to really wonder if the Elder wasn’t just giving us an excuse to be here. There didn’t seem to be any sort of creature here. I stopped in front of one of the

large bookshelves and noticed something glittering in the center of it. I pushed aside the books around it, revealing a glittering memory orb. *Interesting*, I thought as I swept the memory orb into my saddlebag. *I wonder why anypony would leave a memory orb in a place like this.*

A skittering noise brought my attention back to the world of the present. I looked up, trying to locate the source of the noise. I heard the shuffling of hooves as my friends maneuvered around me. The skittering noise continued all around us, getting louder and louder as we tried to figure out where it was coming from.

“What is that?” Patch shouted over the noise. A dark shape passed over us as I looked back up towards the ceiling. I nearly screamed at the sight of the thing. A massive... thing hung from the archways above us. Its leathery wings stretched over the room. Red eyes lit up from its head as it skittered around the room. Glistening teeth emerged from the thing’s maw. Its skin was black and taut, filled with rot and holes. The worst of the thing was what emanated from its mouth. A gaseous pink substance erupted from the creature’s mouth, filling a space in the air before it. My eyes widened at the sight of it. I knew that substance. It was the worst of the weapons the zebras had used during the war. The zebras knew it as the Littlehorn Agent. We knew it as the Pink Cloud. This... thing was some form of ghoul, and not just any kind of ghoul... but a Canterlot ghoul. The thing appeared to be watching us intently, most likely wondering what we would do next.

“Is... that what I think it is?” Steeljack uttered. I nodded calmly.

“Pink Cloud,” I said, staring at the thing with incredulous eyes. “As long as we keep away from its mouth, we should be fine.” The thing must have decided that we were taking too long to determine our strategy. It lunged from the ceiling, knocking into several rows of bookshelves. Shit! I thought as several of the larger rows of shelves began tumbling onto the next, threatening to crush us. “Move move move!” I shouted as we started to gallop back towards the entrance. The thing above us screeched and howled as its claws ripped over our heads, coming deathly close. I pulled out Stargazer and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots into the air towards the massive beast. Time slowly resumed as my weapon let loose its payload, unleashing several rounds into the air at the thing. Howls of pain erupted from the creature as my shots struck true. At the very least, this thing could be hurt. The air lit up with silver fire as Violet let loose with Thunder Flash, hitting the ghoulish creature in the leg. Steeljack and Patch worked in tandem, his rifle complimenting hers with perfect harmony. A massive gout of pink substance shot through the air at us.

“Move out of the way!” I yelled as I tried to push back on the substance with my telekinesis. My companions jumped behind one of the fallen rows of books. The cloud resisted at first as I grimaced harder, trying to push against it. The substance relented and flew back upwards at the thing, wafting harmlessly over it. I put up Stargazer and fired, hitting the beast in several spots, forcing more howls of pain from the thing. It flew backwards, trying to frantically escape as it hit the far wall with a sickening ***thud***. It sank from the air and hit the ground, crushing several bookshelves and howling in intense pain. The thing labored in breathing as it lay there. As I got closer I noticed the thing was scaly and sickly looking. Its eyes were closed as it began to breathe slower. The pink substance that had been coming from it no longer lingered around its mouth. The thing was almost insect-like. The body structure looked almost similar to something I had seen before in a book.

“It’s almost like... like a dragon, but insectoid in nature,” I said aloud as my companions came up behind me. The thing’s breathing subsided and it finally lay still. I looked up to see where the thing had hit the wall. A large hole erupted from where the thing had hit, revealing another large room of bookshelves. The room looked even older than the current room we were standing in, which now appeared like a tornado had suddenly popped up in the middle of it. Books lay strewn about the area, shred into pieces. Some of them looked like they could be saved, but most of them were lost causes. I

felt bad having destroyed such valuable information, but the Elder had neglected to tell us how big this thing could have been. I cautiously stepped around the beast, giving it a wide berth as I motioned for my friends to follow. I was concerned that the Pink Cloud that the thing had been emanating had stopped, almost as if it had been directed carefully so that it wouldn't spread. It didn't fit the normal behavior of the necromantic agent. We entered the old room, feeling the weight of time all around us. The shelves were marked with various icons instead of text, depicting what types of tomes were in that row. My eyes widened when I saw the final row at the end of the room. A stylized icon of Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark was emblazoned on the row, several large books sitting on the only shelf. Next to the books was a large locker.

"I found something!" I shouted as I stepped into the row, eyeing the locker. I lifted it off with my magic and set it down. It wasn't locked thankfully. I opened it up, revealing four glittering memory orbs. I lifted each one out and placed them in my bags. There would be no time for viewing these now. I looked up at the books and pulled them off of the shelf as well. One of the books felt relatively light as I opened it up. The first thing I noticed is that the book was hollow inside! Sitting inside the book was a large dulled golden tiara, a stylized crystal set in the top of it in the shape of a very familiar cutie mark. My eyes lit up at the sight of it.

"It's just as I remembered it... but it's a little dull," A voice from the back of my head said. ***"It used to be a lot more colorful."***

Spark? What is it? I asked Spark. The spirit paused for a moment before answering.

"It used to be the Element of Magic, but now... I don't believe it has that power anymore," Spark replied. ***"In fact, I'm sure that it's useless."***

Why would Twilight store it here if it was useless? I said, snorting. My friends had stepped up at this point and Spark decided to say no more. I grimaced as I lifted out the dull tiara and showed it to my friends.

"Pretty..." Violet said, eyeing the dull tiara up and down. I nodded as I turned to the other book. The word *Diary* was written on the top of it. I grinned and slid both the tiara and the book into my saddlebags.

"I think we have what we came here for," I said with finality. Something inside me knew that this is why we were here. The book, the memory orbs, and the dulled tiara that had once been Twilight's Element. They were all here for a reason. I nodded as we walked towards the hole the thing had made that revealed this room. We stepped out and I immediately noticed that the dragon-insect-thing's body was gone. My eyes widened with fear as I realized that the thing wasn't dead. *I should have known better*, I thought. The thing was some form of Canterlot ghoul. It took a fucking lot to kill one, let alone injure it. This thing was smart. It let us think it was dead and waited for us.

"Shit!" I shouted as I looked up, hearing the skittering noise once more. The monstrous thing lunged from the darkness above us, its teeth glistening. I jumped back out of the way, pushing my friends back with my telekinesis as the thing struck the ground in front of us, snarling and howling. Stargazer and Thunder Flash came up. The monster's eyes glimmered in the darkness. It growled and pushed up off of the floor of the library, flapping its wings. I paused for a moment.

"Wait," I said, staring at the massive beast and flagging down Violet. "Why isn't it attacking us now?" The thing hung there in the air, simply staring at us and doing nothing. A glimmer of light shined behind the thing and I thought that I saw something else for a second. An equine-like figure with a massive shadow behind it was standing in the darkness on one of the balconies above the creature. *Who?* I thought as I tried to figure out what was going on. The figure shifted and turned away, waving what appeared to be a hoof. The dragon-like beast snarled and suddenly began to shrink,

dissipating in a gaseous cloud of pink right before our eyes. Soon, it was completely gone. Nothing remained in the air before us, the musty smell of the library returning as we stood there.

“What the...?” Patch said, blinking. I blinked as well. When I looked back up to the balcony, the figure was gone. Its shadow was no longer cast over the ceiling. I was chilled to the bone. *What was that thing, and how did it do that?* I thought, as I stared at the air before us.

“Yeah... I’m right there with you,” Violet said. “What was that thing?”

“I... I am not sure,” I replied, surveying the damage done to the library. “We had better clean some of this up and continue looking around. There could still be some important books here, but I’m not holding my breath. Mostly I’d like to make sure we don’t get in trouble with the Elder.” I chuckled nervously as Violet grinned. She knew as well as I did that the Elder wouldn’t be happy that some of the knowledge had been destroyed. We moved about the massive room, picking up the shelves that had been knocked over by the monstrous thing. As I picked up a particularly large tome I noticed a familiar mark. Another stylized marking of Twilight’s cutie mark appeared on one of the books at my feet. I picked up the tome and opened it. It was a history book, containing old information about the Twilight Society. Interesting, I thought as I stuffed the tome into my saddlebag. It would make for good reading later on. Beyond that, there wasn’t much in the library other than old magic tomes and historical records in the first place. I sighed, having thought that the restricted section would have more. Violet came up to me, holding a book in her magic.

“Hey, check this out,” She said, handing me the book. It was a book on historical Chicacolt. “It’s nothing major, but the book says that there were several Ministry hubs in the city, including a Ministry of Arcane Science hub. Might be worth checking out when we get there.” I nodded, handing the book back to my love. She stuffed it into her saddlebag and smiled. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah... I’m just concerned. That thing we fought... there was something controlling it. I saw it up on the balcony,” I said, pointing up at the balcony that I had seen the shadowy figure.

“I saw it too,” Patch said as she walked up next to us. Steeljack was busy placing several books back on the bottom of one of the shelves. After he was finished, he trotted up next to us as well as we made our way back to the entrance of the large room. The walk was a quiet one. I spent the time trying to process the recent events. First Pride, then the horrifying dreams and now this monstrous thing that spewed Pink Cloud. Then there was the deal with the shadowy figure I had seen. It was almost as if the thing was waiting for us. More like it was waiting for me. I thought of Pride and what she had said about there being more like her, wondering if this figure was another one. If so... why did it not try and do us in completely? The dragon thing was more than enough of a challenge. I distinctly remembered the thing having died and yet it came back to life quickly. If it could do that, then all it would need to do is keep coming back until it tired us out. So why? It was all too much for my mind to process. I sighed and tried to keep my mind off of them, letting my thoughts drift to the items we had located in the small library room. The memory orbs I would be sure to look at later, when we had time. The diary though... I would have to begin reading it as soon as possible. Perhaps Twilight had written something in there detailing her secret project. One thing was for certain, I knew it would contain some answers.

The Elder had waited us outside of the town as we made our way down the mountainous path. I smiled as she raised her hoof in greeting. She motioned for my friends to continue on, wishing to speak only with me. I nodded in agreement and smiled at Violet. She nodded and ushered my other two friends down the hill, happily trotting along back to town.

“I trust that since you are alive you found the creature?” She asked. I nodded in response.

"I'm not really sure what it was to be honest Elder. It was some sort of dragon insect thing. I don't think it was here by chance," I replied. Her eyes widened.

"What do you mean?" She said. I sighed.

"We've encountered some... enemies for lack of the better word. I believe that whatever it was... it was waiting here for me," I said, explaining about the shadowy figure we had seen and about Pride. She scowled of course when I mentioned the creature and how it had destroyed several rows of books. I knew she would. She didn't say anything about it thankfully as I continued to speak. The Elder nodded at the fake name Diamond Night as I mentioned the midnight alicorn.

"The name does not ring a bell. It is not uncommon though for our kind to resist the call of the Savior. While the vast majority of our race is depending on Velvet's plans to help us survive, there are still others that prefer to be on their own," She replied. "This... Pride could be one of those wayward souls."

"She has... powers. She can see into other pony's dreams," I said, drawing the gaze of the Elder. By now we had arrived back in the Fort and were walking alongside the stately green alicorn down the main drag.

"Really? That is unusual and very rare magic," The Elder said, putting a hoof to her chin. "And you are going to go to Chicacolt to confront this alicorn?" I nodded.

"That is what I intend dear Elder," I said, bowing before her as we stepped up to the Temple.

"Well... I could say that you weren't allowed to, but... I know that wouldn't stop you. You have my blessing and the blessing of the Savior. Be careful. If these enemies that seek you are as powerful as you say they are... you will need to be wary and keep your wits about you. Keep your friends close to your side Radiant Star," The Elder said finally after a moment of pause.

"I will," I said, smiling back. We continued to speak, as I talked about everything that had happened since we left Fort Knowledge. When I mentioned the Twilight Society the Elder's eyes narrowed.

"So you say this DJ believes the Twilight Society has disappeared?" She asked. I nodded.

"Apparently the same day that this happened," I said, indicating my body with a wave of my hoof.

"Interesting... this is new information. I will have to look into this. Are there no leads as to where they've gone?" She said. I pulled out the book I had found in the library.

"I found this. It's some sort of historical record. Apparently the Twilight Society goes back pretty far," I replied. "I'm hoping that it holds some answers as to where they might have gone." The Elder nodded.

"Well, I wish I had some answers for you," She said, sighing. "Unfortunately, I must take my leave of you. I'm sure you have a trip to prepare for. Good luck Radiant Star. May Celestia light your path." She smiled and stepped inside the Temple, leaving me standing there. I sighed and began walking back towards the rooms my friends had been put up in. I stepped in, finding Steeljack and Patch, but no Violet.

"Where's Violet at?" I asked as I sat down next to my two earth pony friends.

"She went off to do some trading. She said she'd be back a little later," Steeljack replied. I nodded, smiling at the two. Steeljack seemed to be happier lately. I grinned internally; wondering if that had anything to do with a certain green earth pony mare that had turned his head. Patch was cleaning her eye patch off, keeping it free from dirt. Her eye had healed up to a point where it was pretty much sewn shut. Regardless of her disability however, the mare soldiered on. I was impressed by her

tenacity. It certainly didn't seem to affect her shooting capability. I stared at her as she worked, drawing her attention.

"What's up?" She asked, smiling and breaking my focus.

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking. Lot on my mind you know," I replied. She nodded.

"Listen... I know we haven't gotten a chance to talk that much lately. Are you alright?" The green mare said quietly. I sighed.

"I just... I'm fine. I really am. I never got a chance to thank you, you know... for... you know," I said, referring to my episode outside of the Ministry of Peace clinic. Patch got my hint and smiled at me.

"It's alright Star... Everypony goes through those things. Relationships are hard like that," She said, grinning. I grimaced.

"Yeah but the things I said... I shouldn't --" I started to say. Patch waved me off with a hoof.

"Everypony says things they don't mean when they're angry. It's part of life," She said as the door opened. I looked up and saw Violet walking in, her bags stuffed full of trade. She grinned.

"Well, I got a bunch of supplies, and good value for the stuff we've scavenged," She said, pulling out several bottles of healing potions and medical supplies. We divvied up the supplies between the four of our bags so that they weren't all being carried by one pony. Violet brought out the book on the history of Chicacolt and began to skim through it, pointing out an illustration on one of the pages. It looked like a map.

"There's an old prewar map of the entire city. I'm not sure how accurate it will be though," She said. I took the book and looked at the map, scanning its locations. Sure enough, there was an M.A.S. Hub listed, along with a Ministry of Wartime Technology Hub. The city was quite large, nearly as large as Manehattan or Fillydelphia. Filly's Tower also stuck out as being important. Apparently it was a very popular tourist location, being one of the tallest buildings in the entire city according to the book. I briefly wondered if the great Tower still stood or not. I set down the book and slid it back over to Violet.

"Alright. We'll leave in the morning," I replied, getting my things ready for bed. I laid out my bedroll and placed myself on the floor next to Violet, who smiled up at me and snuggled in closely.

"Goodnight everypony," I said, to the murmurs of my friends as we all drifted off to a good night's sleep.

The next morning arrived as normal, with no crazy dreams to speak of. I was surprised given my mental state lately. We packed up our things and stepped out into the fresh morning air, ready to get onto the road. As we left the Fort, I looked back once more and began to wonder when I would next see the place. It had been a home, but now no longer felt much like one. My home was with my friends, wherever we ended up at. I smiled as I pondered this thought. As long as I had them, I could be happy.

The sun grew high in the sky as we walked. The sultry voice of Sapphire Shores accompanied our trek across the barren Wasteland as we headed north to the great city of Chicacolt. As Sapphire Shores ended, the radio gave way to the smooth voice of DJ PON-3.

"Good morning Wasteland! This is your host with the most, DJ PON-3! I'm here, mixing up all the latest and greatest news and tunes.

Well folks, it seems like nopony has seen neither hide nor hair of the famous Ministry Mare in some

time, but I can happily say that I finally have some news on her. It seems our famous friend is on her way to Chicacolt my little ponies. Be careful up there Ministry Mare. And if you see my counterpart in that area, say hello to him for me!

In other news, a research team was found dead in Glyphmark in one of the Ministry of Peace facilities working with the Followers of the Apocalypse. I've been informed that the bodies have been interred and their families notified. A representative of our good friend Velvet Remedy tells us that they aren't sure what caused the deaths of the research team, which was part of the efforts to develop a potion to help the alicorns procreate. Work has begun anew however on the project; the new teams refusing to let the deaths of their predecessors deter them. Extra security has been placed around the facility to ensure their safety.

And that's all for the news today my friends. Remember; be kind for kindness sake out there. Protect each other as you would protect yourself. Have a little Sweetie Belle"

The DJ's words drifted away and the sweet voice of Sweetie Belle replaced it, lifting our spirits as we progressed further north. I thought of the research team in Glyphmark, a pain in my chest rearing its ugly head when I realized those were most likely the ponies that Pride had murdered. Of course they couldn't figure out how they died... Pride most likely had given them nightmares that frightened them to death. I cringed at the thought, having almost gone through the same thing at Pride's hooves.

As we walked, the radio station playing DJ PON-3 began to get fainter and fainter until I could no longer pick it up. *Hmm, that's strange.* I thought, fiddling with the buttons on my PipBuck, until a new radio station popped up on it. The music that blared out was new and interesting, and nothing like I'd ever heard before. The song consisted of chunky guitar riffs and a steady drum beat, while the lead singer belted out words that were barely incoherent. I grinned as I bopped along, drawing giggles from Violet and Patch. Steeljack rolled his eyes at us and merely bobbed his head.

"Oh come on Steeljack, get into the swing of things!" Patch said, nudging the buck on the shoulder. He grinned slightly.

"I'm good, thanks," He said, laughing lightly. The song gave way to another tune, this one a little heavier. The drum beat started up early in the song as a crazy guitar riff began to play. The music continued into the background while we walked, the barren landscape giving way to what appeared to be a rough forest of dead trees. The ground became soft and muddy as the sun bore over the top of us. The air became humid and sticky, making it incredibly uncomfortable.

"What is this place?" Violet asked as we pressed forward, the sky above us turning a sharp grey as the sun dipped behind several clouds. It didn't help with the humidity, instead only making it worse. The air hung still around us. The ground grew softer as it gave way to a swamp-like substance.

"Looks to be some sort of swamp area," I said. "Come on, we'd better keep going." The swamp appeared to stretch on for miles ahead of us, the dead trees surrounding us as we walked along the path. It began to get darker, the deadened trees creating a canopy of wood over the top of us. A chill wind blew across us, creating an eerie feeling in my gut. What is up with this place? I thought as we trudged along. I kept looking at my E.F.S., paranoid about any threats. There were several yellow blips to our east that appeared to be large bugs. Nothing seemed to be of any remote threat. Still, something felt off about the whole thing. I felt like we were being watched. I gently clicked off my PipBuck radio, letting go quiet.

The path led deeper into the swamp, finally opening up to a large clearing filled with ash black wooden stumps. A sinister feeling fell over us as we stepped into the clearing, making me feel even more like something was there. I looked to my E.F.S. again, and saw nothing. The feeling of being watched intensified as I grimaced, pulling out Stargazer just in case there was anything there. Violet looked

over and noticed, drawing Thunder Flash.

“What?” She said quietly. I motioned for her to come closer.

“I think there’s something here,” I said. “But it’s not showing up on my E.F.S. I just have a really strange feeling that we’re being watched. It’s been getting worse as we’re walking.” Violet nodded. Steeljack and Patch took up point behind us, keeping watch as we continued through the large clearing. A creaking noise got our attention as we stopped. I turned towards the sound of the noise, not seeing anything at first. The creaking continued, drawing our attention to the center of the clearing.

Where once before there was nothing, now there was a shadowy figure wearing a long cloak. It was equine in nature, with a large contraption behind it. It appeared to be some sort of cart. The figure pulled off its cloak, revealing the most grotesque figure I’d ever seen. It appeared to be an equine of some sort, its mottled skin falling off its disgusting body. One of its front legs was exposed bone and muscle, ending in a gnarled hoof that was curved. The thing was surprisingly short and held itself low to the ground. Long ears lifted from the side of its head. Rotting flesh lined its face and pus oozed from its skull. The thing’s eyes were a sinister red as it stared at us, glowing in the darkness. Looking further back I could see that the thing was indeed attached to a cart, filled with pieces of rotting flesh. The cart appeared to be fused to the creature’s back end; its large wheels the source of the creaking. The smell alone from the contents of the cart could cause any normal pony to toss their lunch immediately. It took all my willpower not to empty my stomach right then and there. I looked over at Violet and my friends as they were struggling with the same thing. It opened its mouth and a pink substance spewed forth, flowing into the air before us. It swirled around the figure almost like a shield. My eyes widened as I realized that this must have been the same figure we saw in the library.

“You,” I shakily said as the thing regarded us with its sinister gaze. “You were at the library weren’t you?”

The thing looked up at me and stared intently. It opened its mouth once again and began to speak, its voice gravelly and harsh, the ages of time having taken their toll on the creature's throat.

“Kid... you’re a lot smarter than you look.”

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Dreamwalker: Your mind is sharpened against mental attacks. Your mental resistance is increased by +25% and you take 25% less damage from psychic attacks.

New Quest: The Pride of Chicacolt – Go to the city of Chicacolt and confront the dark alicorn Pride.

Spell Upgrade! Telekinesis (Rank 2): Your telekinesis has improved. You can now affect insubstantial objects with your magic.

Spark Level: 60%. This is how much Spark has control of your body.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 11: The Road to Redemption

I know this is hard for you Pinkie, seeing that you're friends with everypony, but you just have to accept that Cranky is gonna be an exception.

Redemption. It's something that everypony seeks at some point in their life. But are we truly seeking redemption, or are we looking for validation of our existence? I'd like to think that true redemption comes from within, strengthening our resolve as we atone for the wrongs we have committed. I know in my heart that for every right, there is a wrong that I have committed. The Caravan on the way to Glyphmark. New Appleloosa. Stable 33. Violet. There are two sides to each coin and as I come ever closer to Twilight's memories, I feel each sin she committed along with each joy.

Am I seeking redemption? I'm not sure I know the answer to that question. As always, I look to the past and see the atrocities committed by the ponies of that era. I briefly wonder if they too, sought to atone for their sins. Or did they simply not care, preferring to grind the world into nothing, all for the sake of a war that cost us so much?

I look at Twilight's life, and the wrongs she did. For every wrong however, there was a right in the end of it all. Twilight sought redemption in the end, alone in the darkness. I can't help but think that she tried her best to make up for the wrongs she had done. I knew it in my heart to be true.

So why then do I feel very unsure about it all?

"Kid, you're a lot smarter than you look."

I stared down at the rotting creature that was standing before us. Its eyes smoldered in the darkness, two red orbs of pure unadulterated evil. Surrounding the thing was a swirling column of pink substance. Pink Cloud. Developed by the zebras during the war, the Pink Cloud was the ultimate weapon against the Princesses. Used by zebra militants during the attack on Littlehorn, the Pink Cloud slew without mercy. The Cloud was used in the final attack on Canterlot, as zebra infiltrators smuggled the weapon into the city, releasing it while the capitol was bombarded from the outside by missiles. Once the Princesses realized what was happening however they kept the shielding over the city up, refusing to let the substance escape Canterlot and spread to the rest of the land. Thus Canterlot became a city of death, immersed in the substance that put the nail in the coffin of Equestria.

Like regular radiation however, some ponies weren't killed outright by the Cloud. Where ponies exposed to normal balefire radiation became ghouls much like Ditzzy Doo, some ponies exposed to the Pink Cloud became ghouls as well, effectively becoming known as 'Canterlot Ghouls.' Canterlot Ghouls were stronger, tougher, and much harder to kill than normal ghouls. And now, we were staring down at one, one that had already proven to be extremely deadly.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I asked the thing, a grimace forming on my lips as I struggled with the smell emanating from the beast.

"Gettin' right to the point then kid? Alright then," The thing said, its harsh voice echoing across the still clearing. "I don't know what you did to piss off Pride, but she sure wants you bad." I narrowed my gaze at the thing. *Of course*, I thought. *He's working for Pride.*

"So which one are you then? I take it you take orders from Pride as well?" I said. The thing emitted a gravelly chuckle that sent shivers up my spine.

"Quick as a whip you are kid. Yes. I work for Pride. You can call me Sloth," The beast said, its

grimace even more menacing than my own. "Let's make this easy on both of us. You want to see Pride and she wants to see you, or kill you rather. The quicker we get this done, the more I can go back to being left alone in peace and quiet."

"I don't think so. I'm going to find Pride on my terms, not hers. If you'd step aside, we'll be going now," I said angrily. Another chuckle emanated from the creature.

"Pride said you might say something like that kid. She said that she wanted you alive... or dead. Didn't matter which," Sloth replied casually. I thought I caught a glimpse of a grin from the rotting corpse. I couldn't figure this thing out, it seemed like all it wanted to do was talk. I decided that if I could press some answers out of it I would.

"Hold up. Why does Pride even want me anyways?" I asked nonchalantly. "Because the last time I checked, the Goddess was dead and so was Unity. Why would she want that back?" The thing shrugged, or at least I think it did.

"I don't question her aspirations kid. I only do what she says. It's just better that way," It said, a twinge of sadness in its voice. I could feel a hint of regret in the beast's actions, like it knew it was doing something morally wrong. I shuddered at the wrongness of it. It felt like an icy chill all through my body.

"But don't you know what will happen if she gets her way?" Violet said as her face darkened and glowed with anger. "In the end she's just using you!"

"You think I don't know that already?!" The beast barked. "I do what I have to. There's no other choice for me..." The harsh voice trailed off.

"There's always a choice!" Violet continued. She was positively livid now. I grinned internally at the fire that was certainly lit inside my marefriend's eyes.

"Not for me, kid. Not for me. You know how long I've lived? Over two hundred years. In that time, you think if I had a choice, that I wouldn't use that choice to finally die already? No... there never was a choice. Goddesses damn them all, I was damned from the get go," Sloth said, his harsh voice cutting through the air like a knife through butter.

"You could choose to help us, instead of her," I offered. I wasn't sure if it would work but it was worth a shot.

"Not a chance kid. You see, Pride holds something very near and dear to me. Once I complete my task for her... she'll give her to me. I told you before... I have no choice," The ghoul replied. The cloud around him swirled about, even though the still air permitted no wind.

"Her?" I asked. The ghoul's eyes widened, realizing his mistake. I knew there was something about this thing. I just knew it!

"Umm... it, yes it, that's what I meant," The creature stammered.

"No, I heard you clearly. You said her. What did you mean?" I asked angrily. The ghoul paused for a moment, and let out another breath of Cloud. "Well?"

"Kid... It was a long time ago. I thought... I thought she died. I was on my way to see her when it happened," The thing finally said quietly before shaking his head. "No. It doesn't matter now. If I bring you in, I'm done. I can finally have her again."

"Help us and we'll help you get her back," Violet breathed, drawing a sigh of annoyance from the ghoul.

"It's not that simple. Don't you get it? If that was an option, I'd have done it a long time ago. No..."

the Wasteland never makes things that easy. It's never that easy..." He replied angrily. "Enough of this. Don't say I didn't warn you kid. You're nice and all, but I've got no choice." He opened his mouth and more of the pink substance began to spew forth, sinking into the ground before him. He grinned slightly, the first real smile I had seen the thing crack the entire time. "You know why I chose this place to meet you? It used to be an old pony graveyard. Now then, let's have a little... fun."

The ground began to shake as portions of the earth crumbled. Pink goo seeped up from the holes all around us, forming into bone. A hoof shot forth from the dirt and began to scrape at the ground. The hoof slowly gave way to the skeleton of a pony. The unnatural horror pulled itself free from the embrace of the earth and stared at us with its soulless eyes... if it had any. Instead, pink goo oozed from the thing's bones, and swirling gaseous clouds of pink made up its eyes. We stared in terror as more of the things began sprouting up all around us. My E.F.S. was being driven completely mad as numerous red blips lit it up like a Hearth's Warming Celebration in Canterlot. The first of the creatures stopped and roared, opening its mouth and revealing a pink liquid drizzling out the sides of its blackened jaw.

"Shit," Steeljack said, readying his rifle. He looked back at Patch, who had a look of sheer terror in her eyes. "Stay away from the stuff in their mouths! If you're hit... you're going to have a bad time." I nodded as I pulled Stargazer out of its harness. If Steeljack was accurate, these things were literally breathing concentrated Pink Cloud. The substance in its gaseous form was bad enough, but when the necromantic stuff was mixed with a liquid and concentrated... it became nothing more than liquid death. One touch of the stuff would be enough to critically injure and potentially kill a pony. And each one of these fucking things was packing it. The horde of skeletons started forward, surrounding us. I snarled and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several bursts at a few of the beasts in front of me. The spell dropped and my gun let loose, the burst rounds hitting their intended targets. For what it was worth, the things didn't appear to move very fast as they shuffled forward. Then I realized as my rounds struck... they didn't have to. While the burst of fire tore through bone and even knocked one of the beasts to the ground as its legs were obliterated, more of the creatures popped up in the fallen ones' place, shuffling forward endlessly.

A sharp **crack** erupted from Steeljack's rifle, striking home into several of the creature's heads. Bone exploded around each bullet as he fired. Patch, who had no vantage point in which to snipe, pulled out a mouth grip pistol and began firing while trying her best to keep behind her colt friend in order to provide him proper cover. Many of her shots went wide and missed, but a few got through as she put holes in bone. A blaze of silver fire joined the **crack** of the rifle as Thunder Flash let loose its payload, the operator of said weapon standing next to me as we moved back to back with our other two companions. One of the beasts moved close enough to swipe at me with a gnarled hoof, growling an impossible gurgling roar. I lifted Stargazer and blocked the strike before turning the business end on the thing's head and letting out some aggression all over it. The skeleton slumped to the ground. I grimaced as I watched Sloth, standing in the background, mutely watching the spectacle. In retrospect, he almost looked sad that he had to do this, as he had a strange grimace all over his face. *Why then?* I thought. *What's so important that he has to do this? Why won't he let us help him?*

"Dammit!" I shouted as Violet spat more hot fiery death at two of the creatures, disintegrating them completely. Two more popped up in their place, continuing their endless shuffle onwards. "There's too many of them!" I snarled and continued to fire, sending more of the abominations to the hellish earth below us. A few more of the creatures stood up from the ground, roaring and clawing at the earth with their disfigured hooves. I looked all around me, smelling rotting death everywhere. The smell was overpowering as the things pressed forward, closing in on us. Their hooves dug Pink Cloud along the ground, creating more of their number as they walked. I shuddered as I watched more skeletons emerge from the ground, pulling themselves along next to their brethren.

“They just keep on coming!” Patch yelled as one of the creatures lunged at her, meeting hot fiery death as Violet turned and fired. The thing’s head imploded in silver goo, knocking it backwards into the beast behind it. I fired up E.S.A.T.S. once more and queued up several more bursts, focusing this time on the legs of the beasts in front of me. Time fell back into place and Stargazer let out its payload, obliterating the creature’s legs out from underneath them. The skeletons roared as the creatures behind them stepped over the bones of their predecessors, pressing closer and closer. I looked around hopelessly at the monsters surrounding us. There was just too many of them. I searched my mind for an option, anything that could get us out of this. I could teleport us... but with Sloth about we could run the risk of teleporting directly into Pink Cloud. My mind latched onto a memory of Twilight’s, a very specific and heart-wrenching memory. It was of her brother, Shining Armor, protecting her from the missile strike. *Why of all things is it this memory?* I thought as the memory played out and I realized what I was seeing. Shining Armor’s shield spell. It was worth a shot.

I focused my energy into my horn, trying to put as much power as I could into my spell. Just as the beasts pressed into our circle I let loose, the magic flowing out of me and into the air around us. A thick purple shield appeared, pressing outwards to encompass myself and my friends. I opened my eyes briefly as I maintained the spell. It was working! The beasts were being pressed back, unable to pass through the solid barrier. I panted as I realized the disastrous results behind using this sort of spell. It was physically exhausting. I wondered briefly if this was the same kind of spell the Princesses used to try and save Canterlot. If so... then it was no wonder the two had to keep switching off to maintain the shield. I couldn’t imagine maintaining magic on such a scale if even a small version of it was draining me like this.

“We don’t have much time!” I shouted as I expanded the shield a bit. “I can’t maintain this for long. We need ideas!”

“Teleport out of here?” Steeljack shouted back. I grunted as pain took hold of my horn. *Fuck this hurts like a bitch!* I thought as I shook my head.

“Do you really think he’d let us get away that easily? We’d be playing right into his hooves. We’d probably teleport into Pink Cloud and die,” I grimaced. I stared through the transparent shield at the beasts trying to beat their way in. Pretty soon I wouldn’t be able to hold up the strength of the barrier and the fight would continue once more. My horn screamed with pain now, threatening to dispel the purple orb at any minute.

“We need to get to Sloth then. Can you move and maintain the spell?” Violet yelled over the roar of my magic.

“I can try!” I exclaimed as I took a step forward. One step felt like a million. I was physically drained by holding the shield by now. I nearly toppled over and dropped it right there. “It’s... It’s too hard... I can’t do it!”

“Yes you can!” Violet and Patch said as they put themselves on each side of me. Steeljack hung back and watched our back as my two friends helped me to walk. The trudge across the swampy clearing was painful as hell, and all the while I could see Sloth’s glowering red eyes as we made our way towards him. I stared at him intently as magic continued to pour from my horn into the shield.

“Sloth!” I shouted at the dark creature. “Please... let us help you! I promise, we’ll save her. Whoever she is, we’ll help her!” The ghouel grunted.

“You can’t help me kid. I told you that already! It’s too late for me,” He said, his harsh voice cutting through the air once more.

“I know you don’t want to do this, so please stop!” Violet yelled. “You think that by paying this

price... by acting the part of the villain that she's just going to hand her over to you? She won't! She's a real villain... and you're not. You're..."

"I said ENOUGH!" The ghoul shouted. "Stop trying to act like my friend! I had a good friend once. You know what happened to her? She died in Manehattan, at her silly Ministry hub. That's what they all do... they die! And not just from the bombs. No... my friend died when she started on those damned zebra mints!"

My mind clicked for a moment. *Wait... what?* I thought as I processed what the ghoul had just said. Sure... there were a lot of Ministry ponies in Manehattan, but only one I knew of that was addicted to Party-Time Mintals. I knew because I had buried her.

"Wait... you knew Pinkie Pie?" I shouted over my magic woozily. My magic was beginning to wane as I noticed the bubble shrink slightly. The ghoul's glowing red eyes widened for a moment.

"I did," The ghoul finally said after a moment's pause. "She was a close friend of mine, until those drugs took her from me." I racked my mind, trying to process any of Twilight's thoughts on this mysterious friend. The thoughts were incoherent and jumbled once more as my magic surged across them like wildfire. A stray memory floated to the forefront of Twilight talking to Pinkie Pie in her library. A mention came up of a new donkey in town that Pinkie had unsuccessfully tried to make friends with. A name came with it.

"C-C-Cranky?" I finally said as my brain returned to its normal incoherent mess. I stared at the ghoul, which I now knew to be a donkey. *Strange creature*, I thought. I had never actually seen a donkey before, let alone a donkey ghoul. The thing glowered at me and spoke, its harsh voice angry and hurtful.

"How do you know that name?!" He shouted. "I... I haven't used that name in a long time!"

"It is you isn't it... Cranky? Why then? Why would you do this? I'm a friend of Pinkie's too... I... I buried her in Manehattan," I cried, forcing my words out amidst budding tears and my sputtering magic. The shield finally dissipated with a soft ***pop***, leaving us staring at the donkey ghoul. My horn died down and screamed with pain as I slumped to my haunches and almost to the ground entirely.

"Star!" Patch and Violet both yelled as they struggled to hold me up. The ghoul looked about for a moment and finally spoke.

"You... you buried Pinkie?" He said, his harsh and gravelly tone taking on a sad twinge to it. I nodded, staring the thing in the eyes. "I see..." He looked around and inhaled slightly. The Pink Cloud infusing the skeletons ripped out of them, leaving the hordes of mindless creatures inanimate once more as the pink substance returned to the swirling column of death surrounding the ghoul.

"She... she was trying to get clean..." I choked out, coughing heavily as I struggled to regain my composure. "She was in the middle of sending Twilight a message that she was going to a rehab center... but she was too late. The bombs dropped, and she died right there." The ghoul was positively glowering now, an angry look on his face.

"Pinkie nearly ruined her life and the lives of everypony around her with those damned mints. How do you expect me to believe you?" He replied. I lifted my foreleg containing my PipBuck.

"I... I copied the message. It's here... listen," I said as I mentally sought out the audio message and hit play. Pinkie's voice resonated across the clearing. After the message was finished, the ghoul sighed, sounding like gravel being scraped across metal.

"It doesn't matter kid. There's still nothing I can do," He finally said after a moment's pause. "Pride has my Matilda, held in stasis. She was locked into a Stable on the day the megaspells dropped. I

don't know how Pride found her, or why she was put into stasis to begin with. I thought she was long dead. I was on my way to the Stable leaving Canterlot when I was trapped inside by the shield the Princesses cast. I should have died. Matilda could have lived happy. I spent a majority of the time trying to find that Stable, while trying to keep my mind intact. I've lived a long time kid; all I want is to see her again."

"We can... we can help you though," I said, breathing hard. "Cranky please help us." Sloth shook his head.

"No... I'm no longer Cranky. I'm Sloth now. Sometimes you have to be the villain in order to get what you want. That's my lot in life. Even when I was just a regular ghoul, I was feared and shot at and attacked. I'm a bad donkey, didn't you know that?" He replied, growing angrier by the minute. Something struck me as odd about his sentence, almost as if he was trying to tell us something. Regular ghoul? Did that mean that he wasn't always this way? I pondered the meaning of this for a moment, wondering if the others... Greed, Lust, and Pride were the same way. Did they use to be regular ponies? What changed them? My thoughts once again were swimming around my head.

"You best get ready kid. I'm giving you enough time to get back on your feet. I'm just getting started," The harsh gravelly voice of the ghoul came as he exhaled, releasing more pink substance into the air. The substance wrapped around and lifted a piece of flesh from his cart and tossed it into the air. The goo suffused the flesh, expanding it and growing it. Eventually the pink seeped completely in, revealing a large black dragon-like... thing. It was quite similar to the thing we had faced in the Fort Knowledge library.

I pushed myself up, my legs shaky but feeling a little strong as I stared at the thing. I looked down, realizing suddenly that Patch was missing. I started to call out for her when a gunshot rang out through the air, slamming through the Pink Cloud surrounding Sloth and barreling deep into his shoulder. Pink goop spewed forth from the bullet hole as he cried out in pain. I grinned.

"If there's one thing my friends are good at, it's surprises Cranky!" I exclaimed, using the donkey's old name for good measure and leveling Stargazer at the massive beast in front of us. "Believe me, we want to help you... but if you're going to attack us... we will fight back!" I let loose a few bursts of fire, striking the dragon thing in the leg. It howled and swooped down at us. Another blast of gunfire rang out from the distance, striking the side of Sloth's cart and splintering wood everywhere. Sloth pointed at the ground with his maw, causing a few more of the skeletal ponies to appear. They fanned out and began shuffling towards us.

"Steeljack!" I shouted to the grey buck. He grinned and nodded, understanding what I meant for him to do. With Patch in a vantage point now, he could go all out. He bit down hard on his battle saddle bit, the sharp ***crack*** of his rifle tearing across the clearing as his shots riddled the oncoming horde with holes. More gunfire echoed in the still air as several more bullets struck the donkey ghoul, forcing him backwards a bit from his position. The dragon thing got closer as Violet and I moved out of the way, letting it swoop by us and back into the night sky. A flash of silver fire erupted from Violet's beam rifle, narrowly missing the beast's back leg. It roared at us and faltered in the air, turning around and letting loose a stream of pink goo. I struggled to move, my legs still weak from over-exerting myself. I felt a tug on my side and a faint glow as I saw Violet trying to pull me along with her magic. The goo struck the ground, barely missing us as it made a sizzling sound and sunk in. That's when I felt it. A clawed hoof shot from the ground just below me and grabbed my foreleg, the pink substance driving it sliding onto my coat. I felt the skin beneath it boil and pop as I screamed in pain. I looked down to see the flesh on my foreleg sizzling and melting as the thing tried to pull itself all the way out of the earth. Then just as quickly as it had popped up the thing was gone, destroyed in a blast of silver fire. My leg was on fire as I gingerly tried to step down on it. I almost fell over as pain shot

through my body.

“Star!” Violet yelled as she ran up to me, floating out a healing potion and bringing the bottle to my lips. I could barely focus on anything through the pain as the healing potion worked its magic. The beast spewed forth more pink goo, striking the ground around us. More skeletons popped up as Steeljack stepped in and began firing rapidly, issuing ***crack*** after ***crack*** of his gun. Patch let loose several shots, taking down more of the skeletal assailants. I felt a jab on my side as I saw Violet floating a syringe of Med-X away from my body. The pain began to dull almost immediately as I surveyed the damage to my leg. A nasty fleshy scar hung off my skin as it was attempting to repair itself due to the healing potion I had drunk. I groaned as the pain subsided and I was able to focus a little bit better.

“Are you alright?” The voice of my marefriend rang out, shaky and unsure. I nodded, gritting my teeth as I pushed myself up with her help. I was pissed off now. I hurt like hell and my horn felt like it was going to fall off at my given moment. I lifted Stargazer, weakly I might add, and pointed it at Sloth.

“Violet, think you can keep the big guy busy for a while?” I said. She nodded and looked at me funny. “What?”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re shaking,” She said, concern dripping from her voice. I sighed.

“Yes, I’m fine. Let’s end this,” I said as I rushed forward, woozily at first but clearing up as I went. I took to the sky, ejecting burst after burst of fire from Stargazer at the skeletons guarding their disgusting master. Bone clattered to the ground as the skeletons were ripped apart. I could hear and feel Violet’s silver fire erupting from Thunder Flash and the roar of the dragon thing. I swooped down, keeping wide of Sloth’s column of Pink Cloud as I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time went still as I studied the donkey ghoul. I thought about what he had said. Was it really so simple for him? I thought about what I would have done in his place. Would have I done any different if it was Violet and not Matilda? If the situation had called for it, would I have been the villain? I couldn’t decide as I tried to figure out where to queue my shots. The amazing thing about S.A.T.S. in general was that while you were in it, you had all the time in the world to think about things as long as you didn’t queue up any shots and use the spell’s timing up. I decided however, that it was time as I queued up shot after shot and let the spell drop. Stargazer aimed and began to spin up, firing its payload downwards at the ghoul. A hailstorm of bullets rained down on the donkey, only a few of them striking him and causing spurts of pink goo to erupt from the ghoul. The rest of my shots went wide and struck the ground nearby. I could hear screams of pain from the beast as the dragon thing in the air suddenly disappeared in a splash of pink. I could hear coughing and snarling as Sloth pulled himself from the ground, the necromantic energies that fueled his very existence already healing him.

“Had enough yet?” I shouted down at the ghoul.

“I don’t know kid, have you?” The ghoul sputtered as I landed in front of him. I was still rather shaky. I lifted Stargazer at the creature. He was bleeding pink substance, but it was slowly stopping. Canterlot ghouls were notoriously difficult to kill, and my aim here wasn’t to kill him, even with the barrage I just sent at him. I had intentionally queued up several bursts away from the donkey, only sending a few shots actually at him. I wanted to send a message to his master, and hopefully give him the chance to break free from her control. I wanted deeply in my heart to help Cranky... to show him that he could resist Pride. My heart ached for the poor donkey and the hardships that he had gone through.

“We’re done here. Run home and tell Pride she’ll have to do better next time,” I snarled as my friends slowly stepped up beside me.

“You’re just going to let me go? Why?” Sloth said, shrinking back away from me. His expression now

was one of fear.

“Didn’t you hear? I save ponies, I don’t kill them. And I will save you Cranky. That’s a promise,” I said flatly, staring at the ghoul.

“Still think I can change my fate then I take it?” He replied. I nodded, causing a cracked grin to appear across his bleeding face. “I still think you’re wrong, but I know when I’m outnumbered. We’ll finish this some other time kid.” He stepped back and waved a hoof, the Pink Cloud around him collapsing in until he disappeared. I blinked for a moment. *How did he...?* I thought as I looked around the clearing. The bones of the fallen ponies had begun to sink back into the muck and mire. I looked at my friends, concerned looks gracing all of their faces.

“What’s...?” I started to say as I fell over and felt my world turn to black.

A familiar feeling washed over me as I opened my eyes and realized that I was back there again. The hallway with the doors and the torches. Many of the doors were now boarded up since I had already visited with those emotions. I sighed as I wondered which of the mares I would see this time. As always, the **fwoosh** and the **creak** alerted me to the door that I now sat directly next to. I took a moment to look at the door before I walked in, hoping to glean some information about what emotion I was about to meet, but there was nothing on its wooden surface. I continued forward, stepping from the endless hallway and into an office building floor. A sea of cubicles greeted my eyes as I felt drawn down to the office at the very end of the room. I stepped inside and gazed in awe across a massive cityscape just outside the window. In the center of the room sat a broken down crying purple unicorn mare. She was sobbing heavily as she sat there, staring out the dark window into the city beyond.

“Hello...?” I called out, catching the attention of the mare. She turned, stared at me for a moment and then back to the window as she continued her sobbing. I stepped forward and sat down next to her. “What’s your name?” The mare looked up at me for a moment and then back to the window. “Umm... okay then. I guess we’ll just sit here.” I sat there and looked out the window of the office, taking in the city below. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I wondered if Twilight had ever been to this city, and where it was. Even though it was dark out, activity in the streets below could be seen everywhere. The soft glow of office lights in many of the buildings dotting the city lit up the skyline. Beyond the city, a great bay of water could be seen. I sat there as still as I could, fidgeting every so often and taking a peek over at the sobbing mare next to me. She had yet to say anything as she remained ever silent while the time passed.

“What do you want?” Her voice came unexpectedly. It was low and quiet and I almost didn’t hear her through her crying. I stared down at the mare next to me.

“Excuse me?” I replied. The mare stared back up at me with cold wet eyes.

“I asked what you wanted. No pony’s never just... sat with me before,” She said, sniffing.

“I was kind of hoping you’d tell me... usually you emotions are all so... talkative,” I said, staring out the window once more. “For once, it was kind of nice to just... sit.” The mare looked away for a moment and then back up to me.

“I’m Depression,” She said after pausing for a moment. “Sorry... I’m just a little... out of it.” I nodded lightly.

“Something wrong?” I asked casually. The mare nodded in response.

“I lost someone important to me,” She said sullenly. “I want so badly to see him again.”

“Shining Armor?” I replied. The mare’s eyes widened.

"How...?" She said. I smiled.

"You are in my head after all. I've seen the memories of course," I said. "You loved your brother very much I can tell."

"He was the best... he was my B.B.B.F.F.," The purple mare said as she turned her attention to the window once more.

"Huh?" I said, not catching onto the acronym.

"Oh. Sorry. Big Brother Best Friend Forever," The mare said, the sullen tone returning to her voice.

"Oh," I said in response. That made some sort of sense at least. "It hurts doesn't it? Losing someone you love?"

"Hurts more than you could ever know," The lavender unicorn said. "That's why they call me Depression after all. Deep hurt."

"Is this what Twilight felt after he died? Depression?" I thought aloud. The mare nodded.

"For some time she did. Sometimes she felt like the pain would never stop. She was desperate to get him back in any way she knew how," Depression said.

"Desperate enough then to create magic powerful enough to bring him back to life?" I asked point blank. The mare's eyes widened.

"I... I don't know anything about that. You need to ask Spark," She said, turning away from me and back to the window. It began to rain outside, the light pattering sound smacking against the glass pane as we sat there. A flash of lightning accompanied by the roaring boom of thunder in the distance echoed through the still office.

"I tried that already," I said, my voice growing terse as I spoke. "She won't tell me much."

"Sorry... I'm not allowed to say anything..." The mare said solemnly. I sighed. As much as I hated it, I believed her. Was I being too forceful about all of this? Maybe I was. Maybe I was trying to force answers instead of finding them as they came.

"Sorry," I finally said after a few moments. "So... what was Twilight like? All this time I've been talking to you mares and I don't think I've ever really gotten a good feeling about her."

"Twilight? Oh... she was nice I guess. I only ever got to see her when she was feeling bad about herself. Kind of hard to judge character when all you see is the worst of her," She said.

"Hmm... was she depressed a lot?" I asked.

"No... but she wasn't happy a lot either. Twilight was... focused. She fully believed in what Luna was doing. She wanted to win the war at any cost, no matter what that cost was," Depression said, sighing. I could tell that she was never this talkative.

"I see... one more question. What do you know about a book called the Black Book?" I said, intending to leave the mare alone after she answered. Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. I could smell the fear on her at this point it was so strong.

"How... how do you know about that?" She said nervously.

"I was in Unity. I saw the Destroyer bring the book to the Goddess. It was destroyed though," I replied. "Panic said that the book was needed to finish the spell. But if it was destroyed, how was it possible for somepony to finish it? There has to be another book."

"Rarity had the only one. Twilight obsessed about it. She wanted it so badly. Rarity would never admit to owning it," The mare said, her tone flat and final.

“Is that why those two had problems getting along?” I asked, recalling a particularly vivid memory of Rarity and Twilight arguing over books.

“Rarity and Twilight always had some issues with each other, but there was never any doubt that they cared for each other greatly,” Depression said. I nodded as I remembered the night that Rarity spent with Twilight at the Hoofton.

“In some ways more than others,” I said with a wink. “I seem to recall a certain kiss with a white unicorn coming to play.” Depression snorted at this, her eyes having dried themselves of her tears.

“Twilight was lonely and depressed that night. She had a bad fight with one of her best friends. She was not, and I repeat not, a fillyfooler,” She replied angrily. I grinned that I had been able to coax a bit of a reaction out of the mare.

“She was a pretty good kisser though,” I said, thinking of the white mare fondly.

“Gag,” The lavender mare replied, sticking a hoof up to her mouth. “Anyways, Rarity never told Twilight the truth about the book. Then the rest you know is history. Megaspells dropped, everypony died. Well... mostly everypony.” I thought about what she said. If Twilight never got her hooves on the Black Book, then who finished the spell in the first place? I wasn’t totally sure that there wasn’t another one of those books out there somewhere. It wouldn’t surprise me if the zebras made several of them, as superstitious as they were. Why did it feel like I was missing something? It didn’t seem like Twilight could have ever gotten her hooves on it while she was inside the Goddess. Trixie would have known about it, and that was exactly why many of my sisters had roamed around Canterlot looking for it. No, that thing was locked somewhere in Canterlot until the Destroyer found it and brought it to the Goddess.

“Then... there is no other book?” I asked. The lavender mare shrugged as she turned her attention to the rain outside.

“Maybe. If there was, I don’t know where it would have gone to,” She replied. The rain began to pick up, striking the window harder as the lightning became more frequent. Thunder roared across the sky as I stared out the window next to the depressed mare. I grinned silently, hoping maybe that I could find some answers after all. The diary and the memory orbs I had collected at the library still represented a chance. Perhaps they would contain information about the Black Book and if there were others out there. I made a mental note to check out the diary as soon as I could get some free time. I continued to sit there, mulling about my thoughts until the memory went stark black.

A sharp stinging pain in the back of my mind awoke me from my slumber. I lifted my head and realized I was no longer in the dark swamp we had fought Sloth in. I was in a room, the soft light of morning sun drifting in through the window as I let my gaze linger on the ponies sleeping soundly on the floor. Violet, Patch, and Steeljack lay there. *How long have they been there?* I thought as I watched my friends sleep. *Where is here?*

I let my eyes fall upon each of my friends as I pondered where I was. Violet looked like hell. Her mane was ragged and it looked like she hadn’t slept in days. Patch looked no better as her eye patch was dirty and ragged. I rested my eyes on her flank for a moment, not so much to stare, but to realize that I had yet to ever notice what her cutie mark was. A thin silver needle with blue thread slipped through the eyelet graced her flank. I smiled. Perhaps sometime I would have to ask her what it meant and how she got it. I lifted my eyes to my third friend, Steeljack. The grey buck was sleeping close to his marefriend, his foreleg draped around her side. He looked substantially better than the other two, but he still looked pretty bad. I sighed for a moment and looked down at myself. I was filthy to say the

least, my coat stained with whatever I had fallen into when I passed out. I looked down at my foreleg, the one that had been grabbed by the skeletal pony.

Oh. Ohhh... shit.

Despite the fact that my leg had begun to heal, there was now a large pink scar across my foreleg where the thing had left its Pink Cloud mark. The scar seemed to be keeping away my coat, standing proud of the purple hair on the rest of my leg. I poked at it with my other hoof. It was smooth and itched like hell the moment that I touched it. I couldn't help myself as I started to scratch at it. I sighed in contentment, letting my tongue roll out the side of my mouth as I scratched vigorously. My scratching must have been a little too loud, as I was interrupted a moment later by a cough and a "Hmmp!" I stopped and looked up, seeing Violet standing there. She had a pretty mean look in her eye I must admit. I grinned sheepishly.

"Umm... morning?" I said, continuing my sheepish grin as she glared at me.

"You're not supposed to scratch at it. Doctor said so," She replied coldly, before softening up a bit. "But... I'm glad you're awake." I smiled as she stepped forward and gave me a light nuzzle on my neck.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Tribal town called Arlington. Its a few hours south of Chicacolt, give or take. It was the closest settlement we could find to the swampland," Violet said, lying down next to me.

"How long?" I said, dreading the answer I knew would inevitably come.

"Two days," She said softly. My eyes widened. *Again?!* I thought as I cursed Twilight's memories and emotions. *Why can't they just let me pass out for a few hours or something sometime?* I snorted.

"Great. I trust that there haven't been any issues since I've been out?" I said.

"Well... we did run into a radhog nest coming out of the swamp. Nothing we couldn't handle though. You're lucky I'm getting strong enough to carry you with telekinesis," Violet replied. "Still... nothing else though. No sign of our new friend either."

"I don't think we'll be seeing Cranky for a while," I said, staring dreamily at the window. The morning sun had fully risen and light was now pouring into the window across the room. "I think we've given him enough to think about. Hopefully he changes his mind and decides to help us with Pride."

"Do you really think he can change?" My love asked, looking up at me with hopeful eyes. I nodded.

"Everypony deserves a second chance," I replied. Violet giggled a bit.

"Star, when did you get so wise?" She said, smiling. I looked down at her for a moment and paused. She had a point. When did I start to think this way? I realized that lately I had been thinking more clearly than I ever had before. My thoughts were interrupted by a set of yawns as my other two friends arose from the floor. Patch wiped the sleep out of her good eye and looked up at us, smiling.

"Morning guys," She said, trotting up next to the bed. Steeljack grunted as he began to pack up the bed roll. I could tell he wasn't quite awake just yet. I grinned and snorted at him. He chuckled as he acknowledged that I was awake and doing fine. Patch sat on the floor next to the bed and began to chat animatedly about what happened after she disappeared on us. She had managed to position herself up in a tree, using the opportunity of us speaking with Cranky to slip away unnoticed.

"How did you...?" I asked, clearly confused.

"How did I what? Get away?" The mare said, smiling brightly.

“No... how in the hell did you snipe from a tree? Isn't that... a little heavy?” I replied. Patch giggled.

“Silly. Earth pony ingenuity. A lot of the Ironshod sniper rifles were made from very lightweight but durable material. It was like carrying a feather!” She said, sticking her hoof up for dramatic effect. Steeljack interjected, as he was listening in while he was packing up our things.

“Due to the fact that a lot of mares wanted to sign up to be in the Equestrian Army, Ironshod and other manufacturers developed firearms that were light and useable by anypony. Every little filly wanted to be like the Ministry Mares I suppose and do their part,” He said as he packed up the last of our bags. I decided to test myself and hopped out of bed, gingerly resting my weight on my foreleg. It felt stable enough at least as I took a few steps.

“Well...? We ready to go?” I asked, grinning. The others nodded as we stepped out of the room. The room was apparently connected to a small clinic where a white unicorn mare bearing a needle cutie mark waited at the front desk. She gave us a smile as we walked up.

“You're awake. And looking good it seems,” She said. “I'm Nurse Emergency Care, I run this place.”

“Thank you for helping us,” I said. “It's nice to see ponies helping out other ponies for a change.”

“I can't really turn down an injured pony now can I?” She replied. “That being said, there is the issue of your payment. You see, we could use a little bit of help. If you want to that is... I mean you don't have to since you already technically paid the caps... I was just hoping... well...” The mare began to visibly shake as her speech trailed off. I smiled and put a hoof on her shoulder.

“Whoah there. It's alright. What do you need help with?” I said.

“Well you see... there's a group of raiders just east of us. They've been in holding up in an old Ministry of Peace hospital. There could be valuable medicine or anything there worth salvaging, if the filthy beasts haven't already pillaged it to death. We're just a small tribal town, we barely get by defending our own,” She began. She brought out a map of the area, showing Chicacolt to our immediate north and the hospital circled in an area to the east. “We're running quite low on supplies as is.”

“Can we borrow this?” I asked. She nodded. I slipped the map into my saddlebags and stared at the mare, grinning. “I think we can come to an arrangement. We'll take a looksie out there and see if we can't clear those raiders out for you.” Care's eyes lit up with excitement as she grabbed my foreleg (my good one) and hugged me.

“Oh thank you thank you thank you!” She said animatedly. I giggled a bit and looked at my companions.

“You guys up for it?” I asked. Patch nodded, a grin forming on her face. Violet and Steeljack nodded as well as I turned back to Nurse Care.

“Looks like that's affirmative,” I said. “We'll head out that way now.” The mare's eyes switched to concerned doctor mode.

“Are you sure? You should rest for a bit longer. You were really out of it when they brought you in,” She asked.

“I'll be fine. Two days is long enough for me to be in bed,” I said with a grin. We thanked the unicorn again for her help and stepped outside into the morning sun. The town of Arlington was truly a tribal town. Even though it had buildings and such, there were plenty of makeshift huts strewn about the small town. What really surprised me were the local townsfolk. Besides ponies, I noticed several zebra, griffons, and even minotaurs milling about the main square. As we walked through the square, several of the locals waved at us.

A few moments later we arrived at the eastern gate of the tribal town, waved out by two very bored looking earth pony guards. I chuckled at the thought of it. *It would be nice to be boring*, I thought as we made our way onto the road. The sun was high in the sky now, and a chill wind blew across the Wasteland while we walked. I decided to click on my PipBuck radio, hoping and praying that DJ-PON3 would reach all the way up here. A few tweaks of the receiver and I dialed in to the radio station I had found before we met Sloth. A chunky beat erupted from my radio as the music led into a rough and tough voice of the DJ. I noticed immediately that it wasn't DJ-PON3.

"Yeeeeeeeeeehaawwww. It's time again kiddies for the Morning Moo Madhouse right here on K-COLT 101! I'm your host... The ONE. The ONLY! The MINOTAUR!"

Yes, that's right kiddies. I am the Minotaur. Your host with the most, bringing you all the hits and news in the Chicacolt area. What's that you say? You live in Filliet? Well, you big trash mountain tribal, get your honkin' ass on down to the big city! It's much nicer than that pile of junk you live in anyways.

Today kids we've got some news for you. Big things happening in the city. Gang violence everywhere folks! There's a gang war in the south side of the city. If you're living anywhere near there get out while you can. If you need assistance, there's always a helping hoof in the NCR... the Nude Chickens Republic! Hahaha!"

The DJ cut off and some voices in the background chimed in.

"It sucks!"

"Oh shaddup, whaddya you know? Anyways, a representative from the Cult of Iron Will contacted K-COLT a few days ago and wanted to pass on some messages. Here's what he had to say:"

"When somepony tries to block, [take them to a gay bar]!"

"Sounds amusing there folks. Anyways. We've got some time for some callers. So if you've got a working transmitter out there, and you're not dead yet because Steel Rangers want it. Give us a call on 141.7! Oh, looks like we've got one now!"

The caller came on the line and the DJ got quiet.

"Minotaur, this is Star Paladin Cotton Candy of the Chicacolt Steel Ranger Union. We hate your show and are going to force you off the air soon you son of a whore." The caller said.

"Hey! That's not fair, my mother wasn't a whore!" The DJ replied, laughing heavily as he did. *"Oh well, looks like we lost that caller. *click* Didn't wanna talk to you anyways, you son of a bitch! Anyways kiddies, that's all we've got for right now. Now onto the music! We're playing all the hits from two centuries in the making! Coming up, we've got a hit from The Ponies, enjoy!"*

The rough and tough DJ voice gave way to a throaty guitar riff that led into a fast and furious drum beat. I bopped my head along as we walked. The Minotaur, eh? I thought as the town of Arlington got further away behind us and the road stretched along. The music drifted into the background as we approached the area marked on the map that belonged to the Ministry of Peace hospital.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck! My thoughts couldn't think anything but the word as I stared down the hill at the supposed raider encampment. The hospital itself was surrounded by a large iron wall. Instead of the usual raider fare however, the walls were painted with a familiar symbol. One of gears and iron. It was the symbol of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. Furthermore, it was the symbol of the Steel Rangers.

The Steel Rangers were a group that existed during the war that operated under the M.W.T. After the

megaspells dropped however, the Rangers transformed into a pseudo knight order with a focus on hoarding technology for themselves. These days, it was a rare sight to see Steel Rangers operating alone like this. Applejack's Rangers had all but quelled the old vision the original order had. Instead of hoarding technology for nopony else, the Rangers transformed into a force of good in the Wasteland, actually helping ponies in times of need. This... this was no Applejack's Rangers compound. The Applejack's Rangers would have helped the town of Arlington by now, and provided the necessary medicines to the ponies in need there. This was a bona-fide Steel Ranger camp. I groaned as I stared down the hill, counting the number of power-armor clad Rangers that lined the walls of the compound. Rangers were notorious for their arrogance and thug-like nature. An olden Steel Ranger might help a pony, only to kill that pony afterwards to take their PipBuck.

"So... what do we do?" Patch asked quietly. I sighed.

"Well we're not going in guns' blazing that's for sure," Steeljack said in response. He was right there. This would not end well if we went at this forcefully. The grey buck looked at me. "Any ideas?"

"Well, only one thing we can do. We're going to have to talk to them, see if we can convince them to give up the medicinal supplies and go from there," I said in a low voice. "But I want everypony to be ready in case something bad happens." Nods from around me indicated my friends' willingness to partake in this suicidal mission. I grinned. I couldn't ask for better companions sometimes.

The trip down the hill was a silent one. We made sure that our weapons were readily accessible in case anything went sour. I knew the instant we made it to the bottom of the hill that we had been sighted.

"Halt! Stay where you are!" A voice called out across the clearing. We had barely made it within twenty feet of the wall. The door to the massive gate opened up, revealing several Steel Rangers in power armor. The leader of the group, a massive pink unicorn buck, stepped out of the gate and began trotting down the lane towards us. We held up our hooves, hoping to indicate that we were friendly. The unicorn stopped ten feet in front of us and held up his hoof back in greeting. "State your business here!"

"Hello there!" I called out, trying to be friendly. "My name is Radiant Star and these are my friends. We're with the Followers of the Apocalypse. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

"Maybe. Why the fuck would I care? What do you want?" The gruff unicorn replied. *Great, I thought. A Steel Ranger with an anger management problem. Just what I needed.*

"Err... we're here on the behalf of the town of Arlington sir...?" I began, catching the eye of the buck.

"Cotton. Star Paladin Cotton Candy," The unicorn replied. Oh this was just even better! This was the buck from the radio call! I groaned internally at my luck. Furthermore, what sort of fucking name was Cotton Candy? Steel Rangers always had the silliest names.

"Star Paladin Candy, we're here because the town of Arlington just west of here is in dire need of some medical supplies that you have here in this hospital," I said, trying to maintain a straight face.

"And your point is?" Candy said. "Look. I'm trying to run an operation here. If you're just going to waste my time, I suggest you leave before I force you to."

"My point is, you could be out there helping them instead of keeping yourself holed up here," I said angrily. "You're a Steel Ranger for Applejack's sake!" Cotton Candy snorted in response to this.

"While my brethren in the south are of the mind that the ultimate goal of the Rangers is to help other ponies, us in the Chicacolt chapter could give two shits about what happens to anypony else. We're doing just fine right here. Now, remove yourself from our property," The buck replied, raising his

voice in anger at me. I gritted my teeth as I tried to resist the urge to wrench his head from his suit with a flick of my horn. This buck really rubbed me the wrong way. Too bad we'd be dead before I got my horn to even glow properly. I stared up at the guns lining the wall and sighed.

"Okay then... what about a deal?" Violet said suddenly. I looked down at her and smiled. The mare knew how to barter well after all. Cotton Candy's eyes narrowed at my marefriend.

"What kind of deal?" He asked. Violet grinned.

"Oh, come on. You're Steel Rangers. There must be some prewar tech you guys want that isn't here," Violet said. "The deal stands though, that you have to take a number of the medical supplies to the town of Arlington."

"Intriguing," The buck replied. "There is something that we have been looking for. Are you familiar with a certain DJ known as the Minotaur?" We nodded and the unicorn smiled widely. "Excellent. You see, this DJ has a piece of prewar tech that I would very much like to get my hooves on. As you by now have heard, he likes to openly mock the Steel Rangers on his radio show."

"Let me guess, you want us to get what he has for you?" I asked flatly. The buck grinned for a moment and nodded. "Can you at least tell us what it is?"

"It's a transponder unit that interfaces with a PipBuck. It's essentially a wide-range transmitter / signal location device. With such a device, we'd be able to determine the location of all the prewar technology within the city of Chicacolt," Candy said. I groaned internally again. A device that would help these guys locate more prewar tech? Possibly even worse things? I didn't like the sound of it. I certainly hoped Violet had a plan for this. I looked at her while she stared at the buck.

"I assume that means we'd be taking the Minotaur off the air?" Violet said, prompting a nod from the unicorn.

"You'd be doing a favor to the city to be honest. That filthy loudmouth has been spewing his junk on the radio for quite some time now. You've heard him and how he acts," Cotton Candy said, turning deadly serious.

"I dunno, I thought he was kind of funny," Patch suddenly chimed in, earning a glare from both Candy and Violet. She grinned sheepishly. "Umm... sorry!" Violet returned to her negotiations.

"Here's the deal then. You give us the medicine and we will take it to Arlington. We have to stop back by there before we continue on into the city," She said. "We'll acquire this transponder and bring it to you."

"Sounds fair enough little mare. May I propose an addendum to this deal of ours?" Candy asked.

"What do you want?" I asked, glaring at the buck.

"We'll let you take the medicine, but if you renege on your end of the bargain... we'll make sure that no pony can even find the town of Arlington ever again," The pink hued unicorn replied. I snarled at myself. *Of course he would*, I thought angrily. *Probably had this planned from the moment we proposed a deal.* At this point in time I really really really wanted to pop this buck's head off at the neck.

"Fine," Violet said in response. I stared at her. *What are you doing Violet? You're going to get those townsfolk killed! We're not just giving him the transponder are we?*

"Excellent. Then we have an accord. Please, follow me and I will provide you with the supplies," Cotton Candy said, motioning with a hoof to follow him.

"Excuse me. Steeljack, Patch: could you please go with the Star Paladin and acquire what we

need? I'd like to stick around out here and talk to Violet for a second," I interjected. Steeljack nodded at me. Violet looked at me blankly.

"You sure?" He said. I glared at him with death ray eyes. He nodded again and motioned for Patch to follow him. The three trotted to the gate and disappeared behind it. I looked back at Violet, whose eyes suddenly got very wide.

"I... I screwed this one up didn't I?" She said quietly. I smiled softly at the realization that she hadn't meant for it to end this way.

"What do you think we're going to do now? Those tribal ponies couldn't protect themselves against regular raiders, let alone Steel Rangers. Are we really going to take down a radio personality, one who at least seems to be letting ponies know what's going on in the city, just to hand these pricks a very massive piece of prewar tech?" I asked. Violet sighed and sat down on her haunches.

"I expected him to say something like that, I just didn't figure he would actually do it," She said. "We're going to need to play this one by ear Star. I won't let those ponies down. They did a lot for us in fixing you up. We owe them." I nodded and sat down next to her.

"It's alright. We'll figure it out together," I said quietly before getting very irritated. "Fuck I hate Steel Rangers." Violet chuckled a bit.

"... Yeah."

Several minutes later, our other two friends emerged from the Steel Ranger compound. Their saddlebags were laden down with numerous healing potions, packages of Med-X, RadAway, Rad-X, and even large amounts of medical bandages. The hospital had been stacked with the stuff. I was pretty amazed. Cotton Candy explained that the building wasn't actually an active hospital even before the war, and had been mostly used for supplies and technological devices from the Ministry of Peace.

As we made our way down the road, Steeljack and Patch brought up the elephant in the room of what we were actually going to do about the Minotaur. I looked at Violet and sighed. We were still trying to figure out how we were going to keep the townsfolk of Arlington safe. *We put them in this position after all*, I thought somberly.

"I suppose, we're going to need to have a chat with him," I said as we walked. "I'm sure he's a reasonable fellow."

"Yes, we're going to waltz up to him and say 'Hey Mr Minotaur, we'd like your transponder thingy that lets you broadcast all over the city!'" Patch chattered animatedly. Steeljack laughed a bit at his marefriend's silliness. I stifled a chuckle myself at this.

"My point is, I think we should at least talk to him. He may have a way for us to get around these Steel Rangers and keep Arlington safe," I replied. Violet nodded.

"I agree. Once we get into the city, our first priority should be to find this Minotaur. He might also know where we can find Pride," She said. "After all, being the city's radio DJ, he's gotta have connections. I'm sure he's hopefully at least heard of her before."

Our exodus from the medical center was brief, and soon we had arrived back into the small tribal town. The guards waved us in and we made a beeline directly to the clinic. We were greeted once more by the warm smile of Nurse Care. The white mare was sitting at her desk like normal. Her eyes lit up at the sight of us.

"You're back. Did you get them?" She asked excitedly. We opened up our bags and I floated out the

supplies, setting them out on a nearby table for her.

“Here’s what we could get... but I’ve got some bad news for you,” I said. “Those ‘raiders’ you thought were out there weren’t raiders. They were Steel Rangers.”

“Steel Rangers? What? What are they doing all the way up here? I thought they were all part of the Applejack’s Rangers now,” The nurse said, suddenly appearing very concerned. I explained about Cotton Candy and the Chicacolt chapter of the Rangers. I also mentioned the Minotaur and she nodded, having said she listened occasionally to his broadcasts but didn’t know anything more about the radio personality. When I got to the part about the deal, the mare’s eyes were widened in panic.

“So let me get this straight. You made a deal with these fucks for this stuff? In return for this thing... and if you don’t get it the Rangers are going to come and rain death all over our small town?” She said after a moment of pause. We looked at each other and nodded.

“Eyup,” Steeljack simply replied. The mare groaned in frustration.

“We’ve got enough problems to worry about! We could have dealt with a few raiders if they came too close, but Steel Rangers? No one would survive that sort of an attack!” She cried out in anger. I sighed and put a hoof on her shoulder to try and calm her down.

“Listen here,” I said, staring at her coldly. “I’m not. I repeat. I am not going to let that happen. We’re going to make sure of that. You’re going to have to trust me.” The mare sighed and slumped down into her chair. After a few moments, she looked up at me and nodded. I smiled.

“Okay. Sorry, I’m just under a lot of stress lately. The town is getting bigger and too many need medical attention on a regular basis that I’m not sleeping well. I trust you. I asked you to go out there in the first place... if anything this is my fault,” She replied.

“You didn’t know there were Steel Rangers out there,” Violet offered. “Those pricks will do anything to get their hooves on prewar tech.”

“I know... I appreciate you picking up these supplies still. They’ll really help us out,” Nurse Care said, smiling. “Well... you’re welcome to stay with us if you’d like for a bit. I know we can’t offer much, but there is an old saloon down the ways that’s been up and running for a few weeks now.” I chuckled a bit nervously at this. I was well aware of the way I acted when I got drunk, or even when my lips touched the exquisite sin of alcohol.

“We could use some rest,” Steeljack offered. Violet nodded.

“Umm... you guys go on ahead then, I think I’ll just take it easy here and lie down,” I said. My marefriend giggled at this.

“Alright sweetie,” She said nuzzling my neck for a moment before whispering in my ear. “We won’t tell anypony you can’t hold your liquor.” I blushed profusely at this, most likely giving the wrong idea to every other pony in the room.

“Ah... ah... right right, yes. Okay then, well have fun!” I stammered out as I ran into the nearest room, hearing Violet’s laughter and an exclamation of confusion from Nurse Care. I breathed a sigh of relief as I moved into the middle of the room and lay on the bed. It was dirty and so was I, but I didn’t mind. It felt good to just lay there with a little peace and quiet.

After a few moments of silence, I picked up my saddlebags and opened them up with a flick of my horn. I pulled out the memory orbs that I had acquired until now with my hooves, laying them out on the floor next to my bed. I carefully set aside the ones that I had already viewed, leaving only seven orbs: The five from the library, Twilight’s orb from the six, and another orb that came from Twilight’s room at the Hoofton Hotel. I regarded Twilight’s orb for a moment, before thinking better of it and

setting it aside as well. Whatever had happened with that orb I still was unable to remember, and I didn't want to risk anything bad happening. Instead I looked at the orb that I had found next to the statue of Rarity. Seeing as we were in the care of good ponies, I decided that now was a good time to view it.

A glimmer in the light caught my eye before I could latch onto the orb. I looked at my bags and levitated out the tiara. It was dull as ever, but one of the gems had a faint sheen to it that could only barely be seen. I sighed and set it aside too. It was another piece of the larger puzzle that I had yet to figure out. Beyond where the tiara had sat was the diary, still dusty from the years it must have spent inside that hidden library room. I pulled it out too and opened it up. Many of the pages were grimy and dirty, but it appeared this diary started with a series of letters. I looked down the page of one of the first ones and began to read.

"Dear Princess Celestia,

My friend Applejack is the best friend a pony could ever have, and she's always there to help anypony. The only trouble is, when she needs help she finds it hard to accept it. So while friendship is about giving of ourselves to friends, it's also about accepting what our friends have to offer.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle"*

I blinked for a moment. This was really Twilight's writing? What were these? As I read on, I began to sense a theme in the writing. The majority of what I knew about Twilight was from during the war, but these... these almost seem like they started before the war. Before things got bad. Twilight was just a young mare it seemed. The letters were interspersed with journal entries describing incredible adventures that she and her friends had. Twilight's journal explained that at a young age the mare was sent to Ponyville to make friends in lieu of a threat from the wicked Nightmare Moon. Eventually, Twilight's connection with her friends is what saved Equestria from night eternal. As I moved forward in the diary, the change in the letters shifted as I realized the writers themselves shifted. The writers became Twilight's friends, each writing their own letters to Princess Celestia about their adventures in friendship. There were even letters from a Spike, which I gathered to be a dragon based on his writings and Twilight's recollections of their adventures.

The further I got into the diary however, the one of the entire thing changed. There were no more letters to Celestia, only diary entries of a battered and broken mare. Twilight's view on life had completely shifted, starting from the moment she became a Ministry Mare. That entry was particularly interesting, considering the excitement that the mare had shown so publicly just to find out that she secretly hated herself for taking part in Luna's Ministries. As I neared the end of the diary, I found one last letter to the Princess.

"Dear Princess Celestia,

I haven't written to you for some time, and for that I apologize. I fear that my studies in friendship are finally at an end. I've come to one simple brutal conclusion:

There is no such thing. Friendship in Equestria is dead. It died when this war began.

My friends are all isolated now. Pinkie Pie spends her time hopped up on Party-Time Mintals, Rarity is too busy remaking the image of Equestria, Applejack has her new beau, I don't even know what's going on with Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy is working on some new big project. This war has driven all of us insane.

The simple fact is that the fate of Equestria no longer rests on making friends. This conflict, this bloody war needs to end.

I'm sorry, I wish there was another way. But I will not let the deaths of innocent ponies, like the death of my brother, stand for nothing.

This will be my last letter. I'm sorry for everything.

*Always your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle"*

I sighed as I closed the diary. I nearly began to cry. I hadn't really known too much about Twilight's life in general. Granted, there wasn't anything in the diary that had anything to do with this spell that Twilight had been working on, but surprisingly, I didn't care. The emotional impact of the letters and Twilight's progression from young mare into grizzled veteran of a long and hate-filled war drained me physically and mentally.

I looked down at the memory orb in between my hooves. There was really no choice now but to view it. I looked at the window and the sun was beginning to set. My friends would be arriving back at any time. I looked downwards again, and latched onto the orb with my magic and allowed myself to be drawn into the memory.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

This was a familiar body. I remembered Rarity's body well as she looked about the large penthouse room she was in. Lethely she trotted along until she stopped in front of a tall mirror sitting in the corner of the room. The beauty that the mare graced the reflective surface with was bar none. She was dressed in a light blue dress with lace trimming. A thin blue veil covered her face. She smiled as she looked herself over in the mirror, almost like it was a normal day.

"Right then. You can do this darling, you'll have her like putty in your hooves," She said to the mirror, smiling. I felt confused for a moment. She was... talking to herself? I watched from her eyes, content to wonder what would happen next. The mare stared intently at the mirror for a moment.

"If by some chance I do not have the strength to do this, this memory orb will keep the record of my confession," She said aloud. She looked around for a few moments before turning her attention back to the mirror.

"Twilight. I'm going to leave this orb in your care," My host said confidently. "I've wanted to tell you this for some time, but never quite managed to get up the courage to do so. I know what you're thinking... me not having the courage for this. Hah!"

My host chuckled a bit at this. She was obviously nervous. I could see it in her eyes. When she spoke next it was like a different mare took her place. Her voice was soft and caring.

"Ever... ever since that night that I spent with you at the hotel... I've felt something was missing in my life Twilight. I've tried to push it away, but I can't hide it any longer," She started to say, blushing profusely as she got closer to her confession. I admit I already had an idea of what the white mare was going to say. Her voice got low and it squeaked out from her.

"I... love you Twilight. I don't know why or how but I do. And I'm going to tell you today. You made an appointment with me, about what I don't know. But I'm going to tell you, I have to tell you," Rarity said, pleading now with the mirror. Her eyes were streaming with tears.

"I can't take this anymore Twilight. I feel so much for you. I know what you're going through right now is hard... and I wish I could be there to help take it all away. Your brother... he was a lovely stallion, and an amazing older brother... I just wish I could help... and that you wouldn't push us away like you're doing now," She said, tears flowing freely now. I couldn't help but feel bad for the mare.

"I meant what I said before... I never want to drift apart from my friends. If what I'm working on

comes to fruition... I hope I will never have to. But most of all... most of all I don't want to drift away from you Twilight," My host continued, as she began wiping the tears from her eyes. She looked down at herself and sighed.

"Great... now I've gone and ruined my makeup. Looks like I'll have to fix myself up again before we meet in an hour. Alright Rarity, you can do this. You can..." She said, trailing off. She looked intently at the mirror. "I will do this." A knock at the door interrupted my host. She looked up and called out.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Lady Rarity, your car is here to take you to your offices. We'll be waiting downstairs for you," A familiar male unicorn called out from behind the door.

"Alright dear Snips. Thank you for letting me know. I will be down shortly darling," My host replied before turning to the mirror.

"See you soon darling. If by some chance that I don't get to make this confession before you, at the very least you will be able to see it somehow," She said with a wink at the mirror before she turned and began to head down the hall as the memory faded to white.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke in darkness once more, grinning as I felt a familiar nuzzle on my neck. I looked down to see Violet lying next to me, snuggled in close. Across the room, Steeljack and Patch lay sleeping as well. I smiled softly as I leaned into her snuggles and kissed my marefriend softly on the head. She made a sighing noise and I smiled once more.

I lay there for the rest of the night and morning, looking out at the window while my friends slept around me. For some reason I couldn't sleep even though I felt rather tired. I kept thinking about all I had seen and read. Rarity's confession had been sweet, but it also gave me chills. She deathly cared for her friend and wanted nothing more than to be with her. Twilight's diary unnerved me more. That final letter to the Princess was the words of a mare who was finished. Twilight had given up on her friends, given up trying to promote peace and friendship. She was committed. I shuddered at the thought of it. I looked around the room at my friends. *Is that what I'm turning into? A mare who shunned friendship?* I thought. *I don't want that. I love my friends.*

The morning came without any interruption, my thoughts continuing well until the sun had filtered fully into our room and my friends began to awaken from their slumber. I stayed rather quiet as we packed up our things. Violet looked at me a little funny, but a quick smile reassured her that I was okay. We exited our room and thanked Nurse Care for her hospitality, promising to return as soon as we could. I advised her that if the Steel Rangers came poking around to take the villagers and evacuate them as quickly and quietly as possible. She nodded with a fearful look on her face as we left the clinic.

The morning sun hit our eyes as we made our way out of the clinic and out into the town. The main drag of the small tribal village led us due north until we reached the edge of the small town. Beyond that the Wasteland stretched out before us. As we walked, I fiddled with my PipBuck radio some more, trying to keep the Minotaur's station picked up so that we could glean any information about where the DJ was broadcasting from. In the back of my mind, all I could think about was the small town we had just left, the memories I delved into there, and the dilemma we now faced. If it came down to it, I would certainly fight the Steel Rangers if they attacked the small town. I silently hoped it wouldn't come to that, that we could convince the Rangers to help the tribal villagers instead. Knowing Cotton Candy's response to the whole thing however, I held out very little hope for this.

We walked quietly and quickly, hoping to make it to our destination by the end of the day at least. The

road itself was broken, pieces of rubble and cart vehicles strewn about all over. It appeared like it was some sort of highway. Eventually we came upon a large open train station. A large subway style train sat on one of the nearby tracks. Violet pulled out the old book containing information about Chicacolt, explaining that the city was one of the last few cities that had elevated train systems as opposed to the monorail used in bigger cities like Manehattan. Unfortunately, it looked like the whole thing wasn't working. At the very least there were a few Sparkle Cola machines in the train station lobby that yielded some bottles. The rest of the place appeared to have been picked clean.

We continued on, following the train line. The notes on my PipBuck indicated that the line ran north. The further we continued forward, the more stable and less ruined the ground beneath us became. Wasteland solidified into solid road as we stepped out onto a massive highway that had once been full of pull-carts. Now there was only dust and ash. The sun was beginning to wane by the time we made it over the next large hill and then suddenly... there it was.

Chicacolt.

I stared down the hill at the ruined city and had a stark realization that I had actually seen this city before. My thoughts fluttered back to the chat I had with Depression. It was the same city, albeit broken now. Further past the city sat a great lake that looked completely green with magical radiation. It appeared in a sense to be hugging the northern side of the city. In the center of the city arose a large black tower, completely unscathed from the damages of time. Several large skyscrapers surrounded it, but none were as massive or as tall as this one was. To the east of the city, a massive stadium and museum building could be seen. The ceiling of the museum appeared to be caved in from our vantage point at the top of the hill. An iron wall surrounded the stadium. The city stood there, lifeless but at the same time unscathed. It stood strong and proud. The train line continued down into the metropolis and eventually disappeared below ground into the subway system.

I looked around at my friends, who merely nodded. I grinned and turned down towards the ruined city of Chicacolt. We were ready. We had come too far to turn back now. We had our reasons for being here and we were not going to abandon them: Pride, The Minotaur, Cranky, and Arlington.

Chicacolt here we come.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Smile Smile Smile: You excel at trying to talk your way out of hostile situations. You gain +20% to your Speech skill while in combat.

Spell Upgrade! Shield of the Alicorn (Rank 2): Your prowess with your alicorn shield has improved greatly. You can now expand and contract the shield at the cost of 2 AP. Maintaining this shield past 10 rounds of combat however begins to damage you at 5 points of damage per round.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Extreme Bartering: You are skilled in the art of trading stuff for caps, even with enemies. You gain +20% to your Barter skill when dealing with potentially hostile targets.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 12: Sweet Home Chicacolt

Ugh, here I thought I'd have time to learn about the Elements of Harmony but, silly me, all this ridiculous friend-making has kept me from it!

Home. Home is where the heart is, they say. To me right now my home is where my hooves lay. It's also where my friends are. No matter where we go, I feel like I am at home now that I have my friends beside me. As we head into uncertain territory, I feel like I can do anything, but at the same time I'm terrified. I'm terrified of what I will become when I transform into this... thing that I am evolving into.

I wonder how Twilight felt, as she was forced to watch the atrocities that Trixie committed as the Goddess. I wonder if Twilight wept for us, her children of sin and blood. The alicorn race may have never even deserved to exist, but yet here we are... trying to eke out our survival along with every other pony.

Were we really ever meant to be? Why are we even here at all?

A war zone. We had stepped into a war zone. Gunfire rained down all around us as we ran, pushing our way over into the next alleyway. An explosion rang out through the air, indicating the use of grenades and landmines as we tried to collect ourselves before continuing onward. I looked down at Violet and sighed. *Maybe this was a bad idea after all*, I thought as I peeked out of the alley. The coast was clear, for the moment at least.

We had decided that our first order of business would be to find any sort of friendly settlement where we could get information about the Minotaur. However, this is the Wasteland... and it had different plans for us. That's how we ended up here in the southeast side of Chicacolt, running for our lives.

The locals here were anything but friendly. We quickly found out that this area was the center of activity for a local gang war as we stepped right into the middle of a particularly bloody conflict between two sets of gangers. Of course an alicorn, a unicorn, and two earth ponies were much juicier conquests than each other. Naturally the two gangs laid down their arms for a bit to chase after us.

"Alright, let's go while we still can. If we can keep going north, we should be able to lose them in the city!" I shouted as we ducked out of the alleyway and made our way up the silent street. It was too quiet for its own good. Red blips surrounded us according to my E.F.S. *Shit!* I thought as we came upon the next street block. We were being cornered. This wasn't just any old street gang. These gangers were smart. Being vastly outnumbered, we had opted to run and hopefully hide until the two gang groups resumed their warfare on each other. Unfortunately for us, it didn't seem like that's what they wanted. They were out for our blood.

Gunfire rang out in the distance as several gangers erupted from each side of the street, guns blazing and catching us by surprise. I spun around, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. and queuing up several bursts into the two gangers immediately behind me. Time fell back into sync as Stargazer took aim and let loose its payload. Bullets flew and struck home into their intended targets, tearing through barding and bone as the ponies they hit fell to the ground. A flare of silver fire behind me indicated that Violet had unleashed the fury of Thunder Flash as two more gangers, earth ponies by the looks of them, popped up from behind a row of overturned trash dumpsters and fired what appeared to be makeshift rifles at us. I grinned and tossed up my shield, deflecting the bullets away. Steeljack leaped into action and fired his rifle with a ***crack***, the round tearing across the street and into the head of one of the new arrivals.

More blips showed up on my E.F.S. as we began to move. I looked up to see several gangers coming

down fire escapes to our left, each one brandishing a rifle. What was quite off about these particular gangers was their attire. They looked like raiders, but each one was dressed in what appeared to be slick leather jackets. They brandished both melee weapons and regular firearms. The ***fwhip*** of a bullet tore past my face, narrowly missing as I turned and fired, taking down one of the gangers from the fire escape. Patch used the confusion and opportunity presented by the gangers' focus on us and made a beeline for one of the other fire escapes, using the cover presented by the steel bars to hide and set up on it. *I guess that decides it*, I thought as I took a hard stance in the street and began charging up my horn. Violet and Steeljack fanned out on each side of me and began firing as the gangers approached. I heard the sharp and distinct bellow of Patch's sniper rifle echo through the air as the green mare launched her own brand of death from the fire escape above. Her bullets ripped across into their targets, knocking down gangers like a shooting gallery.

"Do they not get the hint?" I shouted as I came out of E.S.A.T.S., firing Stargazer into another of the group of gangers. The gangers were whooping and yelling in a crazed fashion. I got the sense that these particular members weren't all too bright. However, they seemed to be smart enough at least to realize when they were outmatched in firepower. Either that or we killed the lot of them. The street was covered with our dirty work, dead bodies lying next to each other. The red blips on my E.F.S. slowly filtered away as we made our way up onto the next block, coming upon another quiet street. We stopped for a brief moment to catch our breath.

"I guess the Minotaur wasn't kidding when he said that there was a gang war," I said, panting hard at the workout I had just received. Don't get me wrong, we alicorns are no stranger to physical activity. But even I know when I've been pushed too hard and too fast. I slumped down, groaning as I yanked out the map we had received from Nurse Care in Arlington.

"Any idea at all where we are?" I asked as she came over to inspect it with me. She began looking over the map as I kept a close watch on my E.F.S., hoping for at least at some brief respite from the gang war that was tearing the streets apart.

"Not sure. This map doesn't really say a whole lot about the city itself. Best as I can tell, we should be out of the south side of the city soon. I'm going to need to look at my book though to see if we can ---" Violet began to say before she was cut off by Steeljack.

"Star, behind you!" I heard Steeljack shout as he leveled his rifle in my direction. I ducked out of the way, hearing the sharp ***crack*** erupt from his weapon as his shot hit a unicorn mare that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere behind me. She had been leveling a combat shotgun right at the back of my neck. The mare's eyes widened as Steeljack's rifle struck true, taking her right in the chest and tearing through the supple cloth barding she was wearing. She slumped over, breathing heavily as she began to bleed all over the ground. Steeljack grunted and let loose another ***crack*** right at her head, ending her life in a splatter of gore before I could say anything. I gave him a short glare.

"Steeljack," I said curtly. "What was that for? She could have given us some information."

"She was raring up to shoot you in the back of the neck. These gangers won't think twice about doing the same to you," He said gruffly. I felt my spine shiver for a moment as I considered the fact that he was right. These ponies wouldn't give me a second chance. Did that really make it right though to respond in kind? Why all of a sudden was this feeling an issue for me? I was no stranger to killing raiders or ponies that were openly hostile to me. I had pretty much done the same to the gangers that just attacked us. So why all of a sudden was I so worried about this? My mind tried to process this for a few moments before I calmly nodded and sighed.

"Sorry, I should be thanking you I suppose for saving my life," I said after a moment's pause. Steeljack nodded in response. "You're right. We should be more careful though, it seems that some of these

gangsters have access to PipBucks.” I pointed at the mare’s leg, which had one of the hoofmachines locked onto it. An attachment had ejected from it. I picked it up and looked it. It was a used StealthBuck attachment, a device that hooked to a PipBuck for limited invisibility charges. I deposited it into my saddlebag, hoping it might be worth something in trade and began to check the rest of the body out for anything else salvageable. There wasn’t much. A few caps here or there and some more ammunition for her shotgun. What struck me as odd was the mare’s cutie mark. Bubbles adorned the unicorn’s flank like a bubble bath. It was almost sort of... cute. I briefly wondered what the mare’s special talent was besides sneaking up on ponies and trying to blast their heads off. I offered a silent prayer to Luna that the Goddesses allow her to make use of that good talent in the afterlife.

“We need to keep moving,” Violet said, looking around us warily as she pulled out her book on old town Chicacolt again. “If I’m right, there used to be an old city district somewhere around here. Maybe there’s still something there.” She pointed off in a direction northwest of us. We started walking along, keeping our eyes on everything around us. Gunfire sounded in the distance. Maybe we had gotten lucky and the gangsters resumed killing each other instead of trying to kill us. Somehow, I doubted it. An ever-present feeling of being watched hung over us as we trudged through the city street. I took a moment to notice a few things as we walked. Chicacolt was a surprisingly clean city. There wasn’t much rubble about like there was in Manehattan and Fillydelphia. What rubble there was appeared to be results of the gang wars that were ravaging the south side of the city and thus was relatively new rubble. I kept checking my E.F.S. every few seconds as we trotted along, the red blips having moved out of our range. They were replaced with a large number of yellow blips to the north of us. It seemed that our luck had paid up after all. I indicated this to Violet, who nodded in confirmation.

A few moments later we arrived at a makeshift gate that was guarded by several unicorns that appeared to be very bored. One of them chattered excitedly when they spotted us in a language I hadn’t heard before. I cocked my head at this as we approached the guards, who in turn brandished several strange-looking firearms our way.

“Halt! State your business!” The lead guard, a deep red unicorn stallion, said with a thick accent. We held up our hooves indicating that we were friendly.

“Hello there!” I called out. “We’re friendly! We’re seeking shelter in your settlement and trade if you can provide it.” The unicorn nodded and lowered his weapon.

“You are travelers yes? Come through the gang zone?” He said as he opened the gate for us. We nodded. The stallion grinned. “You lucky to be alive then. Gang wars have gotten much worse lately.” We followed the stallion inside the small settlement, stepping completely into another world.

The street was filled with paper lanterns that provided a soft and inviting light as we gazed in awe. I looked up at one and realized they were lit using magical fire. Numerous shops lined the street ranging from food vendors to more exotic items. Fillies and colts ran from sidewalk to sidewalk, playing silly games. The street itself was even clean! I turned to the stallion.

“What is this place?” I asked quietly. The stallion laughed for a moment and then answered.

“You are new to city. Welcome to Chi-Town. Please, make yourselves at home. The Falling Lotus is our inn. You will be able to make accommodations there,” He said pleasantly before disappearing back towards the gate. We shrugged and began walking down the tiny street, taking in the atmosphere of the place. A tattered sign that read ***The Falling Lotus*** graced our eyes as we arrived on the corner of the next street block. As we entered into the inn, a familiar voice came to our attention on the radio playing at the front desk.

“Yeeeeeeeeeehaawwww! That’s right folks, it’s that time again! It’s time for the Morning Moo Madhouse, here on K-COLT 101! And I am your host with the most... The ONE. The ONLY! The

MINOTAUR!

That's right. It is I, your eye in the sky and your word on the streets... the Minotaur. Mmoowheee do we have news for you fine folk out there in the Chicacolt area. Gang wars my filthy friends. They are heating up out there. News on the street is that the MMMM are getting ready to move some big merchandise out of the city, and the Cowpones and Hellraisers are right there to vie for control of it! It just keeps getting better and better out there doesn't it folks?

We're also getting reports in of some newcomers to the Chicacolt area, a big purple winged pony and some friends of hers. I don't know anything about em, so best to just shoot them onsite. Kidding! I wouldn't shoot em. Hanging em is okay though! Really... just kidding! You can't take me seriously!

Alright, now we've got a new piece of entertainment for you fine Chicacoltans out there. It's the Morning Moo Radio Tap! Are ya ready?!"

The broadcast continued on as the DJ proceeded to radio call Star Paladin Cotton Candy, asking the unicorn buck if he knew if his refrigerator was running or not. The Steel Ranger coldly responded without missing a beat "It's been two hundred years since refrigerators ran... you fucking moron." I couldn't help but chuckle. If the Minotaur was too busy antagonizing Cotton Candy, it meant we had enough time to save Arlington from the Steel Rangers. We approached the front desk. A lovely pink earth pony mare was sitting there. She smiled as she stood, turned the radio down and bowed.

"Welcome to the Falling Lotus. My name is Lotus Petal, how may I help you?" She said.

"We're looking for a room and were told this was the inn?" I asked. The mare nodded.

"The Falling Lotus provides many services to weary travelers," She replied.

"Oh? What kind of services?" Patch asked, her eyes wide with enthusiasm. The other mare grinned softly.

"Many kinds of services... some spiritual, some physical, and some a little more... intimate," She said, smiling wider. I stared flatly at the mare, catching her implication.

"We'll just take the room," Steeljack interjected. *Good call my friend!* I thought as I glanced his way, catching a grin from him. The mare nodded and waved for us to follow her. She led us up to a small room containing two beds.

"This is your room; payment is thirty caps a night. Do you know how long you shall be staying with us?" The mare asked.

"We're not sure. We're looking for some information on somepony. You know about the Minotaur on the radio?" I asked. The mare nodded in response. "We're looking to meet him."

"You are seeking the Minotaur? The Minotaur broadcasts from Filly's Tower, but it's no place anypony goes. Some say that he is the only living soul there because he is allowed to be there," The pink mare said.

"Why's that?" Violet asked.

"It is said that the building is haunted," Lotus replied. I heard a distinct ***gulp*** noise come from Patch as she swallowed hard.

"You mean like.... G-g-g-ghosts?" She asked. I rolled my eyes at this.

"There's no such thing as ghosts Patch," I said, chuckling. The green mare looked up at Steeljack, who promptly nodded. She looked back at the pink mare, who grinned widely.

"No such thing, but yet there is something distinctly wrong with that building. No pony has ever been

there and returned. If you go seeking the Minotaur, you may never come back,” She said as she trotted down the hallway and out of our sight. We entered the tiny room and began unpacking our things. Violet put together a package of items for trade.

“Star... I’m going to take these things down to that marketplace and see what we can get for them, alright?” She said as she began to trot to the door. I held up a hoof to stop her for a moment.

“Wait. Take Patch with you, would you? Show her how to trade, Violet style,” I said, grinning. Patch nodded her head excitedly and bounded over to Steeljack, giving him a peck on the cheek before the two mares left the room. I had ulterior motives of course. This course of action left me alone with Steeljack, so that I could talk to him about earlier. I turned to the grey buck and stared at him coldly. *What is going on with me?* I thought. This attitude had started ever since the invisible unicorn mare had been killed. I couldn’t shake the memory of watching Steeljack kill that mare.

“I know what you’re going to say,” He said quietly. “I still stand by my decision though.” My eyes softened a bit.

“I... I just am having a hard time with it is all, and I don’t know why. When you shot that mare, something inside me just... jumped,” I said, slumping down next to him on the floor. He grunted in acknowledgement.

“I’ve seen a lot of bad stuff in my time,” The buck said finally after a moment of pause. “I did a lot of bad stuff too. Sometimes I forget how hard it is to shed those bad things away. I’m sorry I upset you, but I am your friend. I will do what I have to in order to protect you, Violet, and Patch.” We sat there for a few moments in silence.

“Thanks...” I said finally. “I really gotta get a grip on myself. I feel like I can’t even trust my own feelings lately. The more I find out about Twilight’s life... the more I don’t like what I’m seeing. I’m scared Steeljack. I haven’t said anything about it, but I’m frightened of what I’m becoming.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t either,” Steeljack replied, drawing a confused gaze from myself. “We all are. It’s like Discord said. Another Goddess roaming the Wasteland? It’s scary as hell if you ask me. But that’s not the point. The point is you’ve got me, Violet, and Patch. We’ll always be there for you as long as need us.” I smiled and reached out, hugging the stallion like a sister to a brother. I laughed as I realized how silly I was being.

“Thanks you,” I said as I released the stallion from my grasp. He smiled. “So tell me... have you told Patch about... you know?” He nodded lightly as he caught my reference. I knew from personal experience that the subject of Steeljack’s wife was hard on the poor buck.

“Told her the night we uh... first...” He said, trailing off. “She was... surprised, but sympathetic. She’s... she’s pretty amazing that one.” I sniggered at this.

“Listen to you, Romeo,” I said, grinning widely. He chuckled alongside me. We sat there for what felt like hours, talking about everything from guns to relationships (and also the role that guns play in a relationship!). In retrospect, it was kind of nice really. Time passed however, and we began to wonder where Violet and Patch were. They hadn’t returned yet from their trip to the marketplace. Steeljack assured me they were most likely just sharing a bit of ‘filly time’ as he liked to call it. Another hour passed however, and he was just as worried as I was. I left the room and went downstairs, hoping to find Lotus Petal. She was at her desk, playing some sort of card game as she occasionally peeked out her front window. Unfortunately, she hadn’t seen Patch or Violet either. I peeked outside of the inn’s front window as well. It was dark outside and a majority of the street vendors were now packing up. There was no sight of the two green mares anywhere. I headed back upstairs and walked into our room.

“Lotus hasn’t seen them either,” I said nervously. “And the street vendors are closing up shop. I’m worried.” By now it had been a full three hours since we saw our friends. It wasn’t like them to not come back after trading. Something had happened to them.

“I’ve tried to catch Violet’s PipBuck tag, but nothing is coming up,” The buck replied. *That’s not good*, I thought. Typically, you can track a pony using their PipBuck tag, but if it wasn’t responding that either meant Violet’s PipBuck had been removed/destroyed (which would take either an act of Celestia or a PipBuck Technician) or she was... dead. *No, she can’t be. There’s something not right here!* I thought as I tried to figure out what to do next. A ***crash*** from the window caught my attention as something sharp whizzed by my face, embedding itself in the wall to my right. I stared immediately at a knife stuck into the wall. A roll of parchment was attached to it. I levitated the scroll away from the knife and dropped it as soon as I read it, a soft gasp erupting from my mouth.

“What is it?” Steeljack asked as he rushed forward and picked up the scroll, setting it on the bed. I pointed at the note.

If you want to see your friends alive again, come to 141 N Hoofamak Avenue tonight.

“You sure this is a good idea?”

“No... I’m sure this is a terrible idea,” I said as we made our way through the clean streets of Chi-Town and stepped out onto North Hoofamak Avenue. A cold wind pierced the air, sending a shiver up my spine. Were Violet and Patch okay? I was so worried I almost became sick, but I couldn’t let myself stop for one second, not while my friends were in danger. It turned out that 141 North Hoofamak Avenue was an old warehouse sitting on the corner of an industrial district street. The ages of time had not been kind to the place. A large amount of the building’s windows had been smashed in and part of its foundation was crumbling into the ground. The front doors of the place were smashed in and the lighting was dark. I looked at my E.F.S. as we approached, seeing nothing in our immediate range. I nodded at Steeljack and we entered cautiously, staying close to each other and scanning the area for any threats.

The inside of the warehouse was bare for the most part. Rows of shelves lined the walls, having been rearranged so that the main floor was completely devoid of any obstructions. The inside of the building was dark and cold. I clicked my PipBuck light on for some light, still seeing nothing on my E.F.S. I looked at Steeljack, who gave me a confused expression back.

“We sure this is the right place?” He said quietly. I shrugged. What if this was some sort of trap? Pride was here in the city. What if she knew we were here and kidnapped Patch and Violet to get to us? What if...? The sound of hoofsteps all around us indicated we were surrounded as several red blips appeared on my E.F.S. Several black forms had appeared immediately around us as the shapes resolved into four unicorn mares, each carrying a pistol that was pointed in our direction. Beyond the group, I could see two other unicorn mares and an earth pony mare that looked like... Lotus Petal! The pink mare gave a chuckle as she stepped between the two other mares towards us.

“Hello again, Miss Radiant Star,” She said as she stepped up to us. She nodded at the four other mares surrounding us. They stepped back, giving us some room. I snarled.

“Who do you think you are? Where are our friends?!” I shouted at her angrily. The mare clicked her tongue at me in response.

“Tsk. In due time. First, proper introductions are in order. You are Radiant Star, and her companion Steeljack. Your other two friends are Violet Iris and Patch,” Lotus replied.

“So you know our names. Who are you then?” Steeljack grunted.

“My name stands. I am Lotus Petal. I represent the combined interests of the Lotus Triad,” She said coldly.

“The Lotus Triad?” I asked curiously, drawing a smile from the pink mare.

“The Lotus Triad controls everything that goes in and out of Chi-Town. We keep the peace and civility that we have all grown accustomed to,” The mare replied.

“So you’re another gang,” I said shortly. I could feel my anger rising at the earth pony.

“Please. Let us not mince words here Miss Star. We are not so petty as the street rabble that you ran into during your trip through the gang zone,” She said. “On the contrary we wish to be allies with you.”

“Funny way of showing it by taking my friends,” I snorted.

“Call it incentive, call it blackmail if you so desire. We call it good business,” The pink mare said.

“Fine. What do you want from us?” I asked with an annoyed tone. This game was beginning to get on my nerves.

“Right to the point, I see. Fine. For some time now, we have been trying to get a lock on a large piece of merchandise that the MMMM are trying to smuggle out of the city. We don’t know what it is, but our intelligence tells us they are trying to take it to the Steel Rangers,” Lotus Petal said. “As you can imagine, whatever it is cannot be good if the Steel Rangers want it.”

“Who is this MMMM?” I said with mild confusion.

“They are otherwise known as the Marzipan Mascarpone Meringue Mafia. A business rival of ours. While we control Chi-Town, the MMMM control a large majority of the settlements deeper into the city. They run protection rackets and sell drugs and weaponry around the settlements. Many of these illicit items find their way into Chi-Town, where we do not wish them to be,” Lotus said.

“Sounds like you’re just trying to get a leg up on your competition to me. How do I know you aren’t telling the truth?” I asked curtly.

“You don’t,” The mare replied. “But seeing as we have your friends, you’re not in much of a position to not trust us.”

“Speaking of our friends, how did you stop us from tracking their PipBucks?” Steeljack asked coldly. Lotus chuckled.

“Such devices aren’t uncommon in the city. There are several Stables that opened up over time. Many ponies living in Chi-Town today are either descended from Stable ponies or were ones themselves,” She said. “PipBucks are quite simple to remove really once you have the proper tools.” Realization dawned on me that the mare who had tried to attack us from behind in the streets must have belonged to this Lotus Triad. She had been wearing a PipBuck after all. I wondered if it was some sort of test to see what we were capable of. I suddenly felt very bad at the fact that we had killed her then. Her death had resulted in our selection for this job.

“So you’re smarter than us. We get it. How do we know then our friends are still alive? No sense in making a deal if you’ve killed them already,” I stated. Lotus nodded to the two mares behind her at this. They moved out of our vision through a hidden door, returning with two green mares. They were bound and gagged but otherwise looked unharmed. Fear shaded their eyes as they stared at us.

“Patch!” Steeljack shouted as he almost rushed forward to his marefriend. I put a hoof up and stopped him. Even across the room I could hear her whimper in fear. Rage was building in Steeljack’s eyes as

he turned to the pink mare and snarled. "If you hurt her..." The mare blinked, clearly unshaken by my friend's anger.

"Please. Your friends will be well taken care of while they remain our guests. That is the least we can do for you," Lotus said. I stared hard at the mare.

"What do you want us to do then? Stop beating around the bush and spill it already. You're starting to test my patience," I growled. *Whoah... where did that come from?* I thought as I finished speaking. It was like every part of my body was angry at Lotus Petal, wishing to tear her limb from limb. What was going on with me lately? First I was upset over the killing of that mare and now I angrily wanted to do the same thing to this one. Talk about your mood swings! The mare nodded, and motioned again at the two unicorns holding our friends. They nodded in return and left the room with Violet and Patch in tow. I looked at Violet as she left and silently promised I would save her.

"I will provide the locations of two settlements that are firmly under MMMM control. You will journey to these settlements and provide your services to them. Your task is to gather information on the whereabouts of this package they are planning to move," She said.

"Won't they be a little suspicious of newcomers?" I asked curiously. Lotus smiled.

"While the MMMM are very resourceful when it comes to their business skills, they lack common sense," She replied. "They won't question you too much."

"If we do this, you'll release Patch and Violet?" Steeljack asked. The mare nodded in return.

"Your friends will be released to you upon completion of your mission. One other thing, you mentioned before that you are seeking the Minotaur. I was not lying when I said the region he broadcasts from is highly dangerous. However... if you help us, I will provide you with some information on a way to speak with him," She said. My eyes widened at this. They could provide us with a way to talk to the Minotaur?

"We have no choice really. We'll do it," I said succinctly, staring hard at the pink earth pony, who only smiled.

"Excellent."

A few hours later, Steeljack and I were on our way north of Chi-Town and headed deeper into the city. Lotus had provided us with the location of two settlements that were firmly entrenched in the MMMM protection racket, the closest of which was located inside the old Chicacolt Theatre. I had managed to snag Violet's old book on Chicacolt history before we left. According to the book the old Theatre was once a thriving center of the arts during the war. Many of the world's best plays and musicals were shown there. In fact, there was even a show listed about the rise and fall of Nightmare Moon as written by a playwright named Ink Well. It sounded rather interesting actually, especially the bit of history that the playwright himself went missing during his opening night and was never heard from again.

As amusing as the history was, it was the map in the book we were really interested in, as it was fairly accurate to showing where the theatre was. We didn't really have any sort of good plan for this. I was still unsure if what Lotus said was true about the MMMM and whether they would just take us in. At the moment, the going plan was to arrive at the settlement and go from there. As we walked, Steeljack was strangely quiet. I felt for the poor buck, knowing what he had gone through when his wife died and now having to deal with Patch being out of his reach. I had tried to talk to him several times about it while we walked, but he just shrugged me off. I thought about Violet and sighed internally.

Within the hour we arrived outside the street block the old Chicacolt Theatre rested on. The old

theatre's sign was partially lit, sparking occasionally with the crackle of electricity in the cold evening air. Several guard ponies were standing outside of the theatre, watching us as we approached. One of them stepped forward.

"Halt. State your name and business please," He said with a calm but firm tone.

"Ah, my name is Radiant Star, and this is my associate Steeljack. We heard there was work up here for enterprising ponies such as ourselves," I said as straight as I could manage. The guard, a white earth pony, raised his eyebrows at me.

"Don't get too many of you alicorns up here in Chicacolt. Surprised to see two in one night. You're looking for work?" He said. I nodded. "Well, go on in then. See the pony at the bar." He waved us past as we entered the old theatre. Another alicorn? That was interesting. I thought briefly about Pride being in a place like this and thought better of it. It didn't exactly fit the dream-walking alicorn's M.O. The lobby of the place was absolutely massive. Despite the ravages of time, many of the posters hanging along the large lobby walls were still intact, proudly displaying the show that had been playing at the theatre on the day the megaspells dropped. The vast portion of the lobby had been segmented out into alleys surrounding open top makeshift homes, as the place was large enough to comfortably suit several hundred ponies. Vendors of every kind lined the center of the large room. At the far end of the lobby was a makeshift saloon, taking up a large corner of the place. We made our way through the crowd, drawing stares from ponies as we passed. A few stallions dressed in trench coats and bowler hats patrolled up and down each alleyway.

The bar was lively for the evening. Ponies of every species and color flittered to and fro, waving mugs of dark brown liquid as we entered. We casually made our way to the bar, flagging down the bartender. A rusty colored earth pony stallion stepped up from behind the bar and sauntered his way down to us. A smile cracked on his old wizened face as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Hello there," He said. "What can I do you for?"

"Um... we were told to come here to look for some work?" I asked, catching the old stallion's eye. He grinned at us.

"Came to the right place then," He replied. "What kind of work you looking for?"

"Well..." I said quietly. "We heard that the MMMM is looking for a few good ponies." The buck grinned widely.

"Oh. You're looking for that kind of work," He said quietly as well. I nodded in return. He winked back at me and slipped me a piece of paper. It had a place and a time written on it, the time being tomorrow afternoon and the place being the back office of the theatre. It seemed that even the MMMM were smart enough to not publicly announce where their business took place. I thanked the bartender and he brought us two drinks. I sat there next to Steeljack and eyed the poor buck.

"You alright?" I asked nonchalantly. He nodded grimly.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Sorry I've been so... quiet," He said. I smiled and kicked back a swig of the burning liquid. I grimaced as it trickled down my throat. I wouldn't normally do this, but in order to get Violet and Patch back... I would do anything. I had to appear as if I was one of these thugs, kind of like that green alicorn sitting across the room... wait... green alicorn? I perked up immediately as I noticed her. She was sitting by herself and minding her own business with her muzzle in a tall drink. I looked at Steeljack and grinned.

"Well. We've got some time to kill then. It's alright, no worries. We'll get them back. Take it easy for a bit. I'm gonna need your head in the game when we get there," I said, indicating the piece of paper.

He nodded and took a long drink out of his own glass. I began to sip on my drink some more. The burning sensation slowly faded away the more I drank it, and once I had finished it I called the bartender back over for another. See, here's the thing. Usually, I avoid bars like the plague. I have an extremely low tolerance to alcohol, and it doesn't take long for me to be reduced to a blubbery slob of a drunk. I sat there, downing drink after drink, casually eyeing the green mare and wondering what she was like. After about an hour of drinking, and me on my eighth glass of the night I decided I would go and talk to her.

"I'm going to go mingle a bit, try to act casual you know," I said. He nodded and turned back to the bartender, flagging him down for another glass as he drained his fifth. I stood up and casually strode across the floor, dodging the occasional rowdy customer as I made my way over to the green alicorn. I noticed immediately that there was something quite different about her. Instead of the normal dark green hair that most other greens had, hers was a dark purple color. A cutie mark of a four leaf clover rested upon her rump. *Cute*, I thought as I stepped up behind her quietly. *Why are all the cute mares always green?* I could feel the alcohol pumping through my system already based on what I had already drunk as I downed another glass of dark brown liquid. I swooned a bit and tapped her on her shoulder, grinning widely.

"Hail fair sister! What brings you to this establishment? Come here often?" I said, rather sloppily I might add. The other alicorn looked up at me widely and nearly leaped out of her seat at the bar.

"Don't hurt me!" She shouted as she cowered beneath my drunken gaze.

"Huh?" I asked the mare. "Are you alright?"

"You mean... you're not going to hurt me?" She asked weakly as I shook my head.

"No... why would I hurt one of my own flesh and blood?" I asked, pushing Pride out of my for the moment I said the words. She didn't count as an alicorn anymore. She had even said so herself. For a brief moment I considered again what both she and Sloth had said about themselves before the drunken stupor took back over.

"Maybe because I'm not one of you?" She offered, her voice still weak from fear. I stared at her, feeling very confused.

"Huh...?" I said flatly. The mare blinked for a moment and somehow must have realized that I was hammered and not understanding what she meant.

"Oh, it's just that... I'm not an alicorn. I'm... well I'm just me I guess. I just tell everypony else I am one on occasion. Kind of gets you in places you shouldn't be," She said, chuckling nervously. I blinked, looking down at the mare. I realized that she was actually a little smaller than me and that her wings weren't as developed. She definitely didn't have the lithe figure of a normal alicorn.

"Oh," I said. "Well umm... what are you then?"

"I'm not really sure. I'm a little bit of both a pegasus and a unicorn I guess you could say. My name's Lucky," She said, offering a hoof, which I sloppily took and shook fiercely.

"Radiant Star," I said. "What brings you to the fair city of Chicacolt?" She smiled, still weakly but a little stronger this time.

"Oh you know... I've been around, here and there. Not too many places to go really. I'm just a traveler," She said. I nodded. "What about you?"

"Ah... I'm here with my friends. We're looking for some work here and there," I replied, indicating Steeljack at the bar. He was still drinking from his fifth or sixth glass of I don't know what. Lucky giggled.

“He’s cute,” She said. I glared at her.

“He’s taken,” I said angrily, still quite drunk. I could feel the cursed liquid coursing through my body rapidly as I tried to calm myself down. I shouldn’t be angry at this mare. Why all of a sudden was I this angry? I sighed internally as I tried to figure it out. Her eyes widened at my response.

“Oh, I’m sorry... I didn’t mean anything by it. Is he with you?” She asked quickly. I shook my head.

“No, one of my other friends... they’re sort of in trouble. We’re trying to help them,” I said, resting my head on the bar next to her. She looked down at me with sad eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” The green mare said. I smiled wryly at the poor unicorn/pegasus/thingy.

“You know... you’re kind of cute,” I blurted out, prompting a blush from the mare. “You’re the same color as my marefriend, except she has green hair not purple and oh hey why am I on the floor?” Somehow in the midst of my flirting I had moved out of my seat and landed face down on the floor below Lucky. I groaned as I went to push myself up.

“I think you’ve had a little bit too much to drink,” She said, giggling a bit. “Besides... I don’t think your marefriend would appreciate you hitting on other mares too much.” I sighed as I sat up and stared at her, the haze of alcohol clearing a brief moment.

“Look, I’m sorry. You’re right... It was just nice to see another of my own kind... even if you ended up not actually being an alicorn,” I said, stumbling over my words. “I should get going. We have someplace we need to be.” I stood up, shakily as I began to stumble back to Steeljack. The other mare chuckled for a moment and stopped me.

“Here, let me help you,” She said. “Least I can do.” I chuckled at myself as she helped me get over to my friend. I introduced the mare to Steeljack, who merely nodded and thanked her for helping me over. Turns out the bartender had a room set aside for us already. Steeljack had managed to make the arrangement shortly after I left him at the other end of the bar. He casually helped me along on his shoulder as we made our way to our room. Once inside, I stepped forward a few steps and plopped right into bed, my head already pounding from the alcohol induced coma I was about to partake in. As glorious sleep took me, I thought about Violet and Patch, hoping and praying to Luna that they would be alright.

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This was either new, or the drunkenness had really gotten to me this time. The comfortable and familiarity of Twilight’s body greeted my consciousness as I began to focus on the scene unfolding before me. It was like a memory orb, sort of how my vision of Twilight and Rarity at the hotel had come about. A flash of light brought me to my senses as I realized I was in the middle of a crowd. The flashes of light were coming from cameras, pointed at me and the mares beside me. The brilliant blazing lights of the Chicacolt Theatre sign greeted my eyes and I smiled, feeling the warm glow of the light as I trotted along towards it. I stopped and looked back for a moment, taking in the beautiful and pristine midnight blue dress that I was wearing. The white mare next to me, Rarity, really had put all her effort into it along with all of her friends’ dresses. Still, something felt off about the whole thing.

A twinge of sadness echoed in the back of my mind. Twilight felt like she didn’t even want to be here, despite the smile that graced her lovely face. I didn’t have much of a moment to ponder the feelings before the questions began from the reporters to my sides.

“Miss Sparkle! Miss Sparkle! What do you say to the rumors that Discord has escaped?”

“Miss Sparkle! When do you expect the war will end?”

“Miss Sparkle! Is there any truth to the rumor that you and Big Macintosh were an item?”

Question after question assaulted my senses. Inside Twilight's mind, I wanted to shout and rage at the voices and tell them to go away and leave me alone. Twilight merely smiled and ignored them however, continuing on with the other Ministry Mares into the theatre. Seeing the lobby in the condition it was in during its heyday was even more impressive than it had been seeing it two hundred years later. The whole room was brightly lit and clean. A different array of magically hung posters lined the massive walls and ponies of every color and creed were milling about, waiting for the show to start. I was ushered along by our guide, a kindly blue stallion, up the side stairs towards the private boxes. *What are you trying to show me Twilight?* I thought as I trotted along behind the rest of the Ministry Mares, who were chatting animatedly with each other. I stayed back, aloof from the others and not really speaking that much at all.

We arrived shortly at our own private box, overseeing the vast theatre hall before us. The sights and sounds of it were overwhelming. The plush red velvet curtains adorning the stage and the sound of the orchestra tuning up their instruments were simply too much to contain my own excitement. Still, Twilight felt melancholy and disconnected from the energy of it all. I felt very confused, trying to find the source of the mare's discontent. It seemed I wasn't the only one however, as I felt a hoof brush my shoulder. I looked up and saw Rarity, smiling at me. She nodded softly and motioned for me to follow her.

"If you darlings will excuse me and Twilight, we are going to use the little filly's room," She announced. I smiled as the other mares acknowledged our exit. The bathroom was right around the corner, but Rarity simply stepped past it and kept walking as I followed her. *Where was she taking us?* I thought as we rounded another hallway, trotting along silently. Finally we arrived at an office near the back of the theatre. A window on the right of the room opened up into a spectacular view of the theatre hall. Two large speakers adorned the corners next to the window. Rarity entered, motioning for me to sit on the beautiful crushed purple velvet chaise lounge in the middle of the room. A full bar sat off to the side. Rarity grinned as she engaged her magic, levitating out two glasses of wine from behind the bar. She sat down next to me and smiled.

"I could tell you needed to get away from the crowd," She said, smiling widely. I chuckled nervously.

"I guess you're right about that," I said, looking away at the window for a moment.

"Twilight?" Rarity asked, drawing my stare back at the white mare. "Are you alright? You... you've been sort of out of it all night dear."

"I'm fine... I'm just stressed. Ministry business, you know how it goes," I replied, rolling my eyes. Rarity's gaze turned deathly serious.

"No. I'm perfectly aware of how it goes. You however, do not. You have been shutting yourself away for several months now, and then out of the blue you show up like nothing ever happened?" She said, anger and sadness filling her voice.

"What did you expect me to do Rarity? Just go on like everything was hunky dory?" I spat back. *Wow, Twilight. I had no idea you could be so venomous,* I thought as I watched the scene unfold.

"I expected you to come to your friends for help. We're all worried about you Twilight," The white mare said softly.

"Right... just like you were so worried about me when you confessed your undying love for me?" Twilight responded viciously, prompting a gasp from her friend. "I can see what you're doing Rarity, and it won't work. I'm not weak and I won't be taken advantage of."

"I never said that you were darling. I know you're not weak. I... I was only trying to be honest, you know that. We even agreed that it was for the best that we never spoke about it after you... you know,"

Rarity said, letting her gaze hit the floor. “Regardless, we are worried about you. All of us are. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.” Twilight looked away angrily. The show had already begun outside, the faint music of the orchestra filtering in through the speakers in the room.

“Please Twilight, let us help you,” Rarity offered. “I know it hurts and you’re still upset over Shining –“ Rarity was cut off as my horn glowed, forcing her mouth closed with a quick flick of the magical appendage.

“Don’t. You. Say. His. Name,” I said, anger filling my voice. “Don’t tell me that you know it hurts. You don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know what it’s like going on every day... every day... wishing... wishing it was you instead of him.” I began to break down and cry as my magic released Rarity, who promptly put her leg around my neck.

“You’re right. We don’t know what it’s like. We can’t know unless you let us in,” She said softly as I cried harder. *Perhaps this explains what’s been going on with me lately...* I thought as my crying continued. A soft voice in the back of my head spoke up.

“Twilight’s Emotions are getting restless. Anger is fighting with Jubilation, while the others are struggling to break free all at once,” The familiar voice of Spark echoed.

So that’s why I’ve been having these crazy mood swings? I asked the Element. If she could nod, I could swear that she just did.

“Yes... their influence is beginning to affect your own emotional state,” Spark replied casually.

Well tell them to stop! It’s starting to really get on my nerves! I said. By now Rarity had managed to calm my crying enough to where I could speak. Spark went silent once again. I cursed the spirit for a moment and returned my focus to Twilight’s body.

“Sorry... I... I’ve been a bad friend lately haven’t I?” I asked, looking up at the white mare.

“It’s quite alright darling. I’m sorry that I haven’t been more of an attentive friend myself. I should have been there for you immediately,” She said before turning serious again. “Twilight, you know you can come to us with anything. Anything at all. We’re your friends darling. We’ll always be there for you.”

“I... I know,” I said finally, feeling defeated and broken down. “Rarity?” The mare looked down at me and smiled. “Can we stay here for a little while and watch the rest of the show? I don’t feel like going back just yet.”

“Of course we can darling. Of course we can.”

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My eyes fluttered open to blinding pain as my head began to pound immediately as I awoke. The headache that I had was legendary! It echoed across my head like a stampeding flock of buffalo, pounding harder and harder as it neared its climax of pain. To be perfectly blunt about the whole thing: hangovers suck.

My headache however, cleared right up the moment I felt the cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against my neck. *Shit*, I thought. *Not again.* I looked up through the haze to see two earth pony stallions standing over me. The one nearest me had a rifle mounted battle saddle, the business end of which was pressed right up against my neck. The two stallions were wearing what appeared to be fine clothing. Their manes were slicked back and they were grinning widely.

“Morning, sunshine,” Rifle Pony said. Grinning Pony chuckled a bit at his friend’s joke. I scowled.

“Can I help you?” I asked nonchalantly. My headache returned as the adrenaline rush of being woken

up by a gun flittered away. I glowered at the buck. Rifle Pony chuckled himself.

“Get up and get your stuff. You’re late,” He replied, pulling the rifle barrel away from my neck. A third voice, this one a familiar tone, echoed across the room.

“Star, it’s alright. They’re our escorts,” Steeljack said. I looked over at the buck. He had already gotten our stuff ready. I sat up and groaned as Rifle Pony and Grinning Pony chuckled to each other.

“Could have been a little nicer,” I muttered under my breath as I pushed myself out of bed, feeling a little woozy as I grabbed my saddlebags from my friend. The grey buck casually tossed me some sort of bottle out of his pack with instructions to drink up. I tipped the entire thing and let the cool liquid trickle down my throat. I began to feel a little better as my headache began to clear, but my stomach still felt like it might turn over at any moment. Stargazer floated up and attached to its harness, drawing an “Ooooh” from Rifle Pony.

“Nice piece you got there darling. Interested in trading it?” He asked. I grinned at him.

“Sure. I’ll trade its bullets for your brains splattered all over if you call me any nicknames like that again,” I said, continuing my wide grin. I felt like shit as I spoke, but the stallion’s reaction was worth it. Rifle Pony’s eyes widened as his buddy howled with laughter. The stallion merely grumbled and stormed out of the room, leaving his buddy alone with us. He merely continued his maniacal grin.

“Alright, well we should get going. Our pickup arrives in ten minutes. Get your asses in gear and let’s go,” He said, motioning for us to follow him. The buck led us through the back of the theatre hall and out into the alley. I stumbled a bit, forcing Steeljack to have to help me along. I figured this was some sort of penance for having drunk so much the night before. Rifle Pony waited there for us with two blindfolds on his hoof. A rickety cart sat behind him.

“Get in and put these on. You want to work for the MMMM, then you follow our rules,” He said. I grimaced and sat down inside the cart, sliding the blindfold over my eyes. The cart began to move as we sat there and waited. Several moments later the cart stopped and a voice rang out. I spent the majority of the time trying to keep my lunch intact, groaning each time we went over a bump in the road.

“Get out, keep the blind folds on and we’ll take you the rest of the way,” The voice said. We stepped out of the cart onto the hard ground and followed the voice, led along from behind by another pony. A door opened up and we were inside a building.

“Alright, take ‘em off,” The voice said. The blindfolds were removed and we looked up in awe. It was a bakery. Scratch that, it was a baker’s wet dream. A massive factory sprawled out as far as we could see, pounding out numerous treats and pastries from the gigantic presses. Ponies milled about on the factory floor, working the various machines as dough became shaped into reality. The voice, which I now recognized as Rifle Pony, motioned for us to follow him. We made our way through the maze of machines, stopping at a door to the back room. He rapped on the door several times in a sequence of knocks. The door opened and he waved us in. The room was dark and a table with two chairs sat in the middle of it.

“So... you want to work for the MMMM?” A voice from the shadows said. A cream colored unicorn stallion stepped out and stood in front of us. I suddenly had a bad feeling about this whole thing. It all seemed to go a little too easy. I nodded as the stallion chuckled, before turning and pointing a pistol right at my head. *Of course*, I thought. His blip on my E.F.S. instantly went red.

“Who the fuck do you think we are?” He snarled. “Did you really think it would be that easy to just waltz in here? Who sent you?” Shit. Shit shit shit! Headache cleared up, stomach totally okay now! Adrenaline taking over! We needed a way out of this and fast.

“Nopony sent us. We heard there was work with the MMMM, doing protection rackets,” I said nervously.

“Bullshit. You were set up. We don’t advertise to anypony. Now who sent you, and why?” The stallion said. “You’ve got til I count to three before I splatter your brains all over.”

“Okay okay!” I shouted at the buck. “We were sent by the Lotus Triad. They have two of our friends and forced us into it. Believe me, we wouldn’t be here otherwise.” The stallion grinned and retracted the gun. His blip went back to yellow.

“I thought so. Stupid mares. Think they can nose in on our business. Name’s Apple Danish. Just Danish is fine to call me,” The stallion responded. “I’m sorry about your friends, but they’re goners. The Lotus Triad doesn’t take prisoners, they take executions.”

“We were promised we’d get our friends back if we did what they asked,” Steeljack interjected, prompting a chuckle from the stallion.

“And what pray tell did they ask you to do?” He replied.

“We were asked to find out what you were planning on giving the Steel Rangers,” I said. Danish grinned.

“Of course you were. The Lotus Triad has been trying to figure that one out for some time now. Truth is, we actually don’t have it yet, but we will soon,” The cream colored stallion said.

“Why are you being so forward with this information?” I asked. “We could always escape.”

“And go where? Back to the Triad? Think you can go against the whole of the Chi-Town gangs by yourself?” Danish asked. We stayed silent. “Didn’t think so. Luckily for you, I can offer you some work after all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Danish grinned.

“We ain’t nothin if not reasonable fellows. So here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll give you something to take back to the Triad. Appease them and whatnot, but in return... you’ll have to acquire for us something we’ve been trying to get to for some time now,” The stallion said. “You see, there’s some pretty choice prewar tech in the old Ministry of Technology hub that’s close by here. We can’t get into the place without a PipBuck however since it’s locked down tighter than Celestia’s plot, and as you can see...” He lifted his PipBuck-less hoof. “No PipBuck.”

“So why us? How can it be that you don’t have any access to ponies with PipBucks?” I asked. Danish chuckled.

“Yeah. Most of them boyos they go in and get their asses fried if you know what I mean. Nah, I gotta good feeling about youse two. So, you in or are you out?” He replied.

“We’re in,” Steeljack said before I could say anything. I nodded as well. “Just what are we looking for anyways?”

“There’s supposedly a vault inside that holds some tech that was important to Applejack, the Ministry Mare of Technology. Gain access to that vault for us, and we’ll give you the stuff to get your friends back... provided the Triad ain’t dusted em already,” Danish said.

“I’m assuming it’s just going to be us going in for you?” I said. Danish shook his head.

“Nah. Got one more to join you in addition to yours truly. Didn’t think we were going to let you run around without our consent now did you? We picked the other up last night too,” The stallion replied as he trotted up to the door and rapped on it. “Bring her on in boys.” The door opened and a familiar

face stepped through. It was the unicorn/pegasus Lucky from the bar. She had a sheepish grin on her face as she waved at us. I turned to Danish.

“Really?” I said flatly, as I moved in closer to whisper to the buck. “You do know she’s not an alicorn right? She might not even be combat trained.”

“Ah that’s okay, I’m actually a medical trainee,” A chipper voice jumped in. Lucky was standing there right next to us. *Gah!* I thought as I nearly leapt out of my coat. *How did she do that? I didn’t even hear her!*

“So you’re a doctor?” Steeljack asked. Lucky nodded excitedly.

“Well... more like a medical trainee. I’m still learning some things,” She said animatedly. I sighed for a moment. Once again, for the love of freaking Celestia why were all the cute ones GREEN?! I turned to Danish once more.

“Are you really sure about this?” I asked. He nodded and grinned. I continued to have a really bad feeling about all of this. I looked over at Steeljack, who just shrugged. I groaned. This really was going to be the worst possible thing ever!

Have I ever mentioned just how much I hate robots? They’re up there on that list still, right below those stairs that I hate so much. A blast of laser fire seared past my head as I pondered the hateful existence of these fucking things. I turned in a split second, unleashing destruction upon the Ponitron security robot that was the source of the laser fire. Steeljack, Danish, Lucky, and I had arrived in the courtyard of the Ministry of Wartime Technology and opened the gate using my PipBuck to hack into the gate terminal, only to be immediately set upon by the security robots that were still active. I supposed after all that this was the Ministry of **Wartime** Technology. Still, I wish it had more technology and a little less war. The **crack** of Steeljack’s rifle echoed across the hall as he fired round after round, pounding into the robot security drones. Meanwhile Danish had released several rounds of his own from his semi-automatic rifle he was carrying along in his magic. I had managed to glean a little information from the stallion about the MMMM. Apparently, while the Lotus Triad was right about the protection rackets, they were dead wrong about the drug rings. The MMMM was apparently made up of a lot of ex-bakers and pastry chefs. The protection rackets were just to keep the various settlements safe while funding the MMMM’s various businesses and when they talked about ‘sugar’ they didn’t mean drugs, they meant the real thing. In fact, one of their primary exports was cupcakes of all things. No Dash or Party Time Mintals in them, just regular cupcakes. I was sort of surprised at the hilarity of it all. And here I am rambling again when I should be paying attention to the fact that I was just shot.

“OWWWWWW” I shouted as I rubbed my flank where a stray bolt of laser fire had struck me. I groaned as I turned and let loose a burst round in the direction it came from, turning the Ponitron into a bucket of parts. All the while, I kept looking for Lucky. The green mare had seemed positively excited to be coming along with us, but ever since the fighting started she completely disappeared. I had expected it however, seeing as how she was just a medical pony. More laser fire flew by, nearly hitting me in the chest before I deflected it to the side with my telekinesis.

“You alright over there?” Steeljack shouted as he let loose another **crack** of his rifle, destroying another one of the hated machines. The hall beyond us was large and untouched it seemed by the ages of time. The floors and walls were just as pristine as the day the megaspells dropped. It felt weird to be in a place that was as intact as this place was. Was it abandoned before the megaspells? Why were these drones still active? I let my wondering get the better of me as I angrily blasted away at several more of the robots.

“I’m alright!” I yelled back. “How many more of these things do you think there are?!”

“I don’t know, just keep shooting them!” My friend replied, grinning. I nodded, and entered E.S.A.T.S, queuing up several shots and letting the spell drop. Stargazer turned and aimed, spewing forth round after round into a crowd of Ponitrons that were rushing in at me. Bullets tore into metal, ripping apart the machines at their core. Slowly but surely, the red blips on my E.F.S. began to disappear. All around us hunks of broken metal and sparking electronic components lay in piles. No more of the robots seemed to be coming to stop us. I checked my E.F.S. again, and found the single yellow blip I had been looking for underneath the main desk in the hub’s lobby. I stepped up and rapped sharply on the desk with my hoof, hearing a ***thunk*** from underneath as the cowering mare tried to extricate herself from beneath.

“Oh!! Umm... did we win?” She asked sheepishly. I facehooved and groaned.

“Lucky... are you actually going to help us during fights, or are you going to run and hide?” I asked.

This mare was beginning to get less cute and more on my nerves by the minute. She grinned and nodded her head. I didn’t have the heart to ask which question she said yes to. She slid herself out from the lobby desk and stood. I groaned and motioned for her to follow us. As we walked on through the lobby and deeper into the hall, I wondered what was here that warranted so much security. Was the Lotus Triad right? Were the MMMM really seeking some sort of prewar weapon here to give to the Steel Rangers? It occurred to me that I didn’t really have a choice in all of this, if I ever wanted to see Violet and Patch again.

The massive hall ended unceremoniously in a series of elevators that led to the other levels of the Ministry hub. According to my PipBuck and its interface with the elevator terminal, the elevators went down as well as up, meaning that the vault we were looking for could be at the lower levels just as much as it would be up top. Deciding that we would check out the lower levels first, we stepped into the elevator and pressed the button. Surprisingly it still worked. The elevator began to hum as it zoomed downward, stopping at the lowest floor. As soon as the door opened, the stench hit us. The smell of rotted flesh assaulted my nostrils and the sound of gurgling echoed through the dark hallway. Pipes lined the hallway, revealing that this was a maintenance level that branched off into several corridors that intersected each other. The main corridor extended into the darkness before us.

“Shit,” I said.

“What’s that stench?” Lucky said. This mare was clearly clueless and had never met a ghoul before. I wondered how she had even survived in the Wasteland to begin with.

“Ghouls,” Danish said flatly. “Feral ones. Lots of them from the sound of it.” The gurgling sound got louder and the stench intensified. Wherever they were, they were getting closer. I lifted Stargazer and looked out into the hallway, checking my E.F.S. for any signs of hostility. Several red blips appeared in front of us and the gurgling became overpowering as the first feral rounded the corner. It snarled with inequine glee as it rushed down the hallway at us. It charged onwards until its head exploded in a splatter of gore as a ***crack*** erupted from my right side. Steeljack grinned as ghoul-flesh flew from the dead beast. Lucky shrieked as some of the splatter landed on her coat. *Some mares*, I thought.

Why are the cute ones also the incapable ones?!

“Fan out, boyos. Let’s go to work,” Danish said with a grin. I chuckled a bit. Despite the fact that he had threatened us, I was beginning to like the buck. At least he had a sense of humor. Danish turned down the next corridor to the right as I stared hard at Lucky, who had managed to wipe off some of the gory bits.

“Stay close to me. If you run off, they will find you and you will die. Do you understand me?” I said as clearly as I could. The other mare nodded, her eyes wide with fear. I sighed. It was just my luck,

having to take care of ghouls and babysit this stupid (but still cute, dammit!) green mare. I motioned to Steeljack who only nodded. He moved down the corridor to the left of us, disappearing out of sight.

The ghoulish gurgling got louder as two more of the beasts rounded the next corner in front of us. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., taking no chances here as I lined up burst shots right into their heads. Time fell back into place and Stargazer unleashed its own version of hell onto the creatures, obliterating their heads in showers of sticky flesh and blood.

“Haha! The fun has been doubled!” I shouted, taking surprising glee in punching hole after hole into these monsters. Part of me felt bad for these ponies, having had their entire lives taken away from them as they slowly became the feral creatures we now fought. My emotions over of the subject fought with each other as I fired on the next set of ghouls. Was I really supposed to be happy about the slaughter I was partaking in? I mean, come on... they were feral ghouls for Celestia’s sake! I groaned as I cursed the war going on within my mind.

A shriek from behind me brought my thoughts back to the task at hand. Lucky was huddled closely next to my rump when one of the beasts lunged at my right side, grabbing me by the back legs. I snarled and gave a quick snort, pinning my ears back as I put all my effort into a little trick the country ponies call ‘the applebuck.’ The ghouls went flying past the mare behind me as I wheeled about and brought Stargazer up, posting a double burst of hot lead right at the feral. The thing burst apart into pieces as the rounds struck it. I stared hard at Lucky. The poor mare didn’t even have a weapon. I growled and ripped out one of the spare pistols I had in my saddlebag, floating it into the air before her.

“Take it, and learn how to use it really quick. I can’t keep babysitting you like this!” I shouted. The other mare timidly took the weapon in her magic, holding it shakily in the air. A snarl from behind me indicated the presence of another ghouls. A sharp ***crack*** echoed across the hall to our left and I felt ghouls blood splatter across my rump as the gurgling noises stopped. I silently thanked Luna for Steeljack’s aim. I turned and saw the buck, a grin creeping along his face as another group of ghouls came down the main corridor. I could hear the faint rattling of Danish’s semi-automatic one corridor over, indicating that he was still alive and kicking even though I couldn’t see him. I motioned for Lucky to follow me as we forced our way further into the maintenance level. A funny feeling crossed my head as I felt something tugging on me, pulling me closer and further into the level. I began to trot along, indicating to the mare behind me to keep up.

The blips on E.F.S. began to fan out more and more as we descended deeper into the maintenance level. The place was like a maze, with corridors branching off everywhere in a giant grid-like pattern. Many of the corridors ran into each other, and plenty of times we ran around in circles before we realized we were going the wrong way. If there was something down here, these ghouls were protecting it as part of their final acts of life. I continued to slay without mercy, letting out all of my anger and hatred onto the ghouls. As we progressed further into the level, we found a large corridor that led directly towards the center. It was then that I saw it. In the very center of the section at the end of the corridor was a clearing in which sat a large cylindrical room, locked with a massive door. A large group of ghouls surrounded the area. Danish and Steeljack had made their way back into our little group by now as we had a moment of respite from the attacking creatures.

“Do you think that’s the vault?” Danish asked, indicating the circular room just ahead of us. I nodded.

“I don’t know why... but there’s something in there... it’s calling to me,” I said, feeling the tug on my soul once more.

“Is she for real?” Danish asked, his head cocked as he looked at Steeljack. Steeljack nodded calmly. I looked over at Lucky, who was trembling still.

“Hey. I’m sorry about before. But you need to get your head in the game here,” I said to her sternly,

repeating the advice I had given Steeljack the night before. "I don't know what your reason for being here in the first place is, but my friends are on the line. And I will do whatever it takes to save them." The mare nodded and cocked a small grin.

"Alright. Let's get moving," I said, standing up and taking up Stargazer in my magic. I fired a burst of rounds into the cluster of ghouls in the open space, hopefully getting their attention. It worked like a charm as the first set shuffled into view. A sharp ***crack*** echoed in the hallway as Steeljack worked earth pony magic with his rifle, blowing holes in the feral beast's legs and forcing them to the ground. Danish moved to the side, bringing up his semi-auto and letting loose a few burst rounds himself, grinning as he dodged a ghoul that got a little too close. The rifle came up and point-blank liquefied the thing's head. We began to push inwards, closer and closer to the door. I stepped forward and brought up Stargazer again to fire upon another group of ghouls when suddenly a gunshot and a scream rang out behind me. Pain suddenly shot up my entire back when I realized... I had been shot. I groaned through the pain as I turned to see Lucky, forced onto her back by one of the ferals. The barrel of her gun was smoking in the air. In hindsight, this was mostly my fault for putting a loaded weapon in the hooves of an inexperienced shooter. At that moment though, I hardly cared as the ghoul bit into her side and she screamed in pain. It was the most blood curdling thing I had ever heard.

"Lucky!" I shouted, beginning to stumble towards her as the ghoul latched onto her neck and clamped down, spraying blood everywhere its teeth gnashed through bone. Lucky began to scream harder as she tried to push the ghoul off. It was a futile effort however, as the beast had the mare pinned to the ground and she was unable to move. I snarled, bringing up Stargazer and pausing. Firing with such a weapon at the range I was at, I was certain to hit her too. I stumbled over myself in pain, hitting the ground before I could get there. I could only watch through the haze of the pain as the ghoul bit down again, bringing Lucky's screaming to a bloody end. A sharp ***crack*** filled the air as the ghoul's head exploded. I panted hard as I watched the mare laying there, her eyes lifeless as her blood spilled out onto the floor of the hallway. The last thing I saw before my eyes dropped to blackness was Steeljack's form hovering over me.

Of course. It had to be the same corridor. The doors and the torches and the endless hallway. I sat there, unable to move because my brain wouldn't let me. I was too busy watching Lucky die over and over and over in my mind, entire body shaking from the pain. I didn't want to move. I only wanted to go back, to try and save her again. I felt horrible inside. I had given her a gun and told her to fend for herself when she didn't know how. I shook in fear of what I had done to her. I did it. Not anypony else but me. Why did I do it? Why did I get so irritated with her that in the end... I got her killed. Not just killed... but eaten... savaged by a monstrous beast. The familiar ***fwoosh*** and ***creak*** greeted my ears as I looked up. I tried to move. Tried to go through the door. I couldn't, and yet something pushed me toward it. I slinked into the door and through it, landing in a familiar tree house. I stepped in, waiting for her to appear. From the stairs she came, the same purple unicorn I had been seeing for all this time. She looked... happy? Why would she be happy? What good did a happy emotion do for me right now? I wanted to be miserable! She smiled as she looked at me, motioning towards a couch next to her seat. She was wearing a pair of reading glasses and had a clipboard and pen floating in the air next to her.

"Hello Star. Take a seat. We need to have a talk," She said, smiling.

"I don't want to," I said flatly. "I want to go back."

"I'm sorry, but you're here now, and we need to have a talk," The mare replied.

"I don't care," I said, anger rising in my voice. "I have to go back. Find a way to make it better. Find

a way to save her.” The lavender mare shook her head.

“You can’t do that. It’s too late. Just... take a seat okay? Listen to me, and if you don’t like what I have to say... well then you can go,” She said. I sighed, and plopped myself down onto the couch.

“So which one are you? Psychiatry?” I asked. The mare laughed a bit.

“No. Actually, I’m Hope,” She replied. I snorted.

“Since when does Hope act like a psychiatrist?” I said. I stared away from the purple mare. She chuckled again.

“Since some silly little filly named Radiant Star started being a sourpuss,” She said. I stared back at her. “Yeah, that’s right. You’re out of your head there missy.”

“Well I wouldn’t be if you damn emotions would just buck off!” I shouted at her. The mare sighed and shook her head again.

“You’re too busy fighting us that you’re not seeing the big picture. You have to hope for the best. You have to stay positive,” She said.

“How... how can I do that when... when I feel like all I’m doing is fucking everything up?” I said softly. I began to shake once more from the pain. Visions of Lucky being eaten danced in my head.

“Start by sucking it up already!” Hope replied, groaning. “Geez. You act like it’s your fucking fault and it’s not! You have to have some hope for Luna’s sake.” I snarled back at the emotion.

“What hope?!” I shouted at her. “Where is it? Because I can’t see it! It is my fault alright! I got Lucky killed. It’s my fault we’re here in this damn city to begin with! I don’t even know if Patch and Violet are alive, and with Lucky dead, I can only hope that Steeljack survived too! So what hope is there?!” I hopped off the couch and moved to leave, stopped by the mare’s hoof. She shook her head silently. I moved to pull myself away when I felt her forelegs wrap around me. I looked back once more to see that she had pulled me into her embrace, tears in her eyes. I couldn’t stand it any longer. I slumped down to my haunches, letting the tears begin to flow. The lavender unicorn cooed softly as she hugged me.

“It’s not your fault. Let it out. There’s hope. You just have to look for it. You know in your heart that Violet and Patch are still okay. As for Lucky... there was nothing you could have done for her,” Hope said through her own tears as I bawled my eyes out all over her shoulder. “It’s going to be alright. Just focus on what needs to be done. Let us in, and we’ll help you. Things won’t be as crazy. You’ll see.”

“Why...?” I asked, choking through the tears. “Why is this happening to me? Why me? Why...?” Hope sighed.

“The power growing deep within you is getting stronger by the day. If you don’t learn to accept certain aspects, they will fight you. The Emotions are all fighting because you can’t make up your mind about what you want,” She replied. I pulled back from her, trying to dry my tears.

“You mean if I just... let you do what you want you’ll stop all of these crazy mood swings?” I said, sniffing. Hope smiled.

“All I can say is: make up your mind silly filly! Hope is just around the corner. You’ll find it, I know you will. You’re smart, you’ll figure it all out,” The lavender unicorn said.

“What now? I just go back... and try to hope?” I asked. Hope nodded. She wrote a few things down on her clipboard and grinned widely.

“Just hope. That’s all I’m asking you to do,” She said as the world around me faded entirely to black.

Pain shot through my flank, jolting me instantly awake. I looked around my immediate surroundings and sighed. The familiar rotted stench of dead ghouls filled my nostrils and the dark bleak steam associated with the maintenance level greeted my eyes. I groaned as I felt a bandage being slapped onto my rump and then the familiar taste of healing potion as the bottle was forced into my mouth. I looked up seeing Steeljack standing above me.

“Lucky...?” The first words rolled off my tongue as I winced in pain. Steeljack shook his head, solemnly. I sighed and pushed myself up from the ground. I looked to my friend. “Are you okay?” He nodded. I could see Danish past him, staring off at the vault we had spent all of this painful suffering for. I looked around, not seeing Lucky’s body anywhere.

“Where...?” I started to ask before Steeljack put a hoof up to silence me.

“She’s over there. We covered her up,” He said, pointing down the hall that brought us to the clearing. I trotted past him and moved down to where a mish-mash of coverings was pulled over the mare’s body. I levitated the cover away briefly and stared down. I felt tears drip from my eyes. I closed them for a moment and shook them away, replacing the covering. I thought long and hard about what Hope had said, and still considered what happened to the mare my fault. I still messed up. But there was no going back now, and I would have to live with it. I would have to press on, for my friends and for everypony else who needed me.

“Star?” The voice of my friend echoed down the hallway. I nodded and turned back towards him.

“So what now?” I asked softly as I trotted up to the buck. He pointed over at the vault door, where Danish was trying to figure out how to gain access. I walked over and looked at him.

“Damn thing is locked up tighter than a schoolfilly’s.... I mean... umm.. it’s locked!” The cream colored unicorn exclaimed. I pointed at the terminal hanging off the side of the wall next to the door.

“Just an observation, but I think our method of access lies here,” I said, smiling and holding up my PipBuck. The stallion grinned and stepped aside, letting me to the terminal with a grandiose wave. I stepped forward and connected my PipBuck to the terminal and began to attempt hacking at it. No matter what phrase I tried however, nothing seemed to work. After several attempts, the terminal began to blink red at me and screamed **ACCESS DENIED** over and over.

“Shit!” I shouted at the thing, pounding on it with my hoof. “Why. Won’t. This. Thing. Work?!” I fumed at the terminal and reached out with my magic to try and force the door open. The moment I touched the terminal and door with my magic, something... changed. The door began to glow and the terminal flashed **ACCESS GRANTED** at me. A stylized etching of three apples appeared on the face of the door. A light from above the door flashed downwards at the ground, coalescing into an image of an aging orange mare. Her hair was mixed blonde and grey and she wore a smile on her face. She opened her mouth and began to speak. Her voice was calm and tender as I listened.

“Hey Twi’,” The mare began. “I figure if you’re here accessin’ this, then it means that ah’m gone now. I don’t know why you were so darn stubborn about keepin’ this thing. It’s dangerous. Ah told you so when you first stuck it here, and ah’ll tell you so again now. But still... be careful okay? Ah don’t wanna see nothin’ bad happen to you. Ah know what happened to your brother hurt, but you gotta start livin’ for the future. If ah ain’t around, ah’m sorry I didn’t try harder. This war... it’s been hard on all of us. Ah just hope we all make it through it and you never have to hear this. Ah love you Sugarcube. You were the best friend a pony could ever have.”

The image of the old mare flittered away. I smiled as I realized that in some strange way, fate had brought me here. Despite what had happened up until now... at some point I was going to be here one

way or another. The door began to shift open, steam expelling from it until it was completely open. I stepped into the vault, Danish and Steeljack bringing up the rear. The inside of the room was filled with a techno-geek's wet dream. Every piece of popular pre-war tech was here, from PipBucks to Steel Ranger armor. However, none of these things caught my eye like the item in the very center of the room. It was a large metal casing, shaped almost like a giant acorn. The glass in the center of it displayed the most disturbing thing I had ever seen in my entire life. I let out a soft gasp as I approached the center of the room. I realized now what Applejack had thought was so dangerous in her message. My PipBuck began to click wildly indicating high levels of radiation. Already I saw Danish pulling out his packages of RadAway and downing them. He must have either heard the clicking or felt the radiation in the air.

"Ohh... Oh Luna..." I said, my speech trailing off as I stared at the device. I heard hooves beside me as Steeljack stepped up next to me. He showed visible signs of discomfort as he yanked out a pack of RadAway and downed it.

"Is... is that what I think it is?" He said quietly. I could only nod. Behind the glass was a swirling cloud of pink substance, somehow held in place inside the device. I couldn't begin to fathom how they had done it, but here it was.

There was an undetonated megaspell in the middle of this room, and it was the worst one of them all.

"Pink Cloud."

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Strength of Chicacolt: Your experiences thus far in the city have hardened your resolve to push forward, increasing your Strength and Endurance by +1.

Spark Level: 69%. This is how much Spark controls of your body.

Reputation: You are now neutral with both the Lotus Triad and the MMMM. However, due to the swingy relationship these two gangs have, this could change at any moment.

Violet Iris: Well you were kidnapped, so we don't know what you were doing... did you level up?

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Perk! Intense Training: Level up your Agility by +1

Patch: Level Status Unknown.

Chapter 13: Breaking Point, Part 1

I hope you're happy, both of you. You've ruined my very first slumber party. The makeover, the s'mores, Truth or Dare, the pillow fight... I mean, is there anything else that could possibly go wrong?

Death. Death is the end of life, and the beginning of something new. Death is just another part of the eternal cycle. But to be truthful... death hurts. It hurts a fucking lot. Watching Lucky die right before my eyes broke my spirit in ways I couldn't even fathom. I kept seeing it in my mind, seeing the ghoul take her life. Every part of me hurt and I felt like hurting things in turn. I wanted to see the world burn and I didn't care how or why.

I think about the past once more. Ponies died all the time during the war. Twilight watched her own brother die in front of her very eyes. In the end, she hurt so much that she put every effort into creating this spell that in the long run... changed me. But what am I changing into? And why?

When does all of this end? And why do I get the feeling that it will only end... in death?

"We need to seal this room back up, now." I said angrily at the cream colored stallion. The giant steel acorn sat silently in the room as if it were some form of monolith. Danish rubbed his head and groaned.

"Look, there's a lot of choice stuff here. We're supposed to take what we can carry and bring back the big boys for the bigger stuff," He replied nonchalantly.

"No. We're sealing it up right now. Do you even know what that is?" I said, pointing a hoof at the giant steel acorn. The pink substance inside flowed endlessly. It caught my eye for a moment and I wondered just how the zebras ever managed to contain the substance. No pony had ever seen the bomb that had infiltrated Canterlot. How did Twilight even get her hooves on such a device? The damn thing raised too many questions and provided no answers. As well, the presence of an undetonated megaspell... if the Steel Rangers got their hands on such a device it would be the end of everything all over again. This time however, there would be no Princesses holding in the cloud. It would spread everywhere, either ghoulifying the rest of the population of Equestria or outright killing them. There was suddenly something a lot bigger for me to worry about for the moment. A headache scratched at the back of my mind as I tried to make sense of the past few days.

"Why don't you explain it to me?" Danish asked, looking confused. I sighed. I was sorry to say that I actually liked this buck, but if I had to... I would do what I needed to make sure the bomb never left this room. Even if it meant killing him. Surprisingly, that thought didn't seem all that bad to me at that moment in time. I was angry and hurt. This entire expedition had ended in pain, and left us with the threat of even more pain to come if the wrong ponies got their hooves on the megaspell.

"Have you ever seen Canterlot?" I replied coldly. The unicorn shook his head. I sighed. A long time ago, before the Day of Sunshine and Rainbows and before the Goddess was destroyed, the alicorn race was sent in trios to the ancient capital of Equestria in order to search out the infamous Black Book.

Pink Cloud in its gaseous form wouldn't kill an alicorn. It would do worse than that. The pink substance would get into the alicorn's head and screw with their mind. Many tales came back into Unity of sisters of ours that had made the journey to Canterlot only to be driven insane and cut off after spending prolonged time in the Pink Cloud. Their screams were horrific. "That thing over there? That destroyed Canterlot, and it's only because of the Princesses that it didn't spread any farther. It's Pink Cloud. If this were to detonate... you wouldn't just be killing us and this city, but all of Equestria

would suffer.”

Danish groaned and put a hoof to his forehead. He looked over at Steeljack, who nodded calmly. The cream colored stallion sighed and began to pace. “I... I dunno... I could get in a lot of trouble if I don’t return with something. I’m not saying I don’t disagree with yas, that sounds really bad and all... but youse guys gotta understand my situation here. We’re sitting on a veritable gold mine.”

“And if anypony else gets a look at that thing, the war it will start in this city will be far worse than any other war you have seen yet,” I said coldly. “If you won’t help us, then stay out of our way. And if you get in our way...” I glared at him with death in my eyes. The stallion’s eyes widened as he caught my drift.

“Whoah there now... I didn’t say I was going to stop you. But what about taking even just a few of these choice relics?” He said, waving a hoof over the rest of the room’s treasures. I shook my head, drawing a confused stare from the buck.

“If we bring anything back, it will only prompt others to come back here and see if there’s more,” Steeljack said. “We need to seal up the room and fast.” Danish sighed.

“I am sooo dead...” He whined for a second, before turning serious. “Alright look. I guess... I guess I’ll help you. I’m gonna be shitkicked from here to next Sunday over this, but I’m not going to be responsible for destroyin’ all of Equestria. I like this place.” I breathed a sigh of relief at this. I started towards the door, when a glimmer of orange caught my eye to my right. I stopped and turned, searching for where the glimmer came from. There was something else here, something else that Twilight wanted me to find. Something...

“Star?” Steeljack said as I stared. “You... you alright?” I scanned the room, searching for that hint of orange, ignoring my friend completely as I stepped towards the right side of the circular room. *Where is it? Where?* I thought as my mind drove me forward. The glint of orange became overpowering now as my eyes traced it to a locker on the far end of the room. I galloped full speed at it, ripping the door apart with telekinesis. I skidded to a stop in front of it, panting hard as I gazed upon the contents.

The two items sitting on the shelf inside the locker were a pleasant surprise. One of them was a memory orb, orange in color and swirling madly. The other... the other was a figurine of an orange mare with blonde hair. Three apples graced her flank. She was positioned in such a way that it appeared that she was in the middle of a powerful applebuck. *Applejack*... I thought as I reached out to the statue. As I took up in the statue in my magic, I felt strong enough to take on any obstacle. I lifted the statue and read the inscription on the base. *Be Strong!* It said. I smiled and deposited Applejack into my saddlebag, knowing that the tiny mare was safe next to her friends there. I swept the memory orb into my bag as well, intending on watching this particular one at my earliest convenience. I glared back at the device in the room. I knew instinctively somehow that the memory orb had something to do with it. I stepped away from the locker and started back towards my friends standing at the entrance. Danish gave me a look of pure confusion.

“Umm... I thought you said we wasn’t takin’ nothin’?” He asked. I glared at him.

“That was mine,” I said harshly, perhaps a little more than necessary.

“So does that mean --?” The stallion began to say.

“No,” I said, cutting him off. He shut up immediately and just sort of nodded. I passed through the entrance back into the maintenance corridor, followed by the two stallions. Turning to the terminal, I began to peck at the keys to try and close the door. Nothing I tried would work though. I snarled, beating on the keyboard with my hooves. “Fuck!” I shouted, watching as the terminal kept flashing ***ERROR*** at me over and over. I lashed out with my magic, hoping that it would spur the terminal

and door into closing as it had before when it opened. The terminal continued to flash at me. Anger rose in my throat as I let out a guttural snarl and ripped the box completely from the wall with my telekinesis. I felt a hoof on my shoulder. I turned and shouted at whoever was standing there. "What?!"

There was no pony there. Steeljack and Danish were still standing in the corridor, looking at me with concern in their eyes.

"Star?" Steeljack began. "You alright? What's wrong?" I looked back at the pile of ruins on the ground that was once the wall terminal. I huffed and turned to the door. *Alright then, you want to do this the hard way, let's do this hard way!* I thought as I grabbed the two parts of the door with my magic and began trying to force them together. Unfortunately, it wouldn't budge. I groaned and pushed harder. The door sat there, laughing at me it seemed. At least I thought I heard laughter. A soft giggle echoed through my ears. I groaned. *Steeljack*, I started to think, before realizing that Steeljack didn't have a soft giggle. In fact, I'd never heard him giggle at all. I turned around, seeing nothing but the other two stallions standing there.

"Did one of you say something?" I asked. Both of the stallions shook their head. I glared at them and went to turn back around to the door. When I turned back, I was met with two wide purple eyes and a green face. Connected to said face was the rest of a particular green mare that I thought to be quite dead.

"Hi Star!" A high pitched voice shouted. Truth be told, I screamed. I screamed loudly. Standing in front of me... was Lucky. The green mare looked at me quizzically as Steeljack and Danish rushed up to me.

"Star! What's wrong?!" Steeljack yelled. I shuddered. *No, no, no... you're dead*, I thought as my screaming finally stopped, my voice caught in my throat as I stared at the mare in front of me. I lifted a hoof and pointed. Danish looked past me and snorted.

"There's nothing there." He said. "Geez, you sure know how to pick em bud." Steeljack glared at the cream colored stallion, who promptly stepped back. My earth pony friend put a hoof on my now shaking shoulder. I turned and looked at him, eyes wide with panic.

"Star... there's nothing there. What's wrong? Are you alright?" He said quietly. I looked from him to the green mare in front of me and then back to him. Lucky grinned furiously trying to get my attention. I paused for a moment, and then nodded.

"Can... I get a moment by myself here for a second?" I cautiously asked. "I just... need some time to get my head straight." Steeljack nodded, motioning to Danish to follow him. The two bucks walked back into the vault, seeing as how I still had been unable to close the damn door, in order to give me some privacy. I turned back around, and Lucky was still standing there looking very confused at me. I stared at the mare for several minutes before I finally had the courage to speak without screaming.

"How...? How are you here?" I said, my voice shaking with fear and hurt. The mare cocked her head at me.

"What do you mean? I was right behind you, and then I guess I got knocked out or something..." She said. I stared at her and tears began to form in my eyes. I cried hard, slumping to my haunches. The Wasteland hated me. It very truly did. I could feel the pain rushing back that I had tried so hard to suppress as the memory of watching the mare's death played over and over. I felt something pass through my shoulder as I heard the mare speak.

"Well that's not right," I heard her say. I looked up through my tears to see the mare's hoof stuck deep into my shoulder. My eyes widened as I pushed myself away from the green mare. The hoof slid out

with ease, leaving no trace of any intrusion as if it had never been there to begin with.

“Wha... What...? What are you?” I stammered, looking upwards at her.

“It’s just me Star... What’s wrong?” Lucky said softly, looking more confused by the minute. I pushed myself back more, fear taking over as I struggled to get to my hooves and away from the green mare. I needed to see her body, needed to know that I wasn’t seeing things and that I wasn’t crazy. I didn’t care about anything else at that moment. I scrambled down the corridor where her body had been stored. The familiar covering came into view as I hit the ground and ripped it off. The lifeless body of the mare greeted my eyes. Her eyes had been closed and her body was cold. I pounded the ground next to her. *No. No No No! This can’t be happening, this isn’t real!* I shouted inside my head. I began to cry again as I stopped hitting the ground and let my head drop, sobbing into the cold concrete of the flooring.

“Why...? Why...? I killed you... It was my fault... why?” I bawled as I heard hoofsteps behind me. I turned around faster than I think I ever have in my entire life, seeing Lucky standing there. Her eyes had turned wide as she stared past me, seeing her own body lying there in a pool of dried blood. I wanted to stop it all right then and there. I couldn’t take anymore. But I also couldn’t bring myself to do anything about it either. So I sat there, staring at a mare that was supposed to be dead... but somehow wasn’t.

“Star... why I am over there?” Lucky said quietly. I turned my head to the side, trying not to catch the mare’s eye. Out of the corner of my vision, I saw realization dawn on the mare’s face.

“Star... Am I... am I dead?” She said. I couldn’t speak as I just nodded my head. I started shaking as I turned around and closed my eyes. *I can’t do it. I can’t face her. Not now. Not –*

“Star?” Her timid voice rang out from behind me. “What happened to me?” I shook harder and harder at the softness of her voice, trying to keep myself from breaking down inside. I finally spoke, my voice choking with tears.

“I... I messed up. It’s all my fault.”

“What? What do you mean?” Lucky said, her voice soft and comforting. I started to turn and then stopped. *No! Don’t look at her... I can’t... I can’t do it,* I thought. My mind was swirling with pain and hurt. I couldn’t bear to look at her, knowing that she was somehow there and somehow not dead. The pain was too much. I felt a sensation pass through me and suddenly the mare’s face was right in front of mine. I jumped back a bit, moving to turn away. The other mare lifted a hoof to try and stop me as it passed through my shoulder.

“Get away from me!” I shrieked as I tried to push myself backward. “Why are you being so nice to me? I did it. I killed you. I let that thing... I let that... that thing...” I trailed off as my thoughts began to break down. *Why me? Why am I being punished like this? I accepted the fact that it was my fault... right? So why... why is she here? WHY?!!!* I screamed inside as I stared blankly back at Lucky. The unicorn/pegasus stopped for a moment and sat down next to me. We sat there for a good long time, saying nothing. Finally, Lucky looked over at me and smiled weakly.

“You... you think I blame you for it?” She said. “It was a ghou! wasn’t it? I don’t remember anything from what happened.” I nodded silently. The mare looked to the ground and let out a soft “Oh... I see.” She sat there for a moment longer and lifted her head.

“Star... snap out it. I don’t know what’s going on anymore than you do, but I don’t blame you for it. I’m sure we’ll figure it out,” She said. Her smile went a little wider. “I just wish I could you know... hug you and stuff.” Silence filled the air once again as I sat there, unable to move. Finally, I looked up at the mare and sighed. I groaned and let my gaze fall back to the ground. Lucky stood up and moved

around to my front, staring me straight in the eyes.

“Look. Sooner or later you’re going to have to talk to me, because apparently only you can see me,” She said sternly. I still had to admit, that even as a ghost (could you call her a ghost? I wasn’t really sure what she was) she was still really damn cute.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. Lucky cocked her head.

“What?” She replied, a confused expression on her face.

“I said I’m sorry. I... I screwed up, I shouldn’t have given you that gun, and I should have been there. I should have been stronger,” I said, staring hard at the green mare. She smiled and shook her head.

“It’s not your fault. I should have done what you told me. I should have –“ She started to say before I cut her off.

“That’s it then,” I said. “It’s finally bucking happened. I’ve gone crazy. That’s it right? That’s why you’re here. You’re here to torment me, to make me go insane. Well guess what? It’s working!” I stared wide eyed and crazy-like at the ghostly mare. Was she a ghost? I didn’t really know what she was, other than some other form of my own crazy. I was lost in my own mind so much that I didn’t even hear the hooves striking the concrete down the corridor to my right until they were loudly echoing off the walls around me. Lucky’s eyes went wide as she stepped back and I looked up. A massive brahmin stood in the center of the corridor. I blinked at his method of dress. He was wearing a pinstripe suit with a fedora hat on each head. Flanking the Brahmin on each side were two earth ponies, each of them wearing battle saddles with long barreled rifles. Both of them were also wearing suits similar to the brahmin.

“Well well well,” The left head of the brahmin said. Wait... brahmin could talk? I thought they were all... well you know, dumb and speechless. Was there some special breed here in Chicacolt or something? “Look at what we got here boys.”

“Looks like an alicorn, boss,” The pony on the right of the brahmin said.

“Indeed it is,” The left head of the brahmin replied. “Looks like little miss wing and horns led us right to the prize.”

“Right you are boss,” The other earth pony said, grinning widely. What was it with ponies with rifles and grinning? It was just downright creepy sometimes!

“Who...?” I said, my voice weak from the strain of dealing with my current emotional state. I struggled to process my current predicament.

“Ah so you are with us then,” The right head said. “You’ve been talking to yourself for some time now. Was wondering when you would get around to noticing us.”

“Allow me to introduce myself,” The left head continued. “I’m – “

“The Bullfather,” A voice to my left shouted. Danish and Steeljack were standing there, towering over me. Danish had a look of anger on his face.

“And the MMMM flunkie shows his ugly face. Did you really think you weren’t being followed here?” The right head chortled. Danish scowled.

“So, the Bully himself, eh? What got your panties all knotted up that you had to come down here to see little old me?” The cream unicorn confidently replied. I could have sworn I heard Steeljack snigger in the background.

“You found something of value obviously, you pastry chef wannabe,” The left head said. I have to

admit, it was getting really confusing trying to remember what each head was saying. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lucky standing next to me. I sighed as I pushed myself up from the concrete, startling Rifle Pony number one (for distinction's sake, let's just call him Number One) on the brahmin's left as he went to go bite down onto his battle saddle bit. The Bullfather's hoof stomped in time, striking the earth pony in the leg and causing him to drop the bit.

"Moron. You don't shoot until I tells you to, you got me?" The right head said angrily. Number One rubbed his leg a bit and nodded.

"Sorry boss," He said. I turned to my left, glaring at the brahmin.

"Leave. I won't tell you again. There is nothing here that you could ever want," I said.

"Oh? But I think that's where you're wrong. You see, I'm many things, but I'm not stupid. If I was, I wouldn't be the leader of the one of the city's more prominent gangs," The right head continued. Danish snorted at this.

"The Cowpones? Bullshit. You're just a bunch of retard brahmin and earth ponies. Hardly a real gang," The cream unicorn responded.

"While it's true that some of my brethren are limited in the intelligence area, I am reasonably certain that I am correct in my assumption that there is something here, something of great value. Otherwise, why would the MMMM be so interested in this place? You've been throwing enforcers at it for ages now," The left head said. I glared over at Danish, who merely nodded. I reminded myself to have a little talk with the unicorn if we got out of this alive. The Bullfather's heads grinned in perfect time together. It was sort of creepy. "That's right my dear alicorn friend. We've been watching these rotten cupcakes for some time now. They're the real threat here." I glared back at the brahmin and snarled.

"You're not getting past me or my friends. You can't have what's down there. It will only cause more pain and suffering for everypony in this entire world," I said, readying Stargazer in the air. The Bullfather's heads sighed at the same time. Again, the simultaneous action creeped me out.

"That's unfortunate that you feel that way. I had quite hoped we could be friendly about all of this. Looks like we have to do this the hard way," The left head replied. "Boys? Show the filly and the two colts what we mean by the hard way." Behind the brahmin leader, several other earth ponies with various weapons including mouth-grip knives and long-barrel rifles appeared. A few brahmin, lacking the intelligent look of the Bullfather, accompanied them. Dangerous looking spiked clubs hung out of the sides of their mouths. The Bullfather sunk back behind the crowd of angry looking ponies and brahmin, disguising himself before we could respond. His two enforcers, Number One and Number Two, started in towards us with their rifles cocked and ready. Danish grinned as he lifted his semi-automatic.

"Fine, you want it that way Bully? I got a joke for you that you'll really love then," The cream colored stallion echoed. "An alicorn and an earth pony walk into a bar ---" ***BLAM***

A shot erupted from Danish's rifle, zooming across the corridor and slamming home in the head of Number Two. The earth pony's head exploded in a shower of gore and bone, splattering all over his companion. Number One grimaced and took a shot, that deflected itself off of Steeljack's right leg, as the grey buck opened fire as well. Steeljack's shot tore into the group of brahmin and earth ponies.

The corridor itself was wide enough for the gang members to push forward, trying to flank us against the pressure of Steeljack's rifle fire. I looked down and saw Lucky cowering in the center of the room, flinching as brahmin and earth ponies stepped right through her. I sighed. Regardless of whether she was my crazy or a ghost that now was haunting me, I felt bad for the poor mare that had yet to totally accept what she was now and continued to try and exist in the world of the living. I stepped out and

moved to the center, standing over her as I opened up on a group of brahmin swinging those deadly spiked clubs at me. Leathery skin gave way to bone as shot after shot tore through them. I barely had time to finish firing before a shot struck the ground in front of me. I looked up and saw Number One, still covered in his dead compatriot's gory details, leaping through the air at me. Several more rounds burst from his rifle, going wide and striking the ground. I spun around and kicked backwards hard, just like the little orange mare on the statue, imploring me to Be Strong. My hooves connected with the chest of Number One, sending the earth pony flying through the air and back into a crowd of brahmin.

A snapping noise echoed across the corridor as the stallion's back struck. He didn't get back up. I grinned as another round of bullets was sent flying through the air. One shot struck true, a burst of pain ripping into my leg. I screamed, spinning around and letting Stargazer spit hot lead in the direction that the bullet had come from.

"Star!" Steeljack shouted as he tried to reach me. He was beset by two brahmin and an earth pony, each wielding gruesome melee weapons. I snarled, flaring my horn up and casting my spell.

Steeljack's body glowed with purple light as he disappeared and reappeared next to me with a ***pop***. The group he was fighting stood and stared at the spot where the grey buck had been standing. A ***crack*** to my right indicated Steeljack's return to the fight as the earth pony fell to the ground below.

"You alright?" He said as he issued another shot from his rifle, punching a hole in a brahmin that was rushing at us. I nodded weakly. Despite the pain I felt, the real issue at hand was the fact that I was breaking down mentally at the same time. Steeljack grimaced as he yanked out a vial of Med-X with his teeth. He pressed the vial into my side and I felt the painkiller begin to do its dirty work. As he moved away I thought I saw him step on his hoof gingerly, almost as if it were hurt.

"What about you, everything okay?" I shouted as Danish joined up with us finally. The cream colored stallion was covered in blood and had a wild grin on his face. Steeljack looked away for a moment and back to me.

"I'm fine," He said gruffly. I nodded as I looked to Danish and then around us. Despite the carnage we had wrought, there was still more of the gang surrounding us. A hearty laugh echoed from behind the crowd. *Why did the gunfire stop?* I thought. I looked down once more to see Lucky, still cowering below us. The bottoms of Danish's legs were sticking through her side. She looked up at me for a brief moment with fear in her eyes. *That's it then,* I thought as I glared at the group of earth ponies and brahmin, which was now parting for the Bullfather to make his entrance again.

"You three put up a good fight, but your efforts are wasted. My ponies are securing the vault as we speak. So, here's the deal. I'm going to make you an offer you won't refuse. You leave us to our prize, and we won't 'accidentally' set off that little goodie inside that vault," The left head said. The right head chortled a bit at the other's joke. I blinked. Had we missed something? How had they managed to sneak around us? I realized I had been partly responsible. I had spent my time in the fight protecting Lucky, a mare who couldn't even have been touched in the first place. I snarled.

"No!" I shouted. "You don't know what you're doing! That thing in there, it will kill all of you once any of the other gangs get a whiff of what was in there." The left head chuckled a bit.

"Now, don't you worry or fret about that. We'll keep that little prize safe and sound," It replied. "Now. About our little deal."

"You're bluffing. If you detonate that thing here it will just float up to the city and beyond. You'll die too," I said angrily.

"Who said anything about surviving?" The right head said, staring intently at me. I glowered at the brahmin, realizing that he was indeed not bluffing about his deal. I could see it in his eyes. I realized there was no winning situation here. I was going to have to let it go for the moment. It would have to

be recovered later. I still needed to know after all why Twilight stored the damn thing here to begin with.

“Fine,” I said after pausing for a few seconds. Danish and Steeljack looked at me with incredulous faces. Lucky’s eyes below me went wide as well.

“Star, you said that we had to seal that up. Why are we just letting them have it?” Steeljack said. I glared at him.

“Because he’s not bluffing. He really will detonate it if he has to,” I said, staring hard at the brahmin leader. “What do you want with it? It’s no good to you.” The right head snorted.

“Power. With this thing in our hooves, we will have power over the entire city. We’ll even be able to force the Minotaur out of commission with it! Everypony will be afraid of us! Everypony will ---“ The Bullfather began as he was cut off by one of his enforcers. I guess since Numbers One and Two were dead, that would make him Number Three.

“Boss! We got a problem!” Number Three yelled. The left head of the brahmin glared at the earth pony.

“What is it now you moron?” The left head replied. The stallion chuckled nervously.

“Well, you see... that big bomb thing in the vault... it’s sort of... gone,” Number Three said. Everypony’s eyes widened at the news.

“What?!” The right head of the Bullfather exclaimed. “Whaddya mean it’s gone?!”

“Well, one minute it was there... and the next, it was just gone,” The stallion replied. I stared at the brahmin and snarled. As I started forward at the leader, a form appeared in front of me. Several unicorns in black appeared out of nowhere, leveling combat shotguns at the gang surrounding us.

“Well, I was wondering when the Lotus bitches would show up,” The right head of the brahmin leader said. “You broads have been nosing in on our business for too long now.” I glanced down at the black covered unicorns.

“You’re from the Lotus Triad?” I asked. One of the unicorns nodded.

“We’ve been tracking you using your PipBuck tag. We’ve been following you for some time, to make sure you kept your part of the bargain,” The lead unicorn, a pale white mare, said.

“And what about the bomb? Was that you too?” I asked. The unicorn nodded.

“The device of which you speak is secured,” She replied. I groaned. All I had wanted to do was to seal that damn thing up so nopony could ever get it, and I had inadvertently led two of the city’s most notorious gangs right to it. Sure, one might say I couldn’t have known that there would be an undetonated megaspell in this M.W.T. Hub, but it was still my fault. If you coupled that with the fact that it had all been for nothing, and that I had gotten Lucky killed while doing it meant that my mind was close to shattering completely. I could only stare at the unicorn and wonder what plans the Lotus Triad had for such a device. I still wasn’t sure about their intentions.

“Hey. If you broads are done talkin’, you took something that belongs to me,” The left head of the brahmin leader called out. The lead Lotus unicorn turned back to the Cowpone’s heads of operation.

“That belongs to the Lotus Triad now, as does this location,” She said. Danish snarled at the mare.

“Hey now, this was an MMMM operation to begin with. This place belongs to us,” He shouted. The three began to argue amongst themselves, turning the so-called fight into nothing more than a pissing match. A very childish pissing match. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lucky, once again trying to get my attention. I sighed and slumped to my haunches, the pain in my side flaring back up as

I realized once again that I had been shot and hadn't taken any healing potion just yet for it. The argument got louder and louder as I sat there trying to figure out what to do. For the first time in my life, I felt completely helpless. It was a frightening feeling. I had always had some semblance of control over my life, but as I watched the brahmin and the two unicorns argue I felt like I couldn't do anything to stop it. A green hoof zoomed through my head as I looked to my right side, seeing Lucky there once again.

"What?" I said aloud, not caring anymore who thought I was crazy.

"If you would listen to me from the get go, I think I have an idea on how to get out of this mess," The green mare said, grinning.

"But I'm crazy. You're crazy. You're not even scientifically possible!" I said, drawing a confused stare from Steeljack.

"Star?" He said softly. I waved him off and returned to Lucky, who groaned.

"You know... like it or not, I'm stuck to you. And I can see all sorts of interesting things now that I'm like this. For instance, they haven't actually moved the bomb yet. I peeked in earlier while you were talking. It's still there, just cloaked. We can still seal up the room," She said. I blinked. *What? The megaspell? It hasn't been moved yet?* I facehooved as I realized the truth. The Lotus Triad didn't have the capability to move the device, but I did. I knew what had to be done. A memory floated to my head of a tower and a room where I spoke to an emotion known as Depression. I focused my horn, letting the magic flow through me. A feeling of calm washed over me as I reached out and touched the device in the vault. I could feel it calling to me. A soft ***pop*** emanated from my horn as I reappeared inside the vault above the device, dispelling its cloaking spell as I did. The pink substance inside swirled about violently as I rested my hooves on the top of it. A quick scan of the room revealed that nopony had noticed me yet. I only had mere seconds to begin to try what I planned to do. Lucky was next to me in an instant. I smiled at the ghostly mare.

"If it goes wrong... I'm sorry," I said quietly. "No matter what... I'll find a way to make it up to you." I gritted my teeth and began soaking up the radiation emanating from the device. My horn ignited, glowing with blazing light as I turned my focus onto the bomb. The noise from the magic combined with my sudden disappearance must have been just enough to alert everypony to what was happening. The two gangs and Danish rushed into the vault, staring wide at my glowing form.

"STAND BACK," I shouted, amplifying my voice magically. **"THIS DEVICE MUST BE SENT AWAY WHERE NOPONY CAN GET TO IT."** With that, my horn ignited once more, latching onto the bomb. I knew that if I did anything wrong I could cause this thing to detonate, but if I could do it, it would keep this thing out of the wrong hooves for good. I glowed with purple fire as the magic took hold and the device and I disappeared into nothingness.

This is quite odd, I thought as I stared down the hallway once more. *I didn't even get knocked unconscious did I? Why am I here?* The hallway with the doors extended down and I could now see that there was an ending to it. A large circular room lay at the far end. I stepped cautiously down towards the darkened room, wondering why it was there in the first place. There had never been anything more than endless hallway with endless doors. In the center of the room was a single pedestal with a torch sitting on top of it. Six doors ringed the perimeter of the room, each marked with a different symbol. I recognized these symbols as the cutie marks of the Ministry Mares. As I stepped into the circular room, the torch in the center burst and sent forth a fireball at the door marked with the cutie mark of the Ministry Mare of Image, Rarity. The fire lined the door frame for a moment and then dissipated as the door opened. I blinked. *That's... new,* I thought as I stepped into the doorway.

A lovely smell of perfume greeted my nostrils as I stepped out of the dark room and into a brightly lit storefront. It appeared to be a boutique of some sort. A white cat sat in the windowsill, looking out into a bright and sunny day outside. A humming sound drifted from the stairs at the far end of the room. As I got closer I could make out the whirring noise of a sewing machine along with a demure mare's voice singing.

"Stitch by stitch... stitching it together..."

I took a step forward, hearing the telltale ***creak*** of the steps. The humming and whirring stopped almost instantly and I could hear the mare's voice from wherever she was.

"Opal? Is that you darling?" She called out. I shook my head for a moment as the whirring noise began once again. *What is going on here? Is this some sort of dream?* I thought as I cautiously continued up the stairs. The top of the stairs led immediately to a large open room where in the center was the Ministry Mare herself. Rarity. I smiled as I watched the mare working with a particularly beautiful piece of blue fabric on her sewing machine. Her horn glowed a soft blue as she hummed her little song. I took a step forward and the sewing machine stopped.

"I was quite wondering when you were going to get here darling," She said, turning around and staring straight at me. I swallowed under the gaze of the beautiful mare.

"Ummm... hello? I... My name is..." I said, trailing off in front of the unicorn, who smiled warmly.

"Radiant Star. Yes, I know. I dare say it was about time we met," She said. I blinked for a moment.

"But... you're dead. You've been dead for over two hundred years," I said, pointing out the elephant in the room. Rarity tittered for a moment.

"Yes of course. You would assume that I actually was Rarity. I'm merely wearing the form of my last bearer of course. You may call me Generosity dear. I am one of the six Virtues," The mare responded.

"Virtues?" I asked with a confused expression.

"Yes. Specifically, I represent one of your virtues. You see, everypony has a connection to the six Virtues: Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, Laughter, Loyalty, and Magic. However, some ponies form a greater bond to one of the Virtues, becoming its champion," The mare said. "Take Rarity for instance, she was so giving that she bonded to me in a way no other pony ever could."

"But Rarity eventually stopped being generous didn't she? Once the Ministries began, she became a Ministry Mare and her giving stopped," I replied casually, drawing a sad look from the white mare.

"Indeed. It is rather unfortunate, but our virtues can become so easily corrupted that we become twisted versions of our own selves," She said, almost to herself than to me.

"So... why am I here? I've been expecting Twilight's emotions now every time I end up in that damn hallway. Why you?" I said.

"Because you made a choice to accept your feelings, even accepting that your friend's death was your fault. You unlocked this connection," Generosity said. "The emotions are no longer trying to fight for control now that you've accepted all of them."

"That's not what I wanted..." I said, anger rising in my voice until I was practically screaming at the mare. "I want *my* emotions back. *My* memories! I want to be me again! I don't want to be her! Her life was painful, and she never once... never ONCE saw fit to help us while we were in Unity! It's her fault we're here, and she never cared! Not once did she ever care..." I trailed off, sighing. Generosity smiled and sat down in the middle of the sewing room. She motioned to the floor in front of her. I groaned as I plopped down, staring down at the demure mare.

“Twilight was many things, but she was not uncaring. Having been in your mind, I know that Unity was an unpleasant thing for you. However, Twilight couldn’t help any of you. Trixie had her subdued, shuffled off into the corner as a mere plaything to her,” She said. “Twilight cared for many things; she just never had enough time to care for all of them at once.”

“She cared enough about Shining Armor to put him at the top of the list. Enough to create an entire spell for the purpose of resurrecting him,” I responded flatly. “A spell that conveniently ended up in me. Know anything about that?”

“I only know that Twilight pulled from every area of knowledge she had to create it. She even went as far as to inquire into the properties of zebra necromancy,” The white unicorn replied.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Rarity rebuffed her too. She didn’t want Twilight to have the Black Book. But the Book’s gone now, the Destroyer saw to that. That’s the piece I’ve been missing this whole time. How did Twilight’s spell get finished without the final piece of the puzzle?” I said. Generosity shrugged.

“I don’t know the answer to that... however, I can tell you there is some place in the city that might provide some answers. A Ministry of Image secret hub is in the downtown district. It’s dangerous territory, but Rarity spent much of her time there during her trips to Chicacolt,” She said.

“Maybe I will... but right now... there’s too much going on. My friends are in danger, and I need to... oh... the bomb!” I said, quickly realizing that if I’ve been out this long that I was somehow still alive and hopefully the megaspell was intact. “How do I wake up from this? I need to make sure that thing is sealed away where nopony can find it ever.” The white mare put a hoof out and rested it on my shoulder.

“You don’t need to worry about that, but if you would prefer to wake up now, then wake up,” She said as everything around me faded to black.

My eyes fluttered open to darkness. *Where am I?* I thought as I pushed myself up. A dark room extended before me, ending in a series of television monitors that were emitting a soft focused glow on a chair sitting before them. Beeping noises came from the monitors and terminals. I groaned as the headache set in. I had experienced magic burnout before, but this was intense. I put a hoof to my forehead as I tried to focus through the pain. The last thing I remembered was trying to teleport the --- the bomb. *Where is it?* I thought frantically as I looked around me. I didn’t see the megaspell. *Did it work?* I scrambled to my hooves and began to step towards the terminals at the end of the room. A harsh voice cut through the still air, one that was deathly familiar but for some reason escaped my memory at that moment.

“Hold it right there missy,” The brash and loud voice said. “I’m sure you’ve got some questions.”

“Who are you? Where am I?” I asked, stopping like the voice had asked me to. It cackled a bit and then I realized where I had heard it before. I was in the home of the Minotaur.

“You’ve got the right of it now I think,” The voice said. “So you’re the Ministry Mare eh? I pictured you a bit bigger.”

“How do you know who I am?” I said warily.

“I’ve got eyes in every part of this city. Nothing, and I mean nothing escapes me,” The voice continued. The terminals flickered, showing visions of streets and buildings around the city. Surveillance cameras of the highest quality must have been installed all throughout Chicacolt.

“What about the megaspell? What did you do with it?” I said sternly, prompting another chuckle from

the voice. I wanted desperately to rush up and ask him all the questions I had. I took a step forward, chancing it.

“Don’t come any closer Ministry Mare. I’ve got two turrets trained on you ready to blast you into next Sunday. Now, about your bomb you showed up in my building with. Plain and simply I have locked the device away. No pony will ever find it, not even you,” The gruff voice said. I stopped.

“So... you’re the Minotaur then? No bad jokes or puns for me?” I said. Another laugh came from behind the chair.

“Haven’t you ever heard of a stage voice? I use that when I go on air,” The voice said.

“If you can see everything that’s going on, can you see Steeljack? What about Violet and Patch?” I asked, forgetting for a second the real question I needed to ask him. One of the monitors flickered, showing Steeljack and Danish. They were in chains, captured it appeared by the looks of it. They were surrounded by brahmin and earth ponies. The Cowpones. Another terminal flickered to life, showing a completely different scene. Violet and Patch were in the middle of a room, lying down on long massage tables. They looked serene and happy and both of them had their eyes (or in the case of Patch, eye) closed.

“So the Triad, they weren’t lying about keeping my friends safe?” I said, looking confused.

“The Lotus Triad is one of the few gangs in this city who treat their prisoners with pleasure,” The Minotaur’s voice echoed from behind the chair. “I assure you, they are still in just as much danger as your other two friends are.” I looked closer at the image, noting that there were guards at each of the entrances to the spa. Violet cracked an eye open for a moment. I could see genuine fear there before she closed it again.

“I have no choice then but to save them,” I said with a determined grimace. The voice chuckled once more.

“You just pissed off two of the most ruthless gangs in the entire city. Think you can really get to your friends in time?” The Minotaur said.

“I have to try. They’re my friends after all. They would do the same for me,” I said.

“Amusing. Friendship. Not something you see in the Wasteland too often,” The rough voice replied.

“Well, if you’re gonna do this, there’s some ponies you need to meet then Ministry Mare.”

“Who?” I asked. Another chuckle erupted from the chair.

“I’ll send you the address on your PipBuck. If you want your friends to live, you’re going to need some help,” The voice responded. A beeping on my PipBuck indicated a file transfer had begun.

“Why are you helping me? This doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“What fun is there in making sense?” The voice quipped. “This city’s needed a shake up for as long as I can remember, and you’re just the mare to do it.” I mulled on this for a moment, before remembering I had other questions for the mysterious Minotaur.

“Oh. About Cotton Candy...” I began. A squealing laughter erupted from the chair.

“Heeedoggy I love that buck. He’s a ton of fun to fuck with you know? Yes, I know all about your little deal with him, too. He seemed rather pleased to tell me what was coming,” He said. I blinked.

Was there anything this... thing didn’t know? I guess I wasn’t sure what he was since I couldn’t get close enough to see. All I knew was that he knew a lot about me, and everything else and I couldn’t really piece together how or why.

“So if you know, why aren’t you blasting me to pieces already?” I asked. A snort came from the chair

area.

“Cuz it won’t do me any good. Here, take the stupid thing. It’s broke anyways,” He said. A small circular object popped off of one of the terminals and bounced my direction. “Of course, he doesn’t know that. Nor does he need to, if you get my drift.” I grinned and deposited the item into my saddlebag. At the very least Arlington would be safe, and I wouldn’t have another senseless violent act to be responsible for.

“Minotaur... I came here originally seeking something else. I’m also looking for an alicorn named Pride. Do you know where I can find her?” I asked, my confidence creeping back as I developed a plan.

“Pride?” The voice said hesitantly. “No... doesn’t ring any bells. However, I might be able to point you in the right direction. At the old Colter Field Stadium is where the Cult of Iron Will makes their base. They’re a pseudo-gang responsible for fighting arenas around the city. Their leader is a minotaur named Wrath.”

“Wrath?” I echoed the name. *Is it possible? Is there some connection?* I thought as I pondered the name of the minotaur leader. There had to be some connection there.

“Yes. If any would know of this Pride you speak of, it would be him,” The voice continued. “Now then, with our business concluded you can leave me in peace.”

“It will be my pleasure,” I said, turning away from the terminals. I stopped. “Umm... how do I get out?”

“How did you get here in the first place?” The voice replied.

“I... I teleported, but I had to suck up a ton of radiation to get here in the first place,” I said, thinking about how I managed to find my way to the one place that I could get some answers to what was going on in this crazy city. I tried to focus on where I had come from, but found it difficult to remember the corridors beneath the M.W.T. Hub. Eventually the corridor began to coalesce in my mind and a soft ***pop*** indicated that I was there once more. A soft giggle echoed across my ears. *Lucky?* I thought as the ghostly green mare appeared before my eyes. I sighed.

“So you’re still with me then?” I said aloud. The mare giggled (STILL CUTE!) and nodded.

“Figured you might need some help. I don’t know why but it seems like I’m stuck to you,” She said. I sighed once more.

“That’s because you’re my new kind of crazy,” I replied, groaning. “Look. I don’t know what’s going on, and why you’re here but I’m glad you’re alright. I meant what I said. I’m going to find a way to fix all of this.” Lucky smiled warmly. I looked down the corridor at the bloody carnage we had wrought. My PipBuck beeped, indicating that I had a new message. I hit the play button and began to receive a set of instructions pointing to the address of an old Ministry of Arcane Sciences Hub in the nearby vicinity. *This must be the location the Minotaur wanted me to go to,* I thought as I looked up at Lucky.

“First things first, we need to save Steeljack and my other friends,” I said sternly, drawing a friendly nod from the ghostly mare.

“After you disappeared the Cowpones took Steeljack hostage along with Danish,” She stated as I began trotting back towards the elevators. Steam hissed from the pipes as the ghostly unicorn pegasus followed me. The maintenance level was eerily quiet as I passed by Lucky’s body. I stopped for a moment, and looked down at it.

“Star?” The soft voice of the apparition came from behind me. I sighed. *Keep it together,* I thought.

Keep. It. Together.

“Yeah?”

“You alright?” Lucky said.

“I’m fine. Just thinking,” I replied.

“Oh.”

“I really wouldn’t blame you if you hated me,” I said quietly. “I got you into this mess, and got you killed. Why stay with me?”

“I don’t think I really have a choice. Something is drawing me towards you. Besides... how could I hate you?” She replied.

“Because I could have done better!” I shouted back at her. “I should have been... been... stronger. But I wasn’t. I’m not. I’m just... weak.”

“Somepony once told me that valuing life wasn’t weak,” Lucky mused, stepping through me (boy is that ever a weird feeling!) and trotting ahead. I looked between the ghostly form and her lifeless body before me and sighed. If she was real, I owed it to her to save her. Plans began to formulate in my mind as I forced myself to look up and move forward. It was insane really. There I was, fully believing that this crazy manifestation of my own cracked psyche was really the ghost of a mare I barely knew. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was real, that she really was Lucky. As I stepped into the elevator, I thought about the spell and the Black Book. Could I use it? Could I bring Lucky back if I used Twilight’s spell? *No, stop thinking like that. That’s crazy talk,* I thought as the elevator hummed and rose towards the ground level. A nagging voice in the back of my head told me to ignore the logic of it, that it was possible and that if only I could find the second Book that I could bring Lucky back to life.

“It’s certainly possible,” A familiar voice echoed.

It’s crazy. I don’t even know why I’m considering it, I thought back at the voice of Magic. Spark had been relatively quiet lately all things considering.

“Because you feel guilty,” Spark replied. ***“It was your fault she died after all.”***

Shut up. I... I don’t want to talk about that, I said back. The elevator door opened and I stepped out into the main lobby of the M.W.T. Hub. Pieces of broken Ponitron robots scattered the floor, remnants of our battle against the hated robots. Lucky trailed behind me, a curious look on her face.

“But it’s true. You killed her,” Spark said with a hint of venom in her voice. ***“That’s why she’s here now... to remind you of your failure.”***

Stop it! I didn’t... It wasn’t... I didn’t mean to... I sputtered in my thoughts at the voice. I held back my tears as best as I could, trying not to let Lucky see that I was at war with my own mind.

“Oh but you did. And now... your other friends will end up just as dead,” Spark said. Why all of a sudden was she being so vicious? I could feel her sitting there in the back of my mind, her cackles gleeful and hate-filled.

No! I’m going to save them! I shouted inside my mind back at the spirit. The doorway to the outside loomed just ahead.

“Just like you saved Lucky?” The voice responded. ***“Oh wait... you didn’t. You let her die.”***

“Star...?” A soft voice cut through my inner battle, forcing me back to the waking world as I turned to regard its owner. Lucky had tears in her eyes. “Don’t listen to her. Please... I don’t like her.” My

eyes widened.

“You... you can hear Spark?” I asked. Lucky nodded.

“I can see her too. She scares me, Star.” She said.

“You can... see her?” I said, eyes widening further. Lucky nodded once more and pointed past me. I turned in the direction she was pointing and gasped. Standing across from me was a deep purple unicorn. Her mane and tail were black as night with a thick pink streak blazing through them.

Twilight’s own cutie mark graced her flanks and a shiny silver tiara rested on top of her head. She had a wicked grin across her face.

“About time you saw me,” She cooed. “I’ve been itching to drop that whole mind speak act for some time now.” I shuddered at the sound of her voice.

“How... how did you?” I stammered. Spark grinned wider.

“I don’t know, perhaps it has something to do with your dead friend there. She’s the first one to be able to see me,” The purple mare replied. “I’m disappointed in you little Star. I thought you were better than this.”

“Star, don’t listen to her... just ignore her,” Lucky pleaded with me. My two crazies were at war within my mind. I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

“Shut it greenie. You sure know how to pick ‘em Star. What is it with you and green mares anyways?” Spark said, clicking her tongue at me. I blushed for a moment (Still cute, dammit!) and glared at the spirit.

“Leave her alone. Your business is with me. So what do you want from me?” I said angrily.

“Moi? Gee, I suppose there are lots of things I want,” She mused, putting a hoof up to her chin. “I guess I’d like to see you buck up and stand up for yourself first. I mean look at you for Celestia’s sake. You’re a mess.”

“I’d be fine if it weren’t for you and Twilight’s emotions!” I shouted. In retrospect, I’m sure that this looked really bad to anypony who could potentially pass by, what with me screaming at my crazy and looking like I’m talking to myself. Spark snorted.

“Please. We’re helping you, if you haven’t noticed,” She said. I snorted back at her.

“Whatever. I have things to take care of, like saving my friends,” I said, moving past the purple mare. She grinned as I passed her.

“Be seeing you then, *Radiant Star*,” She said as I pushed by and out the doorway into the street beyond. The street was calm and serene, leaving no sign of anypony around. I marched forward, checking the arrow on my E.F.S. to make sure I was headed the right way, ignoring the fact that Lucky was now walking beside me. I didn’t need to hear what she had to say. *This is just insane, right?* I thought as a cool wind blew across my coat. I had a pretty good idea by that time why they called it the Blustery City. The wind was cold and frequent as I trudged forward. By the time I reached the street the M.A.S. Hub was supposed to be on, I was bucking freezing. The sun was beginning to lower in the sky and the familiar purple tones and tower-like structure of a typical M.A.S. Hub loomed in the distance. I wondered who I would find there that was supposed to help me save my friends. The Minotaur had made it sound like I would need them if I were to succeed.

I moved ever closer to the structure in silence. Lucky followed, but she had been silent too since the encounter with Spark. I wondered how much she had heard of our conversation. I was still considering Spark’s words about the spell being a possibility, but that would mean I would have to

doom some innocent pony to transform into her. Was bringing Lucky back to life really worth that price? My thoughts jumbled and twirled about, preventing me from really getting a good grasp on the situation as I stepped into the courtyard of the M.A.S. Hub. It was pretty much just like any other Ministry Hub. The massive courtyard in front of the building acted as a place for the workers to file in and out, as well as meeting places and tables set aside for lunches and picnics. Now however, it was a place filled with death. Skeletons of balefire-burned ponies lay strewn about the courtyard. The familiar smell of rotting flesh filled my nostrils as I moved closer towards the front doors of the Hub.

If there were ghouls here, they should show themselves soon enough. I relished the chance to deliver payback to the foul beasts. If they showed, I would be ready. Thankfully, nothing popped out me as I arrived on the front doorstep. I breathed a sigh of relief and pushed the door open.

If there were other ponies here, I couldn't particularly believe it. Except for the stench of death and the sight of skeletons, there was nopony else living in sight. The lobby was filled with the bones of the dead, almost as if the protective wards of the building hadn't prevented the radiation from getting in. I trotted along, lifting Stargazer out just in case there was any trouble. There was nothing showing on my E.F.S., but I hadn't really been able to trust that lately at all. I stepped into the office area expecting something, anything at all, to be there. Nothing but more bones and dead terminals. I groaned. *Why would the Minotaur send me here?* I thought as I pressed deeper into the ruined building. I was about to turn back when something caught my eye. The stylized cutie mark of Twilight Sparkle adorned a simple door at the far end of the office area. Navigating my way through the maze of cubicles, I stopped in front of it and inspected it closely. There was no doorknob or anything that would suggest that the door could be opened other than the fact that it was sitting in a door frame. Even the cutie mark itself was faded and would have missed normal inspection had I not been deathly familiar with it. I placed a hoof on the door, continuing to ignore Lucky behind me. I hadn't decided yet what I was going to do about the mare, and I still wasn't sure if she would understand what I would hope to achieve. Would she hate me for it? I couldn't say. I let my hoof trace the subtle outline of Twilight's cutie mark and sighed. *This has to be something important*, I thought. I lifted my hoof from the door and lowered it again in a slow knock. I don't know what I expected to happen, but I hoped something would happen at least.

Nothing did. I sighed and began to turn around to leave when I heard a sliding noise come from the door. The door lay open, revealing a young pink unicorn mare wearing dark brown robes. Her eyes lit up at the sight of me.

"Goddess!" She cried out, catching my attention.

"What? What did you call me?" I asked, confusion setting in. The mare smiled.

"Come, we will explain everything. You have done well oh Goddess in getting this far. Welcome to the new home of the Twilight Society," She replied. I fainted right then and there, letting the weight of my overexertion take me into the bleak void.

I groaned as my eyes opened. My head felt like it had been run through a wringer several times. As my vision began to focus, I took in the details of the room I was in. A plush bed lay beneath me, surrounded by a lovely room with delicate flowered carpet. Granted, it was dirty and the pillow was shredded a bit, but it was still quite nice. However, it was not the décor that caught my interest immediately, but rather the ponies that filled it. Two unicorns, one of them the mare from earlier and the other a tall blue unicorn stallion, stood in the center of the room hovering over my bed. They were both wearing the same dark brown robes.

"Yes... The same coloration and the same cutie mark. The signs we have been given have proved true

after all,” The stallion remarked as he looked me over. “Add to that, to be carrying such a significant piece of weaponry... it seems that our journey here was not in vain.”

“Who... who are you?” I asked weakly as I tried to push myself up and failed. The stallion made a bit of a *tsk* sound at me.

“In due time. You need to rest now. Your body has undergone a lot of physical exertion and it appears magical burnout as well,” He said calmly. “I admit Sunshine here probably didn’t help when she greeted you.” He indicated the pink unicorn next to him, who merely smiled nervously.

“Sorry about that, Goddess.” She said meekly.

“Why are you calling me that? I’m no Goddess,” I asked.

“You are an alicorn, and the one who carries the spirit of Twilight within her,” The stallion replied.

“You are closer to a real Goddess as anypony else in the Wasteland.”

“How... how do you know about that?” I said cautiously.

“Before we get into that, I believe some introductions are in order. My name is Dusk Blue. My comrade here is Sunshine Sky. We are members of the organization you know as the Twilight Society,” The stallion responded, moving a few chairs over with a flick of his horn as he and Sunshine sat down.

“But... what are you doing, here of all places?” I said. A brief scan of the room indicated that Lucky wasn’t with me. *Where did she go?* I thought as I returned my attention to the blue unicorn.

“It’s... rather unfortunate really that we had to temporarily leave our brethren in Tenpony Tower, but it was of utmost importance. It all had to do with... you,” He said.

“Me? Why? Why am I so bucking important?” I said angrily. “I’m tired of not getting any answers from anypony!”

“Calm down Goddess, it’s okay,” Sunshine said with a warm smile on her face.

“Stop calling me that! My name is Star okay? Radiant Star. Learn it and love it sister,” I exclaimed.

“Now tell me why I’m so important.” I huffed. The stallion sighed.

“A few months ago we unearthed a set of instructions that were written down by Twilight. We followed them to the letter and part of it involved the casting of a spell. We had no idea what it did; we were only given a name. Your name,” Dusk said. My eyes widened.

“What,” I said flatly. “What did you say?”

“I said we cast a spell. Per her instructions,” The blue unicorn replied. “But, now that I see you here... I have a pretty good idea of what it did.”

“Yeah... Let me give you a pretty good idea. Your spell put her thoughts, her emotions, and her memories right into my fucking brain is what it did!” I yelled at the two unicorns. “Do you mean to say, that I ended up like this because of some fucking piece of paper that you just blindly followed?!”

“Not blindly. The instructions were very explicit as to when the spell should have been cast. It’s almost like Twilight knew what was going to happen before it did,” Dusk said. I couldn’t believe my ears. The Twilight Society was responsible for casting Twilight’s spell? But how did they do it?

Without the necromantic component... how did they do it? My thoughts swirled with fear and doubt. Answers were right there within my reach, but my encounter with Spark left me wondering. Was it Twilight that was taking over or Spark? All of my emotional encounters thus far had been with Twilight’s emotions, but any encounter with the element of Magic was always... combative, if not downright angry. And now that she had finally shown her face... I was terrified.

"How did you cast it?" I asked quietly, drawing a stare from the blue unicorn.

"What?" He asked, his eyes wide with confusion.

"There was a necromantic component to the spell. How did you do it? Was there a book?" I said desperately. I needed to know if the book existed. It was my only shot at understanding what was going on... and the only shot at maybe being able to revive Lucky. I couldn't really believe I was still considering that. I briefly wondered where the green mare had gone off to. Part of me considered the fact that she was hiding in the M.A.S. Hub still. Dusk looked to Sunshine and back to me.

"What book? We just followed the instructions on the scroll," He said nervously. I glared at him.

"Can I see this scroll? I need to see it. I need to know," I replied. "Because something's not right. Something else is in there, and I don't know if it's Twilight or not."

"We can provide you the scroll..." Dusk said, nodding to Sunshine. The pink mare nodded in return and left the room, leaving only myself and the blue stallion.

"Thank you," I said, sighing. I pushed myself up, feeling a bit better.

"Now then. Part of the instructions given to us was that one day you would come to us, and you would be in this city. So we picked up from Tenpony and left," Dusk said.

"And you left Homage and Life Bloom wondering where you all went," I said.

"Life Bloom wouldn't have understood our intentions. We kept him in the dark intentionally. His association with the Stable Dweller left us no choice but to do so," Dusk said sternly.

"So instead of sticking around and I dunno... maybe helping the ponies of the Wasteland, you just picked up and left because of some two hundred year old scroll written by a dead mare?!" I shouted at him. I was so angry at these ponies I could barely see straight. It felt like I was some big joke in the cosmic scheme of life. I wanted to scream so much.

"That's the thing. The scroll wasn't two hundred years old. It came from a few months ago. Just appeared one day in our possession," Dusk said. "It was a message. We don't know how it came to be, or why, but it very clearly indicated that you were important. That you were something to be protected. It didn't say why."

"What did it say about helping me? Because I sure could use some bucking help right about now," I said, angrily.

"It said that no matter what, we were to help you," Dusk replied.

"Good. I have some friends in danger that need my help, and I was told by someone that you would help me," I said, pushing myself off the bed completely. "My friends have been captured. One by the Cowpones and the others by the Lotus Triad. I need to save them."

"That's a pretty tall order. Both gangs are among the most dangerous ones in the entire city," The blue stallion said. "I will have to consult with the Elders on this course of action."

"The Elders? I think I'd like to meet them. I have a few words for them," I snarled at the deep blue unicorn. "Look, you said you were supposed to help me. You keep calling me your Goddess. I don't really care about that. I just want my friends back, safe and sound. And if anything happens to them, Luna help you because I will hold you responsible for it." Dusk's eyes widened.

"I... I will see what I can do," He replied.

"What about the memory orbs?" I asked, drawing another confused expression from the stallion.

“Memory orbs?” He replied.

“When I was in Tenpony, there was a chest in the Inner Sanctum of the Society. It held six memory orbs. They’re in my saddlebag over there,” I said, pointing at my bags. Dusk poked through the bag for a moment and looked them over.

“Interesting. I do not remember any such chest to be honest with you,” He said. *If that was to be believed, then how did those orbs get there in the first place?* I thought, glaring at the stallion.

“Why should I believe you? You’ve been very secretive about being here after all,” I said. Dusk sighed.

“I realize the implications of your current situation Star, I truly do. We were only seeking to fulfill her wishes. Even we are not privy to the whims of a Goddess,” He said. “I pray to Luna that you do not hate us for what we have done to you.” His last statement caught me off guard for a moment. Did I hate the Twilight Society for what they did? I mean... I was pretty angry at finding out that the reason Twilight was in my head was because of a few ponies just following orders... but hate? I sighed. I had been through so much since we had arrived in the city that the only thing I could focus on was getting Violet and the others back. I decided that I didn’t really hate them. The one pulling the strings behind it all though? Whoever that was, sure. They were the ones ultimately responsible anyways for orchestrating this whole mess of a life I now had.

“No... I suppose I do not hate you, but I am angry,” I said finally. “I just wish I knew what was happening to me.”

“Sunshine should be back any moment now with the scroll. I’m sure together we can unravel this mystery,” Dusk said, smiling. The door opened behind him and a very nervous looking Sunshine appeared. Dusk turned to regard his companion.

“What’s the matter?” He said. Sunshine’s face went white immediately. I hadn’t ever seen a more pale shade of pink in my life.

“The... the scroll... it’s... it’s gone,” She stammered.

“What?!” Both Dusk and I shouted. *Great*, I thought angrily. *Finally some answers and they’re gone.*

“I went to go check where it was stored and it was just gone,” Sunshine continued to say. Dusk shook his head.

“We must bring this matter to the attention of the Elders immediately,” He replied. As he moved to leave, I stepped forward to follow him prompting him to pause for a second. “Where are you going?”

“You’re going to meet the Elders then I am coming with you,” I said forcefully. “I’ve had enough of searching for answers and not getting them.” Dusk sighed.

“I can see that there isn’t much I can do to stop you,” He said. “Fine then, follow me.” The door opened and we stepped out into the hallway. The hall appeared to be part of some form of underground cavern that was carved out into tunnels. Torches lined the walls as we trotted along. Dusk led me through the twisting maze until we arrived at a large open cavern that was situated like an amphitheater. Dusk motioned to me to stop for a moment as he entered. Several ponies in dark brown robes appeared in the ring around the center of the room, which had been embellished with a carved marking of Twilight’s cutie mark.

“Speak, Dusk Blue.” The congregation of Elders spoke.

“My brethren, I fear something terrible has occurred. We have just discovered that the great Twilight’s scroll has gone missing!” Dusk said to the gathered Elders. I heard murmuring throughout them. “As you aware, she who is the Goddess appeared to us. She wishes to address you.” The murmuring

stopped and a single voice echoed out.

“Let her come forward,” It said. Dusk looked back at me and motioned for me to come forth. I stepped into the room, taking in the gasps and murmuring that had begun immediately. I stopped in the center of the room.

“Ponies of the Twilight Society,” I started to say. “Dusk has made me aware that you are responsible for my current condition. The scroll of which has been spoken about is extremely important to me. However, there are pressing matters that I must attend to first. My friends are in danger. They need my help, and I don’t know if I can do it alone. Will you help me, as the scroll instructed you to do?” More murmurs erupted once I had finished as the gathered Elders discussed what I had just said amongst themselves.

“Assistance in your mission shall be provided on one condition,” The voice spoke again. “Recover the scroll, and we shall aid you in freeing your friends.” My gaze narrowed at the Elders.

“Agreed. I have one further request then. When all is said and done, you will return to Tenpony Tower. The ponies of the Wasteland need the Twilight Society. You need to be leaders now, and not followers of old ways,” I said, echoing words once spoken to me by Life Bloom and Homage.

“We shall deliberate on your request. This audience is now adjourned,” The voice responded immediately. I nodded and returned to Dusk Blue, who was standing at the entrance of the amphitheater.

“That went well it seemed,” He said as we walked down the cavernous hallway.

“Well enough. Now, about that scroll and my friends,” I said.

The plan was sound enough. At least, it seemed like it was. After explaining the situation and what happened with the Triad and the Cowpones, Dusk agreed that a simple stealth mission would suffice to get Steeljack and Danish out from under the hold of the gang. As much as I hated to admit it, I had gotten Danish into that situation and intended to make good on my promises. As for Violet and Patch, we hoped a diplomatic solution could be found. The Twilight Society had a small cache of spark batteries they were willing to part with. The plan there was to go in and negotiate. Dusk explained that based on the Society’s dealings with the gangs, that the Triad was one of the few factions that were most willing to bargain besides the MMMM. The Cowpones, as I had witnessed earlier, were brutal thugs who believed in shows of power as a means to cause others to fear them. Based on the danger of the two situations, it was determined we would try and rescue Violet and Patch first.

The scroll had gone missing from the Twilight Society’s vault. There was no evidence of its disappearance that indicated any foul play had occurred. Dusk had returned to the Elders and explained the situation. Still, it was another piece of the puzzle that I needed to find now. *Another set of answers just out of my reach*, I thought as I narrowed my gaze at the ponies in the room. They were going over maps of the city and kept giving me nervous looks every so often. I figured that having somepony who looked like your supposed Goddess hanging over your shoulder would be pretty nerve-racking.

My thoughts turned to the days past and all I had been through. Lucky’s death felt so far away now, but I couldn’t stop the playback of that memory as well as the pain that came with it. Spark’s appearance also hung in the back of my mind, and although I didn’t want to think about it I ended up coming back to it at some point anyways. *What is Spark aiming for?* I thought. *What does she want with me?* My thoughts swirled about, lost in the sea of memories as more history drifted up into the forefront of my thoughts. Memories of Twilight at various stages of her life filled my eyes. Moments

of happiness, such as when her brother was married to the beautiful Cadance. Other moments were less than happy, such as when the news about Littlehorn was first broken.

I distinctly remembered Twilight crying hard into her pillow that night, facing an uncertain future under the rule of Princess Luna and the Ministries. Thought grew fuzzy, fiction and fact smearing together, and I had trouble determining what was real and what wasn't. My mind had finally become so fractured with all of the emotions and knowledge there that I wasn't even sure if it was my own anymore. Yet I had to keep going, to plow on. It's no surprise then, that I found myself starting to cry. Thankfully nopony else saw me as I turned around and left for my room. Once there I sat on the bed and sobbed, letting the tears flow freely.

"Star?" A soft voice said above me. I looked up and saw Lucky once more, hovering there to the left of me. I sniffled and smiled.

"Hi," I said through the tears.

"You alright?" The ghostly green mare asked. I shook my head.

"Of course I'm not alright, can't you tell? I'm seeing memories in my head that don't even belong to me, my friends could be dead for all I know, and then there's still you..." I replied. "Why? Why am I so important? I just want to know..." Lucky sighed, and pointed her right hoof in my direction. The tip of the hoof passed into my shoulder and the mare sighed once more. She retracted it and stared at me.

"Sorry, forgot I can't do that still I guess," She said weakly. I smiled.

"It's alright," I said, pushing back my tears with all of my strength. "Where did you go after I fainted?"

"I hung around up in the M.A.S. Hub for a few hours. I thought you might be coming out at some point, but when you didn't I went down looking for you. Took me a while," The green mare replied. I chuckled at this. The thought of her just randomly looking around for me was disturbingly cute, despite the fact that I still hadn't figured out if I was crazy or if she was real. "What about you?" I took a deep breath.

"Well... apparently the Twilight Society is responsible for putting this thing into my head in the first place, we're going to go get my friends back, there's a scroll that had all these instructions that's now missing, and here I am looking like I'm talking to myself to anypony who might walk by," I said, groaning as I flopped back into the bed, falling through Lucky's body as I did. The green mare squeaked and jumped off.

"Watch it!" She exclaimed.

"It's not like you can feel it you goof ball," I said, chuckling a bit. I'm sure if anypony who was passing by heard me, I probably sounded certifiable. *Hell, I'm sure I am certifiable*, I thought as I lay there, trying to process my next plans: Save Violet and Patch, Save Steeljack, Wrath, The Ministry of Image, Lucky, and finally Pride. The blue alicorn had yet to reveal herself. I was concerned at this only because I knew how sneaky she was. I realized then how much I missed Violet. I really needed her. She always knew the right things to say, and how best to calm me down. Without her... I felt like my mind was cracking faster and faster by the hour. I pondered how I was going to explain Lucky to my friends, but thought better of it almost immediately. I was pretty sure even Violet would think I was nuts if I told her I was seeing the ghost of a cute but albeit pretty dead unicorn/pegasus.

A knock at my door roused me from my thoughts. I looked up and called out.

"Come in," I said. A blue hoof pushed the door open and I smiled. Dusk Blue stood there, now wearing a deep black cloak embroidered with Twilight's cutie mark on the side.

“It’s time,” He said. I nodded and pushed myself off the bed. Following him out of the door into the hallway I took one last look at Lucky as she hopped along behind me, gleefully humming a happy tune.
Time to deal. Time to fly.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

Quests! You got a lot of em now, how are you ever going to keep track of them all?

Lucky’s Lament: Find out what happened to Lucky, if you’re sure you’re not crazy that is.

The Lost Scroll: Locate the Scroll that belonged to the Twilight Society.

Lotus Spa Follies: Save Violet and Patch from the Lotus Triad.

Ride Em Cowpony: Save Steeljack and Danish from the Cowpones.

Quest Perk: This Time it’s for Real: You know now that the Twilight Society is responsible for your change. Your acceptance of this fact has hardened your resolve to find out what is inside you and why. You now have a base DR of 10% regardless of armor. This perk overrides any previous DR.

Spell Upgrade: Teleport (Rank 4) Your teleportation skills are now Twilight Sparkle legendary. You can now teleport massive objects long distances and multiple targets. You still require a bit of a radiation boost to do so, but it’s definitely worth it.

Reputation:

You are now revered with the Twilight Society. While the Elders don’t trust you yet, normal members of the group revere you as a Goddess. This opens up special conversation options with members of the Twilight Society.

You are now hated with the Cowpones. Be wary of the Bullfather, for he is mighty.

You are now disliked with the Lotus Triad. However, offer the right trinket and you just might get your friends back.

You are still neutral with the MMMM.

Spark Level: 75%. This is how much Spark controls of your body. Spark can now manifest as an image instead of as just a voice in your head. While Spark is manifesting herself, your mental resistance is reduced to 0% regardless of any perks or magic affecting it. Remember, Spark can manifest any time she decides to, not when you want her to.

Violet Iris and Patch: Level Status Unknown.

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Companion! (At least to you) Lucky

Lucky has no S.P.E.C.I.A.L. stats and is completely useless in combat, being that she’s either a figment of your cracked psyche or a ghost. You decide which is which.

Chapter 14: Breaking Point, Part 2

I did everything I could think of to change the future. But it didn't work. So maybe it's not what I do... maybe it's what I don't do! If I stand right here and don't move a muscle until next Tuesday, I can't possibly do whatever it is that future Twilight wanted to warn me not to do!

Failure. It's inevitable in this shithole known as the Wasteland. No matter what happens, failure is inescapable. I'd like to think that I've done some good in this hellish world, but the truth of the matter is... I've failed. I failed Lucky, I failed Violet and Patch, I even failed myself. Failure is the great truth of the Wasteland. If you try to do something good in life, you will fail.

I wonder what it felt like at the end. When the ponies of Equestria realized that their world was ending all around them, did it feel like they failed? Did they feel the failure they caused to occur by pursuing the end of a hopeless and violent war? I wonder what Twilight herself felt, as she realized she failed to create the alicorns as she desired and was instead subjugated by Trixie. Did she feel like she failed?

Failure... Maybe we're all just destined... to fail.

Shit! Bad day bad day bad day! I thought as I dodged another strike from the unicorn mare in front of me. Behind me, gunfire had erupted as several unicorns with shotguns fired my way only to meet my shield spell in return. I lifted Stargazer, blocking another hoof strike and using its weight to force the mare off guard. I turned and bucked, sending the unicorn flying through air into the nearby wall. She struck the surface with a sickening ***crunch*** and slid to the ground. She didn't get up, but telltale signs of breathing showed she was still alive. To my right, Dusk Blue was charging up his horn for another blast of spellfire. The deep blue unicorn cast his spell, discharging the pent up magic into a group of unicorns in front of him. I had to admit, the buck really knew his stuff when it came to magic. To my left, Sunshine Sky worked her own peculiar brand of spellcraft. Her spells were random, and often had strange effects. She had just finished wrapping up one of the Triad's enforcers with a vine of all things before looking to me for guidance.

Negotiations had gone wrong, of course. The Lotus Triad was angry with me over my supposed betrayal of the technology they could have gotten from the M.W.T. Hub. Even more so, the presence of Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky made the Triad even more wary of trusting me. The gang had apparently dealt with the Twilight Society before, and the results of those dealings were quite sour. We had made our way back to the old warehouse on North Hoofamak, as that was the only place I could remember the Triad hung out at. I supposed that Lotus Petal had seen us coming, because she was waiting for us. The inside of the warehouse was still bare, but in the center ceiling portion hung Violet and Patch from a metal catwalk. They looked a little worse for wear and they appeared to be unconscious, but otherwise they were safe for the time being.

Once negotiations had failed, Lotus Petal had ordered us to be captured. So we found ourselves surrounded by the Triad's enforcers, unicorn mares brandishing combat shotguns. Lotus Petal herself had retreated to an upper catwalk in the main room. The catwalks were arranged so that they ran parallel and perpendicular across the top story of the warehouse. Metal stairs connected each level. We hoofed it across one of the metal bridges as I barreled into another one of the Triad's enforcers, knocking her off the rickety surface and sending her to the floor below us. Dusk Blue leaped ahead of me, sending another blast of spellfire down the lane right into another enforcer. The unicorn mare went tumbling off the catwalk, slamming onto another enforcer on the catwalk below us. The clatter of metal behind us followed by a gunshot indicated more enforcers were on our tail. Sunshine Sky

huddled behind me, the pink mare cautiously using her magic to try and deflect the shots. I turned and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., lifting Stargazer high. Shot after shot queued up and time fell free, releasing the spell as my gun spat hot lead. Each shot struck true, disabling the enforcers behind us. I was not aiming to kill any of these ponies, but if my hoof was forced I would.

“Oh come on... You’re no fun,” A smooth voice echoed in my mind. I growled quietly. Spark had been moaning incessantly on the way to the warehouse, poking and prodding at me with every move. Thankfully Lucky had been around to try and calm me down about it. It hadn’t helped much, but it made her feel better.

Shut up, I said back to the voice. *Right now is not the time and place for you.* The voice went quiet once more as I turned back, taking a hoof strike to the face from a unicorn that had leapt from one of the upper catwalks. The strike pushed me back some, but I gritted through the pain and reached out with my magic and grabbed the mare’s leg with the firm grip of my magic.

“My turn,” I said as her eyes widened. I pulled hard and threw the screaming mare back up towards the ceiling. Gunfire ceased for a moment as horns glowed, halting the mare’s ascent and setting her back onto the catwalk. I grinned, motioning at Dusk and Sunshine to move. Using the opportunity presented we charged forward, pressing our way up onto the next catwalk. Another unicorn appeared out of nowhere and raised her rifle in our direction. Not only were these enforcers rather skilled, but they were also using PipBucks with StealthBuck attachments. Behind me Lucky trailed along, bouncing from square to square of the catwalk. I sighed and for a brief moment I was sort of glad she couldn’t be seen or shot at. The enforcer had frozen for a moment, most likely using S.A.T.S. to line up her shot. My horn began to glow as her rifle fired, the shot going wide and pinging off of the metal railing. I discharged the magic and teleported behind her, taking her down with a swing of my hoof. I looked up for a moment, seeing Lotus Petal grinning down at me. The pink mare had cleverly positioned herself just above where my friends were hanging down in such a manner that any shot up her way might accidentally hit them first. I glared at her as I was joined by Dusk and Sunshine.

“Well, this didn’t exactly turn out great,” Dusk said, following my gaze upward.

“I guess they’re still a little sore over me betraying them at the M.W.T. Hub,” I replied. Another enforcer leaped at us. Sunshine stepped forward and discharged her magic, sending a jet of fire slamming into the other unicorn. I grinned.

“You two sure know some crazy spells,” I said.

“Life Bloom taught the majority of the Twilight Society many spells, both offensive and defensive,” Dusk replied. An explosion ahead of us interrupted our brief conversation as a grenade landed at the end of the catwalk. It shifted as the metal bridge wrenched from its supports. They broke free, sending the entire thing down towards the darkness below.

“Shit!” I shouted as I watched Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky falling, hanging on for dear life onto the metal railing. I beat my wings hard, rushing downwards after them. I charged my horn, putting all I could into a teleport spell. The magic discharged as the two unicorns disappeared and reappeared on the nearest catwalk as I pulled up out of my dive. The other bridge slammed hard into the ground below, squealing with the sound of metal grinding against metal. I flapped my wings and lowered myself next to the two.

“Are you two alright?” I asked. Dusk nodded.

“A little beat up, but thank you for the save,” He replied, panting hard. Gunfire erupted above us, reminding of where we were. *This is insane,* I thought. *What was I thinking trying to negotiate with these freaks? There was never going to be a deal in the first place.*

“Of course there wasn’t. Everypony is the same, they just want to hurt you,” Spark cooed softly.

Stop it, I responded to the spirit. Her intrusions were beginning to get more frequent.

“Suit yourself, but you need me Star. Don’t forget that,” She replied. I could just see her shit-eating grin now. More gunfire brought me out of my stupor as Sunshine stepped forward and deflected several of the bullets with a flick of her horn.

“What about you Goddess? Are you alright? You seem out of it,” Dusk said anxiously as we began moving forward again. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lucky had joined us again. I shot a smile at the spectral mare, who returned it with a nervous grin. I knew that she was still scared of Spark, and I didn’t blame her. The spirit was beginning to scare me too. When had she turned so hostile? Had she always been that way? I couldn’t begin to fathom why she was suddenly acting in this manner. I nodded at Dusk and sighed.

“I’m fine,” I said. Another group of enforcers appeared through the steam put off by the pipes. I snarled fiercely and used Stargazer like a bludgeon, slamming into the lead enforcer with furious rage. Despite what the gun looked like, it was rather well constructed and made for an excellent impromptu melee weapon at times. The other mare groaned with pain as she hit the ground hard, knocked out cold by the blow. Sunshine grinned and lit her horn up, causing several small vines to appear that wrapped themselves around floating shotguns and yanked them out of the air. Dusk followed up behind her with a blast of spellfire, disabling the other two enforcers. I turned to the two unicorns.

“Look, we need to end this, and end this soon. Will you two be okay on your own?” I said calmly. Dusk nodded.

“I’ve got more than a few tricks up my sleeves,” He said, grinning. Sunshine smiled widely as well.

“Take the fight to them Goddess!” She crowed. I groaned.

“Would you stop calling me that?” I asked. Sunshine meeped and put a hoof up to her mouth.

“Sorry,” She managed to squeak out. I stretched my wings out and prepared myself. Kicking off, I activated my shield and flapped hard, pushing myself into the air and towards the highest catwalk.

Bullets pinged off of my shield as I flew, dodging the pipework and metal catwalks that barred my path. Landing on the platform in front of Lotus, I heard her distinct laughter.

“Getting bored of playing with us Ministry Mare?” She chided. “Come any closer and your friends will get it.” She pointed down where my friends were hanging, suspended by a rope in the center. A knife floated next to the rope enveloped in her magic shroud. It was ready to cut the rope at the slightest.

“Why are you doing this?!” I shouted at the mare, who merely grinned.

“Please, everypony in the city knows who you are now. The Minotaur has been talking about you nonstop now, alongside his normal drivel. And to think, we’ve had your friends here all along,” Lotus said. “If you want them to live, put down your weapon. Once you are in custody, we’ll let them go. You have the Lotus Triad’s honest word.”

“She’s lying,” Spark said in the back of my mind. ***“She has no intention of releasing your friends.”***

“What do you want from me?” I asked, ignoring Spark for the moment.

“You have the knowledge of where the megaspell you took out of our possession is,” Lotus replied angrily. “Tell me where it is... and I might consider letting you live.”

“Who said anything about letting me live? It’s just you and me up here sister,” I snarled. Lotus giggled for a moment and made a motion with her hoof. Two unicorn mares, her elite enforcers,

appeared out of nowhere on each side of me. Each one brandished a rifle that was aimed directly for my head. No matter how fast I could move, they could shoot before I even had the chance to do anything. "Oh," I said flatly. *How stupid am I?* I thought. *Of course it was a trap.*

"*Your fault,*" Spark replied, chuckling. I snarled internally at the spirit.

"Girls: if you'd be so kind as to relieve Miss Star of her weaponry and saddlebags," Lotus said. The unicorns nodded and I felt my bags and Stargazer lifting away from me. The knife floated away from the rope and up to my throat, pressing hard against me as the enforcers began binding me to the railing. I could see that Violet and Patch had still yet to awaken even amidst the commotion. I briefly wondered for a moment if they were already dead, until I saw the telltale signs of breathing. "I'm not going to ask again. Tell me where you sent the bomb," Lotus asked, glaring at me with death in her eyes.

"Go fuck yourself," I choked out.

"Wrong answer," She replied. The pressure lifted from my throat as the blade silently rose up above my left ear. "You know what we do to those that resist us?" She grinned evilly as the knife pressed up against the back of my ear and began to cut. I felt blood spurt from my ear as pain overwhelmed my entire head. I howled in agony as I felt the knife scissor back and forth in a rhythmic pattern. The slicing motion subsided quickly as a large purple chunk hit the ground next to me with a sickening ***splat***. Blood flowed freely down the left side of my neck as I struggled to keep with it. I looked down, seeing that they had only severed the tip of the ear. *Oh holy fucking Luna's panties,* I thought as I gazed upon the chunk of purple flesh.

"Now. Tell me where you put it. Or do I need to make my point further?" Lotus said. I panted hard from the blood loss as I glared at the mare.

"F-f-fuck you. I sent it to the Minotaur," I stammered. "You're never going to get it." The pink unicorn's eyes widened. She was clearly not expecting me to answer, let alone to answer with such an outrageous claim.

"Really now? The Minotaur has the megaspell? That is most unfortunate," She mused. "Why should I believe you? No pony has set foot in Filly's Tower for years and yet you expect me to believe that you went there?"

"Y-y-yeah," I choked out. My vision was getting hazy. Lotus snorted.

"Well then, we don't really need you anymore now do we?" She said, lifting the knife once more. I tried to cry out. *Fuck... I'm sorry Patch... Violet... I love you... I fucked up. Should have been more careful...* I thought as the knife descended and I closed my eyes.

The pain never came. I heard a cry ring out in front of me. I opened my eyes to see the knife had been tossed to the side and was embedded in the wall. Dusk Blue was standing there, his horn glowing.

"Unhand the Goddess!" He shouted angrily. I smiled weakly. I had never been happier to hear that name. The blue unicorn's presence had given me the distraction I needed. I forced the pain down and struck out, slamming the mare on my right with a fierce applebuck. Before the other mare could react, a blast of spellfire slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. I stared for a moment, blinking at the show of power that Dusk had just put forth. A growl pulled me back to reality as I saw Lotus rushing forward at me. I snarled back and lifted Stargazer quickly, slamming the barrel of the gun into the mare's face. The unicorn went flying back, hitting the ground hard. I leaped forward, planting myself right over the top of the pink mare. Stargazer came up and floated above the unicorn's head. I paused for a moment, hesitating as I stared down at Lotus. Could I really take this mare's life so carelessly? Sure, she had done some bad things, but so had I. I was directly responsible for Lucky's death; I

decided I wouldn't be responsible for another. A cackle from my side drew my attention to the dark maned unicorn next to me.

"Do it. Kill her. She kidnapped your friends and even cut part of your ear off," Spark mused. "She deserves it."

"I... I can't... She deserves a chance to do better..." I said quietly. Lotus stared up at me with fearful eyes. Tears had begun to form in them as she began to plead softly for her life.

"Please. Look at her. She's pathetic. She's even begging. Do it. Take her life," Spark replied. The purple mare twirled around me, giggling. "Come on, you know you want to. It'll make you feel better."

"I... No... I can't..." I said. "I can't do that... not again." Spark cackled.

"Who cares?!" The unicorn exclaimed. "She's a bad pony. She deserves to die. Do it! Kill her!"

"No..."

"Do it!"

"No!"

"Do it now!"

"**NO!!!**" I shouted as I dropped Stargazer to the side of the mare, the gun nearly landing on her head. Lotus scrambled away as I wheeled about to face Spark. Everpony else dropped into the background as I focused exclusively on the psychopathic delusion.

"Leave me alone! Why are you doing this? Why me?" I shouted at her. The purple unicorn grinned with glee.

"Because you're so much fun to fuck with, sweetheart," She replied. "Come on, you totally were going to do it."

"No! I won't. I won't be responsible for another death that I could have prevented!" I shouted at the spectral mare. A laugh behind me thrust me back to reality and I felt a sharp pain in my side. Not only was my ear spurting blood but now I had been shot! I turned around and saw Lotus Petal standing there, a pistol held in the air with her magic. Her eyes wide and terrified, the unicorn was shaking as bad as the pistol held in her magic. I couldn't blame her, my argument with Spark wasn't exactly normal or comforting to witness. I tried to lift Stargazer to fire back, but couldn't. I tried to lift Stargazer to fire back, but it came up oh so slowly. The thousands of injuries and magical output from getting to this point had worn me out. Pain ripped up from my chest as Lotus shot me again, and Spark's mad cackle blended with the clatter of Stargazer hitting the deck as I fell to my side.

"What... what's wrong with you?" Lotus shrieked, her voice filled with fear. I coughed and tried to push myself up. *Where was Dusk? Sunshine? What happened to them?* I thought, trying to find the two unicorns through the haze clouding my vision. Then I saw them, further down the catwalk. They were entangled with another group of Triad enforcers. I tried to shout at them to help me.

"Please..." I said quietly. "Please..." Spark stepped over next to the pink mare.

"Honestly," She said. "This is what you get for not taking the initiative earlier and just killing her." I growled at the spirit.

"You stay out of this!" I shouted from my spot on the ground. Lotus Petal's eyes widened with fear.

"Who the fuck are you talking to?" She said. I groaned as my head began to dip and I hit the ground. *No... I need to get up. Need to save Violet... and Patch... Dusk and Sunshine... Need to save them... I*

thought as I struggled to push myself up again.

“Give... me... my... **FRIENDS... BACK!!!**” I shouted, getting louder and louder with each word. I gritted through the pain, lifting myself up and causing Lotus Petal to step backwards. Spark cackled.

“Good. Let me in, I’ll get them back for you,” She said, grinning evilly. I shook my head, trying to clear her away.

“Star!!” A voice cut through the pain. I looked up, seeing Lucky staring down at me. Lucky flew down and landed in front of Spark.

“Leave her alone!” She shouted at the other spectral mare. Spark giggled.

“Fuck off greenie. She’s mine,” She replied. Lucky shrank back for a moment before stomping her hoof and standing her ground.

“No. You’ve been pushing her around too much. Go away!” Lucky cried out. Spark’s eyes widened at the mare’s defiance. I smiled through the pain briefly. *Thank you... Lucky*, I thought as I truly hoped that the green mare just wasn’t a part of my crazy and was actually real. I realized I would do anything to help her get back to what she was. Spark growled for a moment and waved a hoof, disappearing in a blink of an eye. Lucky turned to me, her eyes wide with concern.

“Star? Stay with us, come on. You gotta stay with us,” She said frantically. She tried to reach out to me but couldn’t because her hoof went right through my shoulders. “Please... I need you to stay with me... please...”

I could see through the haze that something had happened to Lotus Petal during Lucky’s intrusion. In my confusion and pain I noticed that she was now on the ground. Dusk Blue was standing over her, his horn ablaze as he lifted my friends out of their bonds. I could see that they were now awake and staring right at me. I tried to call out to them, but couldn’t speak. As I fell, I saw Violet rushing at me, her mouth moving but no words escaping her lips. Then, there was only blackness.

I blinked and looked around me. The circular room with the different cutie marks greeted my eyes.

Fuck, I thought as I tried to process the events prior to my blackout. I knew that when I woke up I was going to hurt a fucking lot. I only hoped that my ear wasn’t seriously damaged. I sighed and turned towards the doors, wondering which one would open next. The torch in the center went out and sent its fiery package right at the door with the three apples on it. The door opened and I stepped towards it cautiously.

The door opened up into a beautifully warm sunny day on a dirt road. The road ended immediately into an apple orchard. The sign above the gate read **Sweet Apple Acres** as I passed below it. A large farm house loomed off to the left as I followed the path down into the orchard proper. Rows upon rows of apple trees met my gaze as I let out a soft gasp at just how many there were. Glistening red apples graced each tree, and the ones in the center of the orchard beheld an incredible rainbow colored apple that I had never seen before. As I neared the center of the orchard I could hear grunting noises. A burnt orange earth pony mare with blonde hair and a Stetson hat appeared before me as she put all of her strength into a spectacular applebuck, knocking down more of the rainbow-dyed fruit. She stopped for a moment as she regarded me.

“Yep,” She finally said. “Was wonderin’ when you might get here. Pick a tree sugarcube, and help me out would ya?”

“Huh?” I said, not realizing what she meant.

“Pick a tree, work with me a bit and then we’ll take a break so we can talk. Ah think ah made that

pretty clear mahself,” She said, grinning as she pushed into another buck, knocking every apple from the tree. She pointed at the tree next to her. I nodded and moved over to it. Turning around, I put all my effort and force into an applebuck... and landed flat on my face instead. The orange mare laughed out loud as I pushed myself up and snarled. I planted my front hooves and kicked out, slamming into the tree with magnificent strength. Apples rained down from above, landing perfectly in the buckets set aside to catch them.

“Nicely done sugarcube,” The orange earth pony said with a grin on her face. I smiled back and began to work beside her, bucking apples. What felt like hours must have passed and the Sun was beating down on the both of us hard. After an eternity, the mare put up her hoof and motioned for me to stop.

She trotted over to a cooler and opened it up, pulling out two bottles of apple juice. I grinned, using my magic to pick the bottles away from her and twisted off the tops. I took a swig of the cool liquid, feeling it refresh and rejuvenate my throat as it trickled down. I set the bottle down on the ground next to me and slumped down into a sit. The orange mare sat next to me.

“Ain’t nothin’ like an honest day’s work, am ah right?” She said cheerily.

“I’m gonna go on a limb here and guess that you’re not really Applejack,” I said blankly. The mare nodded.

“That’s right. Name’s Honesty, pleasure to be makin’ your acquaintance there Star,” The orange earth pony replied.

“Let me guess... one of the Virtues?” I asked cautiously. The mare nodded.

“Got that right too. Hoo doggy, you’re two for two so far,” Honesty said, chuckling.

“So why am I here this time?” I said, looking over at the orange mare. “Another history lesson?”

“Was there ever any doubt?” The mare said curiously. “If you’ll be pardonin’ my fancy, but time... it’s never been something that’s linear. It’s an ocean, a storm if ya willin’ to think so. History is just another part of that storm.”

“Interesting, but what does this have to do with me?” I said. The mare chuckled.

“Let’s jus’ say that sure as sugar you need to learn how to be honest,” She replied.

“What am I supposed to learn from being honest? I’m pretty sure I *honestly* fucked up pretty badly back there,” I said.

“Ah know you saved your friends. Regardless of what happened with Magic,” Honesty said. “Plus you worked with me. Like ah said before, ain’t nothin’ like an honest day’s work.” I nodded, thinking on the mare’s words.

“So be honest with me for a second. Why did Twilight do it? Was it her that gave the instructions to the Twilight Society?” I asked the orange pony.

“Twi... Twi was obsessed if’n you get mah meanin’. She took her obsession a little too far with Shinin’ Armor. You know one time... she said she met herself from the future?” Honesty replied.

“Really? How did that pan out?” I asked, curiously. I seemed to recall a friendship report from Twilight’s diary that dealt with this. A flare in the back of my mind brought up the memory as well.

“Well, as ah’m sure you’re already rememberin’, Twi was so obsessed with worryin’ over what would happen that she took it a little too far,” The mare continued on. “In the end, tweren’t nothin’ to worry about at all.”

“But Shining Armor was different. Why?” I said.

“Twi’s brother was a great stallion and an even greater general. That mare loved her brother with the fire of a thousand suns, and woulda done anythin’ for him,” Honesty said. “What you’ve failed to remember yet, and ah’m not sure why Magic is blockin’ you from it, is why Shining Armor died in the first place.”

“It was pretty clear to me in Rainbow Dash’s memories,” I said, the contents of the cyan mare’s memory orb floating up into my mind. “It seemed like he didn’t have enough time to save himself and the others.”

“Shining Armor was a general in the army of Equestria. He once saved the entire city of Canterlot with his shield spell from a swarm of changelings, including their queen,” The orange mare stated. I thought about this for a moment and considered the ramifications of it.

“If he was that powerful then, why didn’t he save himself?” I asked.

“You have two memory orbs in your possession. One of them belonged to Applejack, the other Shining Armor himself. Watch them. They will tell you all that you need to know,” The mare said, turning deathly serious for the moment, her accent all but disappearing. I nodded, pondering the orbs she was talking about. Shining’s orb must have been part of one of the four I found in the library at Fort Knowledge. I took a mental note to watch them as soon as possible.

“Honesty?” I asked quietly after a few moments of silence.

“Yeah sugarcube?” The mare replied, her accent returning.

“What’s happening to me?” I asked, fear creeping into my voice. “I can’t get it out of my head. I keep seeing Lucky, and the ponies from 33, and I’m even seeing the ponies of Arlington... all dead... always dead.”

“Death is a funny thing. It takes an honest pony to stare down Death in tha eyes and live to tell about it. But ah think what you’re experiencin’ is guilt,” Honesty said.

“It’s more than that,” I said. “I feel like every emotion, mine and Twilight’s is just running rampant now. It’s starting to wear me down.” Honesty nodded.

“Sometimes sugarcube, we let our emotions control us,” She replied. I sighed and prodded in the back of my mind for anything else that I was missing.

“Honesty... you mentioned Magic earlier... are you talking about Spark?” I ventured. Honesty turned away for a moment and paused at my question. She hesitated and then finally looked back with a solemn gaze.

“Yes,” She said softly. “Spark represents the Virtue of Magic that was once connected to Twilight Sparkle.” I blinked. “Specifically, she was originally the Element of Magic.”

“Element?” I asked, blinking again. “You mean like the Elements of Harmony?”

“The very same. Spark was the one that set us all into motion. *When the other five elements are gathered, a spark will ignite and the sixth element will reveal itself,*” The orange mare quoted. “Spark liked to think of herself as the uniter of the virtues. That’s why she took that name instead of Magic.”

“Was she always so... I don’t know... mean?” I asked, thinking about the recent events that had been driven into motion by the spirit.

“She... she never used to be. Ah can’t rightly say when she changed,” Honesty said. Tears had begun to form in her soft eyes.

“I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have brought her up... I can see that it’s a touchy subject,” I apologized.

Honesty smiled and brought a hoof up, wiping away the tears.

“It’s alright sugarcube. You just had me thinkin’ of better days is all,” The mare replied. “I think however our time is up for now. I can only stay so long. You already forced Generosity away prematurely.” I started to speak, my voice getting caught in my throat. *Did I really just push her away?* I thought. *I didn’t mean to... I was thinking about the bomb and getting it safely away at the time.*

“Don’t you worry about fussy britches sugarcube. She’s a strong one, and you’ll be getting your proper time with her sooner or later,” Honesty said, almost as if she had read my mind. “Now then... time to wake up.”

I awoke instantly, my eyes snapping open and blinking. As my vision focused it resolved into the two most beautiful green eyes I’d ever seen in my entire life. Thankfully, along with those eyes came soft green hair and a beautiful smile. Violet was sitting over me, staring at me intently. She must have been there for some time, as I noticed that she looked a little worse for wear. She was also crying. I grunted, trying to force my body to sit up a bit.

“V-V-Violet?” I stammered out. *Where am I?* I thought as I tried to focus past Violet on the rest of the room. Then the pain hit me. The side of my head felt like it would split open any second. Violet’s eyes turned serious and she turned and shouted.

“She’s up, but I need some Med-X over here!” She yelled. Muffled voices responded in the background, but I could only hear Violet’s voice amidst the commotion. My love turned back to me.

“You’re going to be alright. We’re here,” She said. “Just stay with us.” A sharp sting was felt on my side and the pain began to subside. I groaned in agony as the pain left my senses, a numbing sensation replacing it. The haze in my eyes began to clear as I stared once again at Violet.

“What happened to me?” I managed to choke out quietly. Violet sighed.

“Well for starters, you were shot and one of the bullets punctured your lungs. You’re lucky enough to be breathing. Thankfully, the bullet punched through cleanly and went out the other side,” Violet replied. “However, you also lost a lot of blood.” A greenish glow surrounded a small piece of glass that lifted up so I could see myself in it. A good portion of the tip of my left ear was completely gone. I gasped softly as I could see the end of it was cauterized, making the end of the ear look like a burnt piece of purple flesh.

“Dusk had to perform emergency cauterization on it to stem your blood loss. The healing potion seems to have no effect on it though,” My marefriend continued. “That’s not the most pressing issue though. You were having some sort of seizure when we got to you.”

“S-seizure?” I asked. *What happened to me?* I thought. I clearly remembered Spark, egging me on and on to kill Lotus Petal. “What happened to the Triad? Lotus Petal?”

“We barely escaped with our lives. Suffice to say, we’d probably better steer clear of Chi-Town for like... ever,” Violet said. “Lotus Petal got away too.”

“I almost did it...” I said quietly. “I almost killed her...”

“Why didn’t you?” Violet replied. I stared up at her with fear in my eyes. Tears began to form in them.

“I... I couldn’t cause another death,” I said, burying my head in her side and sobbing. Violet’s harsh eyes softened at this.

“What happened?” Violet said, holding me close. I held back the tears for a moment, motioning for her

to help me to sit up. Quietly, she pushed on me with her magic in order to prop me up in the bed so I could see things better. The room we were in was some form of dilapidated one room apartment. It had been cleared out of any remains, but still felt dusty and old. In the corner sat Dusk and Sunshine Sky, talking amongst themselves and stealing a glance at me every few seconds. I wondered what was going on in the minds of the two Twilight Society members. At the other corner, cleaning out her sniper rifle was Patch. She looked at me grimly and cracked a weak smile. I knew she had to have been going through hell once she realized that I returned without Steeljack. I looked back at Violet and began to speak. Patch stopped cleaning and sat down next to the bed. She was soon joined by Dusk and Sunshine.

I told them about Steeljack and I being caught by the MMMM and meeting Lucky. I spoke of what we found in the M.W.T. Hub, evoking several low gasps at the mention of Pink Cloud. Numerous topics filled the air: Lucky's death (I failed to mention Lucky's rebirth. A quick scan of the room indicated the mare was nowhere around), The Bullfather and the Cowpones, the meeting with the Minotaur, and meeting the Twilight Society. When I got to the subject of the Twilight Society's involvement in my transformation, I noticed that Violet had shot Dusk a glare of death ray eyes. I left out Spark and Lucky. I wasn't ready to admit that to my friends just yet, and I was honestly concerned about what Dusk and Sunshine might do if they found out that the thing inside me was not definitively Twilight. I thought about what Honesty had said. If Spark was Magic, what happened to her? What changed her? I thought about trying to contact the spectral mare once more, but fear stopped me. I realized I was afraid of her, of what she was trying to do. A hoof entered my vision, waving back and forth as I realized that I was lost once again in my thoughts.

"Star? You alright in there?" Violet said. I nodded lightly, not wanting to admit the opposite. Instead of alright, I felt like hell. My mind wanted me to do nothing more than to crawl up in a corner somewhere and bawl my eyes out. Yet for some reason, I couldn't do it.

"Well Goddess. It seems like our next course of action is to retrieve your other friend from the Cowpones," Dusk Blue stated.

"Why are you calling her that?" Patch piped up for the first time the entire conversation. She looked deadly serious about her question.

"Well... she is... she's the living embodiment of the Goddess of Twilight," Dusk replied. Patch snorted.

"If she were a 'Goddess' like you claim, none of this would be happening would it? She'd be able to stop it all right? She'd have been able to save Steeljack all by herself," She said viciously at the blue unicorn, whose eyes widened. An angry look crossed Patch's face. *Wow... I guess she's mad at me*, I thought, trying to process what she had just said.

"Patch, enough," Violet replied before Dusk could say anything. The other green mare grumbled for a moment and went back to her corner. Moments later she was back to cleaning her gear. I noticed for a moment that the two's bags were slightly different, although I was able to pick out Thunder Flash among the items.

"What happened to your bags?" I asked quietly. Violet sighed, and motioned me closer. She spoke quietly.

"Most of our stuff was taken when we were kidnapped. We were lucky enough that Thunder Flash wasn't taken away somewhere, but Patch's old rifle was busted up by one of those enforcers," She said. "She picked one up off of one of the Triad and has been trying to figure it out since we've been gone from that area."

“Wait... how long have I been out?” I asked, already dreading the answer. Violet sighed once more, letting me know that I indeed would not like to know just how long I was unconscious.

“Star, you’ve been out of it for at least a week,” She said. *Oh... oh. Fuck me with Luna’s horn three ways from Tuesday*, I thought. *No wonder she looks like hell*. My stomach growled intensely with a furious rage as I grinned sheepishly at my love. Violet smiled softly.

“I figured you would be hungry when you woke up,” She said, pulling out of her bag some old prewar snack cakes and a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. I dug in, relishing the taste of each morsel as I scarfed down the preserved food. It was pure heaven, almost like I had never eaten before in my life.

“Wait... so what about Steeljack? Is he alright?” I said as I ate ravenously. I prayed that the buck wasn’t dead, that Steeljack was still alive somehow.

“Steeljack is alive. The Cowpones apparently run a bit of a slaver ring in this town, and so they’ve got him in an old rock quarry or farm if you want to call it that,” The green mare said, her eyes drifting over to Patch. “It’s been hard on her. I don’t know what to do.”

“We’ll get him out of there. I’ll make sure of it,” I said. Violet sighed and rested her head on my shoulder.

“You should get some rest,” She replied. “If we’re going to be on the move, we’ll all need to be on the top of our game.” I nodded and slumped back into the bed, the green mare sidling up next to me in a careful embrace. I giggled a bit as she clumsily nuzzled my neck.

“I missed you...” I breathed. “You have no idea how much I missed you.” Violet sighed in return.

“I missed you too. I’m just glad you’re alright,” She said. I smiled and closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of her body as I drifted off to sleep.

What felt like moments later, I woke up. Darkness cloaked the room as I peered around, finding everypony else. Patch lay in her corner, snuggled up to her new sniper rifle. Dusk Blue and Sunshine lay next to each other in the other far corner. I had to admit, they were kind of cute together. Violet still lay next to me, but she no longer was all over me. Instead she was lying on her back, her legs in the air in a cute fashion. I nearly giggled, but thought better of it. A soft chuckle echoed in the room beyond me as I turned towards the source of the noise. A faint glowing green light was coming from beyond the closed door. I pulled myself away from the bed quietly and stepped towards the light.

Opening the door, I found myself face to face with Lucky once more. I sighed and stepped into the hallway with the spectral mare, pulling the door closed behind me. The hall was littered with debris and rubble, giving no clear indication as to where we were other than that it was some sort of abandoned apartment. I really wasn’t even sure where we were in the first place. Being out of commission for seven days kind of does that to you.

“Hey Lucky,” I said, smiling at the green mare.

“Star. I’m glad to see you up and about finally. I’ve been hanging around off and on, waiting for you to wake up,” She said meekly. “I thought you were a goner.”

“Takes more than that to keep me down,” I said, not feeling very confident about my reply. “I was hoping you might show up. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Me? What did I do?” Lucky replied, looking very nervous.

“You stood up to Spark when it mattered,” I said. “I... I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t intervened. She would have taken over.” The green mare’s eyes widened.

“I... I just wanted you to be okay,” She said quietly. “You’ve been so nice to me, and I’ve been nothing

but a bother.”

“No no, you've been fine... really,” I said. “I... I've just been really out of it.”

“Just... promise me you won't listen to her. She's not nice. She's really scary,” Lucky responded. I sighed.

“I... I can't make that promise. I need to find out more about her. Why she's inside my head, why... why she is the way she is,” I replied. “It's the only chance I've got at getting her out.”

“Star...?” A meek voice behind me said. I turned around, seeing Patch standing there. *How long has she been there?* I thought as I looked back to regard Lucky. The purple haired unicorn/pegasus simply shrugged and began walking down the hall. I turned back to Patch.

“Ummm... hi. I didn't wake you up did I?” I asked.

“Just a little. Who were you talking to?” Patch said, staring at me.

“Oh... umm... no one, that's right. Just talking to myself,” I said. *Great, I thought. Now she's really going to think I'm crazy.*

“Are you okay? You look like hell,” The dark green earth pony said. I sighed and slumped to my haunches in the middle of the floor.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I said. Patch nodded slowly. “I haven't wanted to tell Violet yet. I'm afraid she might worry too much about me.”

“What is it?” She asked.

“This... thing inside my head. It talks to me. Her name is Spark. I don't know what she is, but I do know she's connected to the Element of Magic,” I said. “Lately though, she's been getting vicious... sometimes downright... evil I guess you would say. Saying hurtful things. Trying to force me to do things.”

“I see,” Patch said. *Please don't think I'm crazy,* I thought, closing my eyes for a second. I felt hooves wrap around me and I reopened them. Patch had shifted over and had placed me into a warm hug.

“Patch...?” I said quietly, confused by the mare's response.

“Shh,” The green mare replied. “It's alright.”

“But... I thought... aren't you mad at me?” I asked, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I was. But even I can see you didn't mean to leave him behind,” Patch said, releasing me from the embrace. I sighed and stared at my friend.

“I'm sorry, I should have been there to help him,” I said. “By the time I got back to the Ministry of Technology... it was just Lucky and me.”

“Lucky?” Patch said, a confused expression crossing her face. My eyes widened. *Oh, shit,* I thought. *I just said Lucky didn't I?* I groaned and lowered my head.

“Yeah... you see the thing of it is... I'm kind of seeing her around too,” I said quietly. *Not crazy!* I thought as I met the gaze of the green earth pony.

“But you told us she died,” Patch said. I nodded.

“She did. I'm... I'm not sure what she is but apparently, only I can see her,” I replied. “It's like... she's a ghost or something.” Patch's eyes widened.

“But you said there weren't such things as ghosts,” She said.

"I know... but I know what I'm seeing and she's definitely not there," I said adamantly. "She even passes through things."

"Strange," Patch said, looking at me curiously.

"Look... I know you must think I'm crazy or something but please don't tell Violet. I don't want her to worry about me," I said. "It's bad enough that you two had to deal with being captured by the Lotus Triad."

"Heh... yeah... that was a bit strange. Never been kidnapped before and forced into pleasure massages," Patch said rubbing her neck with her right forehoof.

"Ah... right. So... anyways, Violet told me you lost your sniper rifle and had to pick up another one?" I asked, quickly changing the subject. Patch groaned.

"Yeah. I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to use it though, it looks like it was made for a friggin' unicorn," She replied. Quietly she disappeared as she tiptoed back into the room and returned cradling the gun in her forehooves. Walking upright like a zebra, she set down the gun in the hallway before me. Looking over the gun, I could see she was right. The gun was clearly not designed with an earth pony in mind. No mouth grips and definitely didn't look capable of being mounted on a battle saddle. No, this had to be set up and used by a unicorn.

"I can see what you mean," I said, staring at the jet black rifle. Patch sighed.

"I've been messing with it, trying to adjust the stock so that I could saddle mount it, but I have no fucking clue how to actually hit things that way," The green mare said. I nodded.

"What if you adjusted the firing mechanism? We could rebuild it and make it hoof capable," I offered. I didn't know a whole lot about what I was talking about to be honest. I was really only trying to make Patch feel better about losing her other rifle. The other mare grinned for a moment.

"That's it!" She exclaimed. "It just needs to be re sewn together, and I'm just the mare for the job!" I chuckled.

"Speaking of sewing... how did you get that needle anyways?" I asked as the mare set to work disassembling the gun. She paused for a moment and then continued to work as she spoke.

"Well. Growing up in a Stable, you are usually locked into one job based on your cutie mark. My mom was a Security officer. She was pretty disappointed when my cutie mark appeared. I had somehow gotten into one of her old sewing cabinets and managed to make a cute little sweater. Got this baby right afterwards," She said, pulling a few tools out to help her work.

"So why did you become a Security officer then? You sound like you could have been a talented seamstress," I said. Patch snorted.

"Mom. She hated the fact that I got a cutie mark that wasn't slated for some military career," She said.

"Pretty much forced me into the position. We soon figured out I also had a knack for taking apart and putting together weapons. Gave my cutie mark a whole new meaning really."

"Interesting. So what are you doing here?" I asked as I nodded at the disassembled gun. The other mare grinned.

"Just what you suggested. We're going to custom build this baby! The firing mechanism won't work the way it is currently, it's built for a unicorn after all. I need to modify it so that I can fire with a bit instead," She said, pointing above the stock. "The electronics for the scope are totally intact, I figure I can turn them into some sort of eyepiece I can wear that will engage the scope." I blinked as I looked at her.

“What?” I said flatly. Patch grinned wider.

“You'll see,” She said. I sat there quietly as she worked, not feeling very tired at all. The hallway began to lighten as the sun came up and Patch was still hard at work. I waited patiently until the mare's eyes widened with glee and she whinnied a victory cry. I blinked. The rifle itself was marvelous looking. The entire thing was shortened down to fit Patch's small stature. The scope and the barrel were intact and so was the loading mechanism. A bit firing mechanism was attached to the rifle, and as Patch lifted the gun up in her hooves I could see that she could easily engage the bit. A device almost like a monocle was strapped over her good eye.

“I rigged the whole thing up so that I can carry it standing upright. If I'm lucky, I should be able to even use her in close quarters too,” She said, grinning. By this time I could hear voices in the room. Violet pushed opened the door and looked out at us.

“What are you two doing up?” She asked, yawning. I nodded at Patch.

“We've been... well Patch has been working on her new gun,” I said. Patch grinned, standing upright once more and showing off the rifle.

“This baby is going to be awesome!” She said, clearly excited about this. “She packs a punch too. I modified it so that it would accept 7.92mm machine gun rounds!” I blinked.

“What?!” I exclaimed. Patch grinned and took aim with the rifle down the hallway and put her teeth down onto the bit, biting into it. The bullet erupted from the gun and sped through the wall, ripping a clean edged hole in it and continuing out into the world beyond. I noticed Patch grimacing, rubbing her shoulder. A shriek from the other room indicated that Dusk and Sunshine were now awake.

“Recoil is a bit of a bitch though, gonna have to get used to that,” She said.

“So... does this new baby of yours have a name?” I asked as the green mare put down the rifle. She paused for a moment of thought and grinned.

“There's an old saying my mom used to tell me. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*,” She said. “I don't know what language she was saying, but it means 'If you wish for peace, prepare for war.' Which is exactly what those Cowpones are going to get.” She grinned even wider at this. “Yes... her name is Para Bellum.”

The next several days flew by faster than I had ever thought possible. Despite the healing that I had already received from Dusk Blue and the healing potions, the injuries I had sustained at the hooves of the Lotus Triad were simply too severe for me to be out and getting into trouble again. My ear especially had to be bandaged and re-bandaged as we hoped that something would help heal the scarred flesh. Even with the magic working on it, my ear hurt like hell. Gradually I began to get used to the numb painkilling feeling that was brought on by the Med-X. Still, every time I looked in the makeshift mirror I could see the burnt tissue still there, almost as if it was mocking me.

Patch had taken to her new weapon like a fish to water. She spent most of the few days we spent in the building, which had turned out to be an old abandoned apartment building known as Hay Lake Tower, practicing with Para Bellum, using everything from windows to radroaches as targets. Violet had spent a vast majority of her time taking care of me, and helping Dusk Blue with his healing magic. He had even managed to teach her how to cast the healing spell herself, so that she could continue while he and Sunshine Sky went out into the city to perform some reconnaissance. They had managed to determine that Steeljack was still alive and was being held along with Danish. I was surprised to hear the cream colored unicorn had continued to survive, but was thankful. He had been ready to give up everything

to help me keep the Pink Cloud bomb from getting into the wrong hooves. I owed it to him.

Several mornings later, after figuring out breakfast and our planned route through the city, we set off towards the west side of the city to find this rock quarry that our friend was being held at. As we walked I felt very tired and my headache returned. My ear still wasn't healed. It wouldn't respond to either potions of Dusk Blue's healing magic. Dusk suspected that Lotus' knife may have been enchanted to cause such a strange wound. Despite that, I seemed to have no issues hearing out of it. I kept a close eye out for Lucky, catching glimpses of the green mare trailing behind us. I wondered why she was keeping her distance from me as we arrived on the edge of the city. The western edge of the city was pretty bare, other than the large amount of debris and trash everywhere. I kept a close eye on my E.F.S. as we moved forward, looking for any sort of hostile targets. Thankfully, E.F.S. remained clear, there was nothing around us.

The rock quarry was situated in a low valley just outside of the city proper. The top of a hill nearby served as a decent vantage point with which to see the entirety of the camp. Enslaved ponies moved to and fro, lifting rocks and moving them out of the quarry to a rock crusher on the top of the far side of the crater. I could see several large chunks of rock being crushed down, revealing gemstones inside.

No wonder they're here, I thought as I watched. A large wooden house and several large caravan tents looked to serve as the camp for the workers to sleep in and the Cowponies to manage their operation.

Brahmin and earth ponies in suits guarded the slaves. I guess I had to be thankful that this didn't seem like the type of operation that would draw the Bullfather's attention too much. A quick scan of the area however, didn't reveal our grey friend or the cream colored unicorn Danish.

"I thought you said he was here," I asked Violet quietly. She nodded.

"There's some sort of mine below the quarry as well," She replied. "They may be down there."

"Well, how are we going to get down there?" Sunshine chimed in. "We can't exactly waltz on in, we'd be sitting ducks."

"I agree. We need to be stealthy about this," I said. I looked over at Patch nervously, who shook her head.

"No. Not doing it. If he's down there, I'm going to find him," She said adamantly. I sighed and nodded.

"I know," I replied. "And I'm not going to make you stay here either. You need to do this, I can tell.

We just need to figure out the right way to do it." I looked over at Dusk Blue. "We need a distraction to lure the guards away while we sneak into the mine. Can you two work something up?"

"We might be able to come up with something," He said, looking over at Sunshine who just grinned.

"Good," I said, pulling out the StealthBuck attachment and handing it over to Violet. "In case we need this. I'm going to try and cast an invisibility spell over us so we can sneak in."

"You sure that's a safe idea?" Violet asked, cocking her head with a nervous expression. "You haven't cast your invisibility spell in quite some time now."

"I'll be fine. I'm sure I can remember it," I said, smiling. *Nothing will go wrong*, I thought, staring past Violet a moment at Lucky. The spectral green mare smiled at me and nodded. I closed my eyes and let the magic begin to build up into my horn. *Come on... invisibility spell!* I thought as I discharged the magic, letting it wash over myself, Patch, and Violet. A funny tingling feeling wrapped itself around my body. I opened my eyes. *Did I do it?* I thought.

"Wow..." I heard Sunshine say. "I think you did it. We can't see you guys now." I grinned, looking over at Violet. Apparently because we were all under the spell we could still see each other.

"Dusk," I said. "We'll start making our way towards the mine now." The blue unicorn nodded and motioned towards Sunshine. The pink unicorn grinned and began charging up her horn. I began making my way behind Patch and Violet, skirting our way around the camp and down into the quarry. It was quiet, and most of the workers were too engrossed in their work to even hear our hooves touch rock as we passed by. The brahmin guards surrounding the workers were also too interested in keeping their slaves actually working as well. Granted, I doubt that these brahmin were intelligent enough to hear us in the first place. As we crept along, I kept looking around the mine entrance. Violet motioned at me and pointed at the dead center of the quarry. Situated there was a mine shaft going downward attached to a metal elevator. *Great, I thought. Unless Dusk's distraction is good enough, they're definitely going to notice an elevator going down all by itself!*

A loud banging noise caught my attention. I looked back towards the source of the noise and my jaw dropped. A fireworks display, grander than any other I had ever seen lit up the sky. At the center of the display was Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky, combining their magic as more fire and explosions burst forth into the air. I grinned as the guards and workers began making their way over towards the two unicorns. The two looked at each other and discharged their horns at the same time, launching another large aerial bomb off into the air before running the opposite direction. I motioned to Violet and Patch to keep going as we reached the now unguarded elevator. The bombs in the air were still going off. I said a silent prayer to Luna, hoping Dusk and Sunshine would escape as we stepped into the metal cage and hit the button. The elevator began to lower into the deep ground, descending down the stuffy mine shaft at a relatively quick pace. *There must be more gems down under the quarry,* I thought as the elevator stopped abruptly, depositing us in a large open tunnel. The glint of gems lit up the cavern around us. More workers lined the halls of the large tunnel, digging at the walls and pulling gemstones out of the rock. I looked around as we quietly made our way forward, hoping to not draw attention to ourselves. The guards had looked at the elevator when it had touched down, but hadn't yet gone to investigate why it was empty.

The tunnel narrowed to a smaller tunnel, filled with workers and guards. I shifted uncomfortably as we walked. There was no way we could get through it without bumping into somepony. I moved to turn around, slamming into a large earth pony guard who had come into the room. *Shit!* I thought as I cried out in surprise. The magic fueling my invisibility spell completely discharged, revealing my friends and I in the center of the tunnel.

"What the fuck?!" The guard shouted as he moved to aim his rifle. "Intruders!" He shouted as more guards piled into the tunnel. He began moving in at us, drawing the bit for his gun into his mouth. He never even got the chance. A loud ***blam*** echoed through my ears as Patch took up Para Bellum and fired, the bullet slamming home in the other earth pony's shoulder. The impact of the shot put the guard to the ground almost immediately. The slaves around us, those that were still strong enough to take notice, began cheering as the guard hit the ground. Another group of guards strode into the tunnel, the head earth pony aiming a massive shotgun off of his battle saddle.

"Hold it!" He shouted. "Well, if it isn't the alicorn bitch. Put in a call to the Bullfather. He's gonna want to hear about this." The guards began to fan out, surrounding us on all sides. I looked at Patch and nodded. Our stealth mission had effectively been blown. I hoped and prayed that we were right and that Steeljack was down here somewhere. I also knew though, that there would be no stopping my green earth pony friend if he was. Violet grimaced at me.

"Ideas?" She said quietly. I shook my head.

"Surrender for the moment?" I replied nervously. It was a terrible idea, but I wasn't sure we would make it out of here alive. Before anypony could formulate a response to my question, a cry of victory erupted behind the guards. Several of the slaves turned and began attacking their masters with crude

weapons fashioned from spare metal. Metal spears and bludgeons struck home, throwing the slavers off guard for a moment. I grinned and took the opportunity to queue up a shot in E.S.A.T.S. at the head guard, hitting him square in the head and taking him out of the game. Within moments, the battle was over and the slaves were pulling their chains off using keys lifted from their masters. One of the slaves bounced his way up to me, a small pale blue earth pony stallion.

“So glad you could save us my dear,” He said, bowing low to me. “I’m Filthy.”

“Yes, yes you are,” I said flatly. I mean come on, he was working in a mine. Of course he was filthy.

“No no, that’s my name. Filthy Rich the Forty Third,” He replied. “I’m a local resident of the town of Filiet.”

“Filiet?” I asked, confused.

“Yes indeed. Filiet is one of the largest settlements on the west side of the city. Beautiful settlement too,” Filthy replied.

“If you’re from there, why are you here?” I asked. The stallion chuckled nervously.

“Well, the Cowpones sometimes work their way up near us and they kidnapped me while I was out of town working for the Tin Rangers,” He said.

“The what?” I asked blankly. “Don’t you mean the Steel Rangers?”

“No, the Tin Rangers. Finest force this side of the landfill if I do say so myself,” He replied. Around us slaves began to mill about, going from slave to slave and freeing them from their chains. It was a miracle we hadn’t had any guard intrusion in this part of the tunnel yet. Somehow I knew it wasn’t going to last too long.

“That’s... interesting, but I need to know something. I’m looking for friends of mine. A grey earth pony named Steeljack, and a cream unicorn named Apple Danish. Know where we might find them?” I asked as Violet and Patch joined me. Their faces indicated that they hadn’t found either of the two. I kept a close eye on my E.F.S., noting that we had more red blips incoming. I had to make this fast before the battle resumed again.

“Can’t rightly say. I haven’t personally seen em,” Filthy replied. “I’m sure if they’re important, they’d be in the tents up top instead of way down here.” I blinked for a moment.

“You mean we didn’t have to come down here?” I said flatly. The red blips got closer and closer, and chaos erupted in the room as brahmin and earth ponies flooded the tunnel, wielding their instruments of death. Behind the crowd of slave masters, the one and only intelligent brahmin entered himself.

However, instead of enforcers flanking the sides of the Bullfather, Steeljack and Danish were set on each side. Each of the stallions was wrapped in chains and was also gagged and blindfolded.

“Well, I sort of figured you would come here for your friends, provided that you lived,” The left head of the Bullfather shouted. “Quite a ruckus you made with the Lotus bitches. Thanks a bunch, that made it a lot easier to moooove in on some of their territory.” I growled.

“You’re quite welcome, but you have my friends. Let them go,” I said angrily. The Bullfather’s heads chuckled. It was still creepy.

“Or what? You’ll let the slaves do all the work for you? Please. You’re surrounded. Surrender now, and then we can discuss where you sent my bomb,” The right head replied. A harsh giggle erupted from my right. I looked over and saw her again. *Fuck*, I thought. Spark stood there, giggling profusely at whatever she found to be funny in this situation.

“Yeah, surrender. It’s not like you’re gonna save them anyways,” She said, grinning widely as her

giggling subsided. I tried to ignore her, as saying anything would make me look severely crazy in front of... well everypony and brahmin. Fortunately, I didn't have much time to reply before Patch did.

"Fuck off," She said, glaring at the Bullfather. She lifted Para Bellum, standing upright like a zebra.

"You're going to release my Steeljack. If you don't - aww, buck, who am I kidding, you're not going to let him go. I'm gonna shoot you now. Kay?"

"Who the fuck are ---" The right head started to say before Patch unleashed hell. Several loud eruptions filled the air as she fired, the bullets traveling through the air and hitting the right head of the Bullfather dead center. Blood and bone exploded from the right head, and chaos erupted once more.

The Bullfather's left head cried out in pain as he struggled to move out of the way. I jumped forward, growling as I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. and queued up several shots, targeted all at the guards near Steeljack and Danish. Time fell free and Stargazer fired, the bullets flying through the air and slamming home into their targets with extreme prejudice.

"Patch!" I shouted, giving the green mare the opening she needed. She ran forward, hopping onto my back and pushing off. She landed in the middle of several brahmin that were wielding those nasty spiked clubs they favored. Grinning, she spun around, bringing Para Bellum to bear and firing. Her bullets struck true and I smiled. *She really did make it well*, I thought. Another giggle at my side made me groan as I turned to face the spirit of Magic. Off in the distance I could see Violet, holding her own with Thunder Flash as silver fire filled the air. I quickly scanned the chaotic scene of slave against master, looking for Lucky. She was nowhere to be found.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone!" I shouted amidst the chaos at Spark.

"Not until you give me control sweetie," She replied, grinning.

"Not going to happen! What'd you do with Lucky?" I yelled, hoping that I wouldn't draw any attention from Violet or Patch.

"What, little miss goodie two shoes?" Spark said. "She took a walk. You know, it's funny. I don't seem to be able to affect you as much while she's around you." I snarled as pain shot through my body. A brahmin with a spiked club had used the opportunity presented by my talking with Spark to hit me in the ass with it. I turned and lifted Stargazer, obliterating its head in mere seconds. Beyond the haze of pain and gore, I could see Patch. The green mare was busy untying her love's bonds. Steeljack's eyes opened in a flash, seeing his mare as he smiled. She appeared to chatter animatedly as the two set about freeing Danish as well. The cream colored unicorn scanned the room and saw me. He nodded his head and smiled. Another set of sharp giggles returned me to my crazy talk.

"Looks like your friends are okay. Too bad really. I was hoping they would have died," She said, scowling. "Oh well, not like you did too much to help them."

"Shut up," I said, trying to ignore the spirit as I focused on the fight at hand which had begun to spill over into the other tunnels. The Bullfather was nowhere to be seen, most likely extricated by his cronies. Patch and Steeljack were working together in tandem, wreaking havoc on the slavers. Violet came up beside me with Filthy and grinned.

"The Cowpone slavers seem to be getting pushed back," She said. "We're still stuck down here with only that single elevator to go up and down, and it's certainly not large enough to take all the slaves out of here."

"Don't you worry about my folk ma'am," Filthy replied. "We can handle things from here. You take your friends and get the buck out of here, if you'll be excusin' my fancy. Filiet's just north of here. You can hole out there." I sighed and looked at Violet, who merely nodded.

"You sure you'll be alright?" I asked the earth pony.

"Sure as sugar," He replied. "We'll be fine."

"Good. Violet, let's grab Patch and the others and blow this pop stand," I said. My marefriend grinned as we galloped forward into the surging chaos of the fight ahead. Patch and Steeljack were just ahead, standing next to Danish, who smiled broadly as we met up with them.

"Sweetheart!" He shouted. "Glad to see you finally decided to come save us. I was startin' to get a little itchy here, you know what I mean?"

"Hello to you too Danish," I said flatly. The cream colored unicorn chuckled.

"You guys seriously brought this guy along?" Violet asked. I shrugged and nodded.

"Don't ask," I said, motioning towards the end of the tunnel. A break had appeared as the slaves pushed back on their masters, providing us a clear path to the elevator. We surged forward, pushing towards our destination. The elevator came into sight moments later as we rounded the next corner.

The device was beginning to be raised. I focused my magic and held the platform in place with my telekinesis. Quickly I set up another spell, teleporting the group of us onto the small platform. I looked over at Steeljack, realizing he was without his power armor.

"What happened to your armor?" I asked as I pumped more magic out of my horn, speeding the elevator up towards the surface. The grey buck groaned.

"They keep any armor and weapons taken from the slaves up top, in a large armory tent," He said. I nodded.

"That'll be our first stop then," I said as the elevator picked up speed. I grinned as I pushed on the platform harder. The Cowpones waiting for us up top were in for a very nasty surprise.

"Get ready!" I shouted as I focused my magic once more, creating the Shining Armor shield at least for a good moment before the platform struck the top of the shaft. Then... we were airborne. The platform hit the top of its ascent, lurching to a stop and launching us into the air. A cold breeze whipped along my face as I relished the experience, using my telekinesis to push us to the ground across the quarry, much to the surprised faces of the slaver guards. It took me a moment to realize that the chaos below had extended its way above as well. Slaves attacked brahmin with crudely made weapons, taking down the beasts in short order. At the head of the assault was a massive earth pony wearing what appeared to be power armor... made of trash cans. Standing next to the buck were none other than Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky, who cheered heartily at the sight of me and my friends.

We touched down in front of the tents, landing next to a group of Cowpone slavers. The two earth ponies in the group wheeled about and aimed their long rifles at us. Patch leaped to the side and brought up Para Bellum, firing four shots that took out the offending ponies. All around us, fighting ensued as we made our way towards the armory tent. Despite its name, it wasn't very well guarded or very well built. Sitting just inside of the leathery tent was Steeljack's armor and rifle. He cried out victoriously as he ran to them and began to pull on his power armor.

"Ready to go," The grey stallion said as he fitted his rifle onto his saddle, grinning. We started to make our way out of the tent, stopped only by the sight of a very familiar brahmin. The Bullfather stood at the far end of the clearing, brandishing a massive cannon-like gun on his battle saddle. Gone was his suit and fedora hats. What was amazing was that he was even able to still stand. The brahmin's right head sagged downwards, clearly immobilized if not completely dead. The left head growled with fury as it saw us.

"You fucks! I'm gonna kill all of you! Say hello to my little friend!" The head shouted as he bit down

on the firing bit. A loud ***boom*** echoed from the giant gun on his back, firing a massive ball of iron right at us. A giggle to my right made me remember that Spark was still hanging about.

“Haha! Boomcow. Get it?” She said, laughing. I snorted and returned my attention to the problem at hand. The giant ball of iron sped down at us at extremely high speeds. I focused my magic... and nothing happened. Spark giggled next to me.

“Ah ah ah,” She said. “No magic.” *What?!* I thought. *She can do that?!* I growled in the few seconds that I had time to.

“Listen here –“ I barely had enough time to say before the ball of iron struck the ground before us, exploding on impact and knocking me to the ground. I groaned in agony with the pain. I struggled and pushed myself up, noting that the explosion had knocked back my friends as well. Thankfully nopony else seemed to be in horrible condition. I stood up and assessed the situation. Violet, Steeljack, and Patch were pushing themselves up as well. Danish had been knocked back into the armory tent. I turned and glared at Spark, who giggled profusely at our situation.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?!” I yelled at the spirit of Magic, who continued to giggle. Across the clearing, I could see the Bullfather getting ready to fire another shot. He paused as I screamed at my crazy. Violet and the others paused too, watching me as I let loose. I was past caring now. The bitch had prevented me from using my magic and had also almost caused my friends physical harm, and that was the last straw. Something in the back of my mind snapped as I growled at Spark.

“You know what?! I don't care anymore! Get out of my head, you psycho bitch!” I shouted. Spark glowered at me as I charged my horn up for a blast of energy. Spark giggled more. “What's so fucking funny?!”

“You. You're so hellbent on getting me out that you haven't realized yet that I almost control you entirely. Don't worry though, I'll still treat your little Violet with the utmost care and respect,” She said, grinning.

“You stay away from her!” I shouted. I could barely hear anything else that was going on. In the background, Violet and my other friends were yelling out my name, but I didn't care. Everything else faded away as it was just Spark and me standing there. I glared at her and let loose my spell, sending a blast of fire right at her. She grinned and disappeared right before it would have hit her.

Reality snapped back and I heard a shout of pain. The spell had hit something alright, but it hadn't been the Element of Magic. The spell had slammed into the Bullfather, sending the brahmin to the ground in a bout of pain. He cried out as the magic wracked his body. I paused for a moment and blinked. *Did I...? Did I really do that?* I thought as the magic expelled from the brahmin's body, leaving him a lifeless husk. I felt a little invigorated by the spell, as if somehow... the Bullfather's remaining life energy had been transferred to me. A voice from behind me broke my concentration.

“Star...” Violet said, fear bubbling up into her speech. I turned back, seeing it in her eyes as well.

“What... what happened...?” I turned back, not able to face my marefriend. Surely by now, they all thought I was crazy. But that's because I was... right? I was bona fide psycho. And I'd just crossed the line. What was happening to me?

“No... Violet stay back!” I shouted. “Please... don't come near me. It's too dangerous!” Violet took a step forward.

“Star... it's okay, we just want to help you. Please... let me help,” She said. I could see it. The fear there, hidden behind her concerned face. She was afraid of me. It had finally happened. And it was all Spark's fault. I cursed the spirit of Magic as I struggled to move back away from Violet. I could hear her giggling as I tripped over the body of the Bullfather, falling over and hitting the ground hard.

Where is Lucky? I thought as I tried to get back up. *She was supposed... supposed to be here...*

“Star... please stop. We're your friends,” I heard Patch say. I could tell it in her voice too. She hated me for not saving her coltfriend when I could have, and she knew just how crazy I was. She was afraid too. They all were. The truth of the matter was, I had no friends. They all hated me. *Why do they hate me?!* I thought as I tried to fly away from them. My wings wouldn't cooperate however, nothing would. I tried magic, and failed once more. Was Spark killing it again like she had before? I couldn't really tell.

It was then that I saw her. Lucky. She was flying above me, circling inwards as she landed next to me. *Why now?* I thought as I regarded the ghostly mare. *Why is she here now? She's too late. It's over for me. Spark has won.*

“Star. Please, for your friend's sake and your own. Stop now. You're scared, I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner, but you have to trust me,” She said calmly. When did this irritably cute mare get so wise? I tried to step away from her.

“L-L-Lucky?” I stammered. “Stay away. Spark is still here. I can feel her. She's taking over. She's...” Lucky sighed and put her hoof on my shoulder. I realized immediately that I could feel it. The mare smiled.

“It's going to be alright. Just close your eyes and everything will be just fine. You'll see,” She said.

“But...” I started to say before I was shushed by the green unicorn/pegasus.

“Just sleep,” She said. My eyes felt heavy and they began to close on me. I didn't want to go. I struggled to stay awake, but my body was winning that fight. Blackness overtook me and I saw nothing more.

My nose woke up before the rest of me did, to a most unfortunate stench. The smell of garbage filled my nostrils as my eyes fluttered open. The room I was in was dark and dirty and looked like a metal storage container. I groaned. *Where am I?* I thought. *Not again...* My eyes widened, remembering what had happened. I felt around in the back of my mind for a moment. Spark was either not listening to me, or didn't seem to care enough to stop in yet. I groaned, wondering how long had I been out of commission this time. The sense of lost time was beginning to feel as familiar to me as going to sleep. Had I been out a week? A month? Three years? My mind raced with the possibilities as I struggled to remember anything between what happened with Spark and now. A creak of a door alerted me to a presence entering the storage container. Violet stood inside the container's door, smiling weakly at me.

“Hey,” She said quietly as she trotted up to the side of the dirty mattress I was lying on. I curled myself up and looked away from my marefriend. I was afraid.. afraid of what she was going to say. I felt her hoof brush over my coat and over the base of my wings. It was soft and caring. I shuddered. “Shh... it's okay. How are you feeling?” I looked at her, seeing the love held there within her eyes.

“Scared... I'm... Violet please go away. It's not safe around me,” I choked out. Violet smiled softly.

“No. It's okay, you're safe now,” She said. “We're away from the slave camp now.”

“It doesn't matter. *She's* still here,” I replied, shaking with fear.

“She?” Violet said. “Who is she?”

“Magic. She's Magic,” I stammered. “She's stuck in my head Violet... and it's getting worse. She's getting worse. I don't know what to do...” Violet sighed.

"I know. Patch told me about it. She said you've been seeing her... and Lucky," She said. "It sounds like her death hit you a lot harder than even you thought." Memories replayed in my head. Gushes of blood and gore from Lucky's neck showered my thoughts.

"I... I'm scared of her," I said finally. "She stopped me from using my magic. She almost got us killed. I think she's responsible for what I did to the Bullfather." Violet nodded and went silent for a moment, appearing to be lost in thought. "Please don't hate me... I'm not crazy, please..." My green love smiled again, weakly but I could see it in her eyes. She didn't hate me. There was only concern and love there deep within those dark green orbs.

"It's alright. We'll figure this out. This Spark better watch out. We're gonna get her out of your head," She said confidently.

"But... what if we can't? What if she takes over completely?" I said, fear filling my voice.

"Then she's gonna have to go through me before I let her at you," Violet replied firmly. I sighed and let her come closer as she nuzzled my neck.

"I really missed you," I breathed. "I... I just feel like I don't even know what's real anymore Violet. It's like my mind is just cracking."

"It's alright. We'll get through this," She said softly. "I missed you too sweetheart."

"How long?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"A day at most. You hit your head pretty hard in addition to your other injuries. It's going to take a few days but you'll be okay," Violet said, nuzzling me. A knock on the metallic door interrupted our private time. I looked up, seeing a large white earth pony stallion wearing trash can armor stepping into the makeshift doorway. Patch and Steeljack trailed in behind him. They smiled at me. I realized for the first moment that everypony else but the native looked a little pale. I sniffed the air again and finally understood why. The air smelled like pure, unadulterated, rank garbage. Rotting food and the smell of what could have been feces filled my nostrils. I must have been subconsciously blocking it before. I nearly gagged.

"What is that?" I coughed as I looked up the big earth pony in front of me.

"That's the scent of Fillet my dear," The buck replied. I blinked for a moment. "I'm glad you're up and about, let me welcome you to our fair town. Name's Trash Can." I looked the buck up and down at his trash can apparel. Even his cutie mark which was barely visible through his armor was a trash can. At least it fit.

"Really. I couldn't tell," I said flatly. The buck laughed heartily.

"Well, I'm glad you're alright. You are one crazy filly you know that? Taking on the Cowpones in one of their larger slave operations," Trash Can replied. I shuddered at the word 'crazy.' It must have been pretty visible since Violet held onto me and ran her hoof through my hair after he said it.

"How did you know to come help us?" I asked weakly. Trash smiled and whistled at the door. A familiar pair of unicorns entered. Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky smiled at me and bowed.

"Your two friends here came running into town and warned us about what was happening. We did what we could to send out a contingent of the Tin Rangers out to assist," The white stallion replied. I sighed.

"Thank you. I... What happened with the slaves?" I said. Trash Can chuckled.

"They're all safe. Filthy told me how you came down there and took on the Bullfather himself," He said. The Bullfather. Did he survive what I had done to him? I pondered what the spell was that I had

cast on the brahmin, trying to remember the specifics about it.

“Did... did anypony see what happened to the Bullfather?” I quickly asked. Trash Can shook his head.

“Nope. Never did find the bastard. However, suffice to say they won't be kidnappin' our citizens no more,” He said. I nodded.

“Well... still. Thank you for helping us. We are truly in your debt,” I said as calmly as I could. Trash Can laughed some more.

“Shucks. It wasn't no big deal little filly. That's what the Tin Rangers are for. We patrol these parts around our town,” The white stallion said. “In fact, I'm their acting leader.”

“Acting leader? And if you patrol the areas why hadn't you dealt with the slavers already?” I asked. My mind was still swimming with the memories of what had happened. Trash chuckled again, albeit a bit more nervously.

“Well, we umm... alright look. We all take turns being the leader of the group, and we just make do with what we have out here. We don't have fancy armor, or even fancy training... and buck we sure as sugar don't speak fancy, so we try our best. Those Cowpones unfortunately were much better organized than we are. Luckily you put them into such a tizzy we was able to make a difference,” He said. I blinked. *You mean we were saved by a bunch of... incompetent untrained ponies?* I thought. My mind nearly exploded at the thought. I groaned for a moment and motioned to Violet.

“I... I need to stand. Need some fresh air,” I said, pushing off the bed and heading towards the door, barely listening to Violet's protests. I pushed open the metal container door and stepped out into... a large pile of trash.

“Oh. That's what it is,” I said aloud, mostly to myself than to anypony else. I blinked for a moment as I took in what I was looking at. It was a town, if one could call it that. Giant metal storage containers made up the majority of the buildings, but you could also see large skywagons and carts strewn about the area as well. This was par for the course for most Wasteland settlements. What was surprising was the ground consistency and general aroma of the place. It was all garbage. I realized then that Filthy Rich had made some comment about a landfill, but I didn't figure he meant that the town of Filiet was actually situated on top of one. Suddenly the Minotaur's jokes about the place made a little sense and I began to chuckle a bit at the irony of it.

“Heh. Trash Mountain. I get it now,” I said aloud once more. Crunching noises behind me revealed that Violet had stepped out of the musty container. She smiled.

“I was going to warn you. It's a tribal town apparently. We're still lucky we found some place friendly,” She said, stepping up besides me. “Seems like everywhere we've been in this shithole of a city has tried to kill us, so far.”

“I know where to go next,” I said calmly. “There's a Ministry of Image hub downtown. I don't know exactly where, but I have it on good authority that it may hold some answers for me. Possibly for both me and Lucky.” Violet nodded.

“What about Pride?” She asked. “Any sign of her? She's fucked with your dreams before. Are we certain this doesn't have anything to do with her?” I shook my head.

“No... this is different. This is already there. I can feel Spark inside me Violet. She's growing stronger by the day, and I don't know what I'm going to do if she gets loose,” I said. “I'm scared of her.” She smiled and leaned up against me.

“What we're going to do, is go to this Ministry hub and find your answers,” She said. A creak behind us indicated that the door was opened and the others had filed out to join us.

"Goddess," Dusk Blue said as he strode past me and turned. He bowed before me.

"You really should stop calling me that," I said. "What is your goal now? Staying with me still?" The unicorn shook his head.

"These... past days being by your side have been eye opening for myself and my young comrade," He said, indicating Sunshine Sky as she stepped up to join him. "I am truly sorry for the pain we have inflicted upon you, oh Goddess of Twilight. Your actions have shown us though that we can be better. We can do better than what we have before. I think you were right in telling the Elders to return to Tenpony. We can do so much more for the Wasteland. We can carry your story and show the world that there still is good out there." I sighed as I took all of this in. I was no hero. I wasn't even good. I caused pain and heartache and suffering. It was all a bit much to be regaled in such a way. For once, I was speechless and found myself unable to really formulate a response. I simply nodded. Dusk smiled.

"So. That's what we aim to do. Sunshine and I shall return to the Twilight Society and convince the Elders that our work here is done. I can see for myself there is no need to continue our interference in your affairs," He said, turning to move away.

"Wait," I said, halting the unicorn in his tracks.

"I meant what I said before. I don't hate you. I... I just wish I understood all of this better," I said hesitantly. "I'm not your Goddess. But... if there was anypony who was a Goddess... I know she'd want ponies like you backing her up." The blue stallion smiled, turned and bowed once more. Sunshine Sky bowed as well.

"It was an honor Radiant Star," She said as she turned to join her friend. The two began the precarious trek down the side of the trash pile, heading towards what I guessed was the landfill gate. I couldn't really tell because of the large amount of trash overflowing onto it. I waved after the two as they became smaller and smaller. I sighed and turned to Violet.

"Speaking of friends, whatever happened to Danish?" I asked, remembering the cream colored unicorn. Violet groaned.

"That goofy little unicorn ran back to his bakery buddies as soon as he could," Trash Can interjected. I grinned. *Of course he would. Ever the selfish thinker that one,* I thought.

"Looks like it's just us again then," I said, smiling at my three friends. Steeljack took a moment and stepped forward.

"I... wanted to thank you for coming after me Star. Patch and I... we both thank you," He said. I smiled and extended a forehoof over the grey buck. It felt too good to be true.

"***Well that's because it is,***" A very familiar voice echoed in the back of my mind, causing a sharp pain. I stumbled back from Steeljack a bit.

"Star? What's wrong?" Violet asked. I shook my head.

"I'm fine. Headache. Just a little worn out and overexerted is all," I said, waving her away. *You stay out of this,* I said to the spirit of Magic.

"***Suit yourself sweetheart. But be forewarned, I am coming for you,***" She said before going silent once more. The pain subsided and I sighed.

"I... I just think I need to lay down and rest for now. Get back on my feet," I said, moving back into the storage container room. My friends had nodded and advised that they would give me however much time I needed. I plopped down onto the dirty mattress and brought my saddlebags over to me. I began

to poke through them, pulling out what pieces I could of the puzzle. I regarded the diary once more, and sighed. While it was nice to know that Twilight was once happy and hunky dory, it didn't really answer anything for me. I pulled out the tiara next. The old broken thing confused me greatly. Why was it in that library if it was so important? I poked at it with a hoof, even with telekinesis, just to get it to do something. It mostly just sat there, an enigma taunting me. It was then that I remembered my conversation with Honesty. *Where did I put that memory orb?* I thought as I dumped the contents of my bags out. There, in the center of everything else was the orb I sought. It's swirling orange contents called out to me. I sighed. *I guess there's no rest for the wicked huh*, I thought as I reached out and grabbed the orb with my magic. The world fell away into nothingness as I fell into the past once more.

OoooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The lean powerful body of the Ministry Mare of Technology greeted my senses as I fell into the mind of Applejack. A cold breeze whipped across my host's face as she walked down the street. On each side of the mare, two Steel Rangers marched in perfect time in their famous power armor. In the distance loomed the familiar building of the Ministry of Wartime Technology Chicacolt Hub. It was getting dark out, and the building was still a hive of activity. The war never stopped, it seemed. My host stepped into the lobby of the building, flanked by her armored escort. Ponies milled about the lobby to and fro, but each of them took notice of the Ministry Mare and her armored escort. My host stepped forward and marched down the massive hallway towards the elevators at the end.

"Y'all just stay here now," My host said to the two Rangers. They looked at the mare.

"Are you sure Madam Applejack?" The one on the right said. His voice sounded old and grated behind his armor. My host nodded.

"Ah'll be just fine. Just stay here," The orange mare replied. The two Rangers nodded and took up point next to the elevator door. The door slid open and my host stepped inside. After a few button presses, the elevator began to move. A soft ***pop*** next to my host indicated another presence had joined me in the elevator.

"Evenin' Twi," My host spoke aloud to the pony behind her.

"Good evening Applejack," Twilight's voice said from behind my host. The purple unicorn stepped up beside my host. Her face was ragged and she looked like she hadn't slept in days. Her mane and tail were tangled all in knots and her eyes were bloodshot.

"Twi, you alright? You look like hell sugarcube," My host said with concern in her voice.

"I'm fine. Just... lot going on with my projects is all. The Princess is always keeping tabs on my Ministry," Twilight replied. "The I.M.P. Project has hit another complete dead end. I may have to bring on additional help at some point."

"Well, just take care of yourself sugar, ah don't want to see you run yourself ragged," My host said as the elevator continued its descent.

"I'll be fine once I get this taken care of," The lavender unicorn said.

"What's in tarnation this about anyways? You called me while ah was in the middle of a business meettin'," My host asked. "Not that ah minded, mind you, them businessponies are as venomous as snakes in the ground."

"My Ministry managed to get their hooves on something big. You're going to want to see it. I've had it transferred here for careful study," Twilight said. The elevator finally shifted to a stop. The two Ministry Mares stepped out into the corridor, the same one we had found the vault in. My host followed the purple mare down the corridor, not really paying much attention to anything but her friend

walking in front of her. I considered what must have been running through Applejack's head at that moment in time. Was Twilight truly okay? Why was all of this happening? Why now? I couldn't even begin to answer the questions. The walk was short lived as the two mares approached the vault. My host eyed the purple unicorn as she stepped up next to the terminal.

"When did this get here?" My host asked. "Ah don't remember buildin' anything like this."

"My Ministry built it for the sole purpose of containing the device which you are about to see," Twilight responded.

"In mah Ministry building? Don't you think that's oversteppin' the bounds just a little," My host replied.

"It's fine. Look, do you want to see this or not. Your Ministry is going to be responsible for studying it after all, with M.A.S. help of course," The lavender unicorn said, putting her eye up to the terminal.

The box flashed **ACCESS GRANTED** and the door opened. My host followed the other mare into the vault and gasped at the sight I knew they were going to be seeing. The steel acorn of the Pink Cloud megaspell sat in the center of the vault.

"Twi... please tell me that's... that's not what ah think it is... is it?" My host said, fear creeping into her voice. Twilight nodded.

"The Littlehorn Agent," She said. "Undoubtedly in megaspell form. Ministry of Arcane Science agents found it during a joint operation with the Shadowbolts. It took a million bits of royal money to get it here safely without detonating."

"Twi, that thing is dangerous. Why did you bring it here? If it goes off this entire city, hell possibly our entire country is done for!" My host shouted at the lavender mare, who only sighed in response.

"Applejack, please... this is important. If we can figure out how the zebras did this, we can change the whole course of the war. Plus there are other applications too," Twilight said confidently.

"That's not the only reason you did this is it sugarcube?" My host said, glaring at the other mare. "You wouldn't spend millions of bits just for this. What is it? Better yet, who is it?" Twilight sighed once more.

"I knew you wouldn't understand it," She said after a moment's pause. "Applejack, I had to try something. Rarity wouldn't let me have it, so I had to go to the source."

"Have what? What's Rarity got to do with this?" My host said. "This has got to do with your brother again don't it?! Dangit Twi, I thought you were past this! You're taking this too far!"

"I can't take it Applejack! We were so close to figuring it out! Then he just... he just died!" Twilight shouted back, tears streaming from her eyes. She put her forehoof to her mouth as she realized she had just said something that she hadn't meant to.

"Figuring what out Twi?" My host asked, glowering at the lavender mare. Twilight meeped in response, sounding nearly like Fluttershy for a moment. "Figuring what out?" My host repeated angrily.

"It's... It's a secret," Twilight said quietly. I almost couldn't hear her.

"Well you'd better start explainin' quick sugarcube. What was so dang important that you had to spend so much money on getting this thing here?" My host exclaimed. Twilight took a deep breath and finally spoke after a moment's pause.

"He... he was sick Applejack. Cursed even," She said calmly. "While on assignment, my brother's squad was attacked by a contingent of zebras testing a new form of the biological agent known as the

Littlehorn Agent. There was nothing he could do to stop it. It debilitated him.”

“Ah... Ah didn't know,” My host said, her anger toning down as her voice switched to a softer and more caring one. Twilight continued to speak.

“It happened a few months before he... before he... I thought I had it all figured out. We were working on a cure,” She said. “It was supposed to work. But then that day happened. I don't know why he did it. I keep running through it all in my head and every time I can only come to one conclusion... and it hurts like hell to think about it. My brother wanted to die.”

“Why? Why would he do that to you?” My host asked. Twilight shook her head.

“He was always in so much pain. The concentration of the biological weapon wasn't enough to kill him, but it dampened his magic significantly. The doctors didn't know what was wrong, and they couldn't figure out either why he was still alive,” The lavender mare said. “I told him I would help him no matter what. That I would fix it. And I'm still going to. I'm going to do it Applejack. I'm going to bring him back.”

“Is that why you went to see Rarity?” My host said. Twilight nodded.

“Rarity has a book on zebra necromancy. But she won't admit that she actually has it. I tried to get her to give it to me, even tried to capitalize on her little crush on me, but she won't budge,” She said. “But it doesn't matter now. I have this. It's everything I will ever need. If I can decipher the necromantic spells woven into the Littlehorn Agent, I believe I can do it. I can bring Shining Armor back to life.” My host's eyes widened.

“Twi, please tell me you're joking,” The orange mare said. The lavender unicorn shook her head. “Are you crazy? You can't just go on bringin' ponies back from the dead!” My host continued.

“Who are you to tell me what I can't do? Huh?” Twilight angrily replied. “You spend all your time with your business meetings and what are you really accomplishing?! Nothing! I'm working on something that will change the course of the war! Nopony will ever have to die again. We'll be able to bring them all back while we send the damned zebras to Tartarus!”

“Twi, there's a better way to do this. Please, just listen to me,” My host said. Twilight snorted and pushed past the orange mare.

“I thought you of all my friends would understand Applejack. I guess not,” The purple mare said as she stomped out of the vault. My host looked on as the unicorn left and sighed.

“Ah do sugarcube, ah do,” She said as the memory faded to blackness.

OoooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke, groggily at first as I recognized the familiar smell of Fillet once more. The rotting stench of garbage assaulted my senses as I let my eyes focus on the storage container room. I groaned and pushed myself off the dirty mattress and strode to the metal door, pushing it open. It was dark out, and I could see fires lit around the town. In a sense, this made the refuse smell even worse. Nothing totally worse than rotting trash. I started down the hill of garbage, pulling up my PipBuck and locating Violet's tag. They were over in a large skywagon on the next trash pile over apparently. I poked my head in, seeing my friends speaking with Trash Can. Violet turned and smiled when she saw me. She trotted up to me as I stepped into the old skywagon cabin.

“Hey... feeling any better?” She asked. I nodded. At the very least, my headache had gone away. I still couldn't shake the feeling that Spark was still there, watching every movement and waiting to put me in another situation like she did against the Bullfather.

"I'm... I'm alright. What's going on?" I said, trying to process the memory orb that I had awoken from. Twilight had been working on some sort of cure for Shining Armor? None of it made any sense. What happened to Shining Armor then? Did he really step in front of that rocket intending to die? I needed to know as soon as I could look at the memory orb that belonged to him. Still, the Ministry of Image loomed ahead in my future. What was there that was so important? If the Pink Cloud bomb was what Twilight was studying... where did she keep that research?

"Trash was giving us a better map of the inner city areas. Apparently the old train system still kind of works. There's a station nearby that will take us right downtown," Violet said.

"Well what are we waiting for then? Let's get going!" I said excitedly.

"Are you sure? Your injuries were quite serious," My marefriend said with a concerned look on her face. I grinned. *No. Not better... driven. I'm going to figure this out and beat Spark. I have to, I thought.*

"I'll be fine. Nothing I can't handle," I said as I turned to the white stallion in the room.

"Thank you again for your hospitality, but we really must be going now," I said, bowing low to the earth pony.

"Thank ya kindly as well ma'am, for saving our townsfolk," Trash Can responded. My friends and I exited the skywagon and began the precarious trek down the side of the landfill off into the direction of the train station. As we walked, I clicked on the radio, hoping to catch any more news about goings on in the city. The familiar gruff voice of the Minotaur greeted us as we trotted along.

"EEEEEEEEEEHAAAWWW!!!! That's right kiddies! It's that time once again for the 'Morning Moo Madhouse'! I am your hostest with the mostest. The ONE. The ONLY. THE MINOTAUR!

Yes that's right kids, it is I the Minotaur, and I'm here to give you the down low on all the happenings in the Chicacolt area. Have I got some news for you! The Cowpones are on the run my friends, after a visit from the Ministry Mare at one of their west city slave camps! Word is, the Ministry Mare might have even taken out the Bullfather himself folks. Eyewitness reports also place the Tin Rangers at the scene. Hope you had fun up in Filiet with all that trash Ministry Mare!

In other related news, the Lotus Triad has placed a bounty on the Ministry Mare's head and are willing to pay 500,000 caps for her head.

That's all the news I have for the day for you kiddies out there. No other segments for tonight other than the sweet sweet music of Radiopone. Enjoy!"

A soft humming beat replaced the DJ's voice as a crooning lead vocals entered the mix. We trotted along, listening to the music and not really saying much else. There really wasn't much to say really.

Violet spent some time casting the healing spell again on my ear, but results were nonexistent. The thing still hurt, regardless of any magic applied to it. *Just what was on Lotus Petal's knife that did this?* I thought as I walked. The knife she had wielded hadn't looked like anything special, and yet even now I felt the slicing motion gnawing its way through the soft flesh. I gritted my teeth through the pain for a moment as Violet reapplied the bandage with her magic.

Hours later, the train station loomed in the distance. We had finally managed to somewhat rid ourselves of the scent of Filiet (although I was pretty sure I'd never be able to smell burning garbage the same way ever again). The Minotaur's broadcast had made me a little frightened. A catastrophically massive bounty of gargantuan proportions? On me? It seemed that the Lotus Triad wasn't one to forget those that transgressed against them.

The train station was ravaged by the ages of time, and skeletons lay strewn about everywhere around

the lobby. The train platform however was relatively clean. I supposed that if the trains were still running, the ponies from Fillet would have kept things in order. I looked about, trying to locate the train, as it appeared to be completely missing from the platform.

“Anypony see the train?” I asked. Violet shrugged. A loud horn blew in the distance as the chugging noise of a subway car echoed down the track. Within moments the train began to speed past the platform. I realized that it wasn't going to stop.

“Shit. We're gonna have to hitch a ride. Everypony hold on!” I shouted, charging up my horn and pouring my magic into a teleportation spell. Hitting a moving target was going to be difficult, since the change in vectors increased the amount of energy I would have to put out. The magic let loose and I felt myself tumbling onto the top of the train car, my friends right behind me. I groaned and pulled myself to my feet, shaking from minor magic exhaustion as I spotted the porthole that led down into the car. I looked back at my friends as the car sped along. Patch groaned as Steeljack helped her up, the buck using his weight to help her and Violet along to the porthole. I used telekinesis to open it and we slid down into the car proper.

The car was dirty and smelled of vomit and booze. Skeletons of dead ponies sat in the chairs lining the sides of the car. The cityscape ran by us outside the tinted windows. I blinked. It was a miracle that this thing even survived the megaspells, let alone had power. Somepony must have fixed it up. We moved some of the remains and used the chairs to sit, watching the city fly by. I sighed and nuzzled up next to Violet, who kissed my forehead in return. Within a few hours we'd be downtown and on our way to the Ministry of Image. There I could hopefully find some answers and hope to get rid of Spark for good.

I briefly wondered where Lucky had gone. I hadn't seen the mare since the encounter with the Bullfather. I hoped she was okay. I promised her that I would find a way to fix it... and I realized that my promise was no different than what Twilight had promised to Shining Armor. She had only ever wanted her brother back, and I only really wanted to save her because I felt responsible for getting her killed. Was it too much to ask?

A loud ***thunk*** brought me back to my senses and reality. The noise continued above us, and I realized quickly that it was hoofsteps. The noises had gotten loud enough that the others were alerted to them as well.

“Somepony is up on the train,” I said quietly, pointing upward. Suddenly, without warning the train's brakes began to squeal and cylinders hissed as the train slowed down until it bumped to a complete stop. The squealing intensified to earsplitting levels as the ancient brakes tried to keep the train from moving forward. A voice came over an aging loudspeaker warning us about clearance on the tracks and that we had temporarily stopped until the obstruction was removed. I stood, lifting Stargazer as I headed to the porthole. Violet trotted along after me as she brought up Thunder Flash. I poked my head outside of the train, noting that we were now surrounded by large buildings in the center of an elevated track high above the city. I pushed myself out of the porthole and onto the top of the train. Where did the mysterious hoofsteps come from? No pony was in sight as I trotted up the length of the train car, trying to see what lay ahead of the train that was preventing it from moving. Violet stood by the porthole, levitating the beam rifle above her as she acted as its guard.

I knew the moment I reached the front of the train car something was wrong. A giant piece of concrete block sat in the center of the elevated track, breaking the connection in the track. A shout behind me alerted me to the real danger. I spun around, seeing a dark form on standing on the train car upright. A green cloak surrounded the form, preventing me from seeing who it was. Violet had lifted Thunder Flash and fired as the form leaped over the silver fire expelled from the beam rifle. As it flew through the air, I could see a lithe figure beneath the green cloak. Black and white stripes floated along the

figure's coat, revealing its true nature. *A zebra?* I thought. The figure landed again on the train car and turned, pulling back the hood. A beautiful zebra mare with fiery green eyes stared at me. Her wild spiked hair made her look devilishly evil in the night sky. Her mouth moved and she began to speak in a language I couldn't understand. Another blast of fire came her way from Violet who shouted at me.

The zebra mare twirled about, dodging the blast with relative ease. I stared, mesmerized by the exotic beauty of the zebra.

"She attacked me Star!" My marefriend shouted, bringing me back to my senses. I lifted Stargazer and pointed it at the zebra.

"Who are you!" I shouted. The mare turned back and grinned widely.

"Surrender now, and lay down arms, or your friends will suffer great harm," She said as she pulled out her hooves from her cloak. "I am Envy, as you see, and your bounty belongs to me!" *Envy?! I thought. What?!* The mare pulled out several small devices and spoke quietly in a chanting voice. The devices glowed with unholy light as she tossed one at me and the other at Violet. Stargazer came up and fired, hitting the device in the air and causing it to blow up in a flash of blue light. A scream from behind the mare caught me off-guard. The other device had made it past Violet's blazing fire and struck her on the shoulder. I watched in horror as the device exploded in a flash of blue light, knocking my love off the train car and hurtling through the air towards the mean streets below.

"Violet!!!!"

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Wanted Mare: Your exploits have made you a wanted mare in Chicacolt. This opens up unique conversation options with ponies within the city and surrounding areas and also increases your Speech skill by +15%.

New Spell: Invisibility (Rank 3): You've finally regained your use of the invisibility spell you once knew. You can use it on yourself and up to three others, but be forewarned on using it in close quarters!

Spark Level: 80%. This is how much Spark controls of your body.

Reputation:

You are now villified with both the Cowpones and the Lotus Triad.

You are now friendly with the Tin Rangers.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Spell: Healing Magic (Rank 1): You've learned how to apply basic healing to another pony in need! You're not very good at this, but you're learning!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

New Weapon: Para Bellum

New Perk! Si Vis Pacem: Your enemies had better prepare for you, because you are a force to be reckoned with! You gain +25% to Heavy Guns and +1 Agility.

Chapter 15: Date With Destiny

My magic, real magic, comes from within. It's a skill you're born with. Curses are artificial, fake magic. It's conjured with potions and incantations; all smoke and mirrors meant to scare. But curses have no real power; they're just an old pony tale.

Destiny. It's a strange concept. Is it something that we all have? Does everypony have a destiny? And what guides us there? Do we make our own destiny or are we guided by some inescapable fate? I shudder to think that somepony else is controlling my life. But as I draw closer and closer to my destiny, I can't help but think that it's true. Something is pushing me in a direction, and I'm not sure that I want to know where it is taking me.

I wonder once more about Twilight's destiny. Did she know where she was going during the war? Did she ever realize that her role in the conflict that destroyed the world was merely pushed along by the gears of war? I felt for the mare, the real mare, not the Ministry Mare. The real Twilight was a good and kind mare who only saw her friends. When did she lose sight of that? I can't rightly say. But in the end, she found her destiny in the vats of Maripony.

“Violet!!!” I shouted as my love streaked towards the ground. Blue gas streamed from her body as she plummeted towards the rubble-strewn ground. The green eyed zebra mare that had caused her untimely descent grinned wickedly at me from her spot at the far end of the train car.

The first thought that came to my mind was *Oh shit she's falling really fast!* The second thought that came to my mind was *You have wings stupid!* I flapped my wings hard and pushed away from the train car, taking wing after my marefriend. Within an instant, the hard beating of leather alerted me that I was being followed. I looked back for a brief moment, seeing that Envy had leaped from the train car after me, her cloak glowing with unnatural energy as it transformed into a pair of bat wings.

I turned back and pushed forward, intent on reaching Violet before the zebra mare got to me. I could hear my love scream as she fell, spurring me on in my attempt to save her. Somewhere above me, the telltale eruptions of Para Bellum rang out into the air and Envy shrieked as she flew upwards to escape Patch's fire. I thanked Luna for good fortune and locked my wings in, shooting downwards fast towards Violet. The green mare began flailing as I neared her.

“Hold on!” I shouted as I built up the magic in my horn. Opting for simple telekinesis I wrapped Violet in a tight mesh of force, pulling her upwards to meet me as I spread my wings. Coming out of the dive, I brought my love with me as I zoomed back towards the train car. Above, I could see Patch and Steeljack standing on the top of the car, aiming curiously at the buildings and sky above. Envy was nowhere to be seen. I beat my wings hard as I lifted Violet next to me, heading towards the train car. White and black flashed before my eyes as the zebra mare appeared in front of me, her leathery wings flapping hard against the still air. A hoof lashed out and struck me in the face, disrupting my magic and knocking me towards the streets below. A scream from beside me indicated that Violet was now falling again as well. A blur above indicated that the striped mare was pursuing us, her dark form strafing back and forth as she dodged Patch and Steeljack's fire. One of Steeljack's bullets nearly caught me in the side, the round grazing me as it streaked by. I shouted in pain, hoping that my friends above kept their friendly fire to a minimum. I used the opportunity presented by the zebra's distance to lock my wings in to get some speed. I sped towards the ground, trying to position myself below Violet, who was screaming like a scared schoolfilly.

"I got ya!" I cried out, spreading my wings at the last moment, catching my marefriend as she landed on my back. First things first, this hurt like a bitch as my love is not exactly a light pony. Not calling her fat, but she's definitely not light. Second of all, being landed on while trying to maintain your trajectory in the air really throws you off. I went spiraling as Violet struggled to hold onto me, slamming into the concrete street. I groaned as my rider went over my head, landing on the ground next to me. I definitely felt pain as I tried to push myself up. Shadows above us indicated the presence of Envy as the zebra mare rushed down at us. *Shit!* I thought as I rolled over, grabbing Violet and scrambling to my hooves. I lunged into a gallop as Envy struck ground right behind me, sending shards of concrete everywhere. I tossed a glance back over my shoulder, seeing Envy's toothy smile closing in on me. I scooped up a protesting Violet with my magic, unceremoniously depositing her on my back as I pushed off from the ground. I took to the air, feeling the hot breath of the zebra against my back. I beat my wings as hard as I could, forcing Violet and I into the sky. As I headed towards the train car, I dived low, giving Steeljack and Patch a clear shot. A loud ***crack*** erupted from above as Steeljack's shot streaked past us, forcing Envy to disappear once more. I banked hard over and landed on the car, lowering Violet down as softly as I could. She groaned as she laid on her side, looking up at me. I scanned the buildings around us, trying to locate the enigmatic zebra. She was nowhere to be found.

"Star...?" Violet said weakly. I smiled as I placed my hoof on her shoulder.

"You're alright now," I said, looking up at Patch who was scanning the skies for any sign of the zebra.

"Patch. You see if you can get the train running. I'll take care of the zebra," I said. I had a score to settle with that bitch for trying to kill my marefriend. Patch nodded and rushed along the train car, leaping from one to the next as she headed towards the front of the train. I lifted out Stargazer and called out to the dark city.

"Show yourself!" I yelled. "If you want me, come get me you zebra bitch!" A chuckle emanated all around me.

"You'll get your desire Ministry Mare. Here I shall appear before you fair," The voice echoed as the black form of the cloaked zebra landed on the top of the train car. Her cloak billowed out behind her as she rushed at me, wicked gauntlets with steel spikes extending from her forelegs. *Shit she's just as fast as the others!* I thought as I moved to dodge. Steeljack moved to pull Violet away as the zebra leaped forward, swinging at me with one of the gauntlets. The steel blade barely missed my neck as I pushed away. The zebra leveled a back leg at me, swinging into a kick that struck me hard in the side. I felt a rib break under the force of the blow, knocking me to the metal of the train car roof. Steeljack snarled and leveled his rifle, letting loose a ***crack*** at the zebra. Envy grinned and leaped into the air, throwing several small silver devices towards the grey buck. Steeljack tried to move back as the devices struck the metal surface, dotting the train car with tiny explosions that knocked the stallion back over Violet. My green love groaned and pushed herself up, levitating Thunder Flash in her magic. A flash of silver fire filled the air as she fired, completely missing the zebra as she disappeared from the air, reappearing behind me. A steel blade emerged from her cloak as she struck, slicing open my flank and spilling precious life blood.

"Owww!" I shouted as I struggled to regain my focus on the enigmatic zebra. I wheeled around and lashed out with a forehoof, missing the striped mare again as she leaped over my head and landed back onto the train car with a loud ***thunk***. I growled as I leveled another strike at the zebra.

"Stay still dammit!" I shouted as Envy leaped back away from my strike. She grinned evilly as she unsheathed two wicked blades from underneath her cloak.

"The Lotus Triad wishes for your head. It does not matter to me if you are alive or dead," She intoned

in her rhyming cadence.

“You're here for the bounty?” I snarled angrily. I could feel pain shooting through my legs as my life blood flowed down them. I felt as if most of my body had been broken in half, and I hadn't even gotten a scratch in on the zebra. The mare nodded in return.

“The amount of caps that you are worth is quite enough. Now come quietly and this will not be too rough,” She replied.

“Fuck you. I'm not going anywhere with you,” I shouted. I lunged forward, bringing Stargazer up and dropping into E.S.A.T.S. Time stood still as I studied the zebra. Her dark green eyes sparked with a deadly intelligence. I decided to queue up several shots to the mare's legs, hoping to disable her. Time resumed and Stargazer unleashed hell, vomiting a torrent of gunfire at the zebra. Envy grinned, leaping into the air over the bullets. She reached out with her hoof, striking me in the face. *What?!* I thought as pain rippled across my face and neck, knocking me to the cold steel below. *I could have sworn I had her!* I looked up in horror to see the zebra descending down towards me, her steel blades shining in the darkness. A flash of silver streaked over my head from Violet's rifle, slamming into the black cloak surrounding the deadly mare. The force of the blast was enough to send Envy skidding across the top of the train car, impossibly staying upright. She grinned, tossing a few more of her deadly silver mines my way.

“Nice try bitch,” I said, igniting my horn. I didn't take the time for subtlety, batting the mines away into the surrounding buildings. The devices struck and exploded upon impact, rocking the train track a little. *What's taking Patch so long?* I thought as I leaped forward, lashing out with my hoof at the zebra, finally managing to connect with a hit. The mare rubbed her face as she returned with a roundhouse that struck me squarely in the shoulder. I grimaced through the pain as I glared at the striped menace.

“A lucky strike you have achieved, double the pain is what you will receive,” She said, grinning.

“Go to hell,” I yelled in reply, pushing myself off of the zebra and leaping back next to Violet, who was readying Thunder Flash for another attack. Envy whirled her cloak about, launching several knives through the air. Violet jumped to the side, lighting up her own horn as she lifted her beam rifle. Silver fire flashed through the air, catching several of the knives and melting them into goop. One of them managed to get through, lodging itself into my shoulder. I felt ready to fall apart at any moment. I had been stabbed, blown up, and I was pretty sure Envy had broken several of my ribs earlier. I groaned. Pain ripped through every part of my body. A thought came to my mind as I lit up my horn, focusing all of my magic into an attack I'd only ever used before under Spark's control. I unleashed the magic in an explosion of psychic energy that erupted in front of me, rushing towards the zebra. Envy shrieked as the wave of energy hit her. She hit the train car with a resounding ***thud***, sliding off the back of it. I turned back to Violet, who smiled weakly at me. I realized the train was starting to move as the shuddering turned into a lurching motion.

“Thank you Patch!” I shouted. The train lurched forward, steam and smoke issuing from the sides of the car. I grinned, turning towards the zebra, who had never reappeared after falling off the train car. *Where did...?* I thought as I scanned the buildings around us. The sound of hooves echoing on cold metal behind me alerted me to somepony running along the train car. I turned, seeing Patch. The green earth pony leaped across onto the train car, landing next to Steeljack.

“Took me a bit, had to completely rewire the control panel. That stripey bitch must have disabled it,” She said as we stood on the now moving train. The car shuddered below us, groaning as it traveled along the track. There was no more sign of Envy. I felt uneasy about this. My injuries were starting to catch up with me as I plopped to my haunches. Violet stepped up next to me and began checking me

over. I sighed and grimaced as she pulled the knife out of my shoulder. She tossed the knife off the side of the train car, the metal clattering against the track as it soared to the streets below.

“Violet? You alright?” I asked weakly. She grinned.

“I’m fine, thanks to you. You saved my life,” She said softly. I chuckled, reaching over and kissing her lightly on the cheek. I pulled away, coughing a bit from the stabbing in the side of my barrel. I managed to stop myself and smiled.

“Always will too,” I replied. “So that was Envy. I really hope we don’t run into her again anytime soon. Something tells me that I’m wrong though.”

“Do you think she’s got any connection to Pride?” Violet asked. I shrugged.

“She didn’t mention her, but it wouldn’t surprise me. I’m starting to get the feeling all of them: Pride, Lust, Envy, Greed, Sloth? They’re all connected somehow. Sloth said something about being a regular ghoulish once,” I said as my love began to work over my injuries with her healing magic. She had learned only a little bit from Dusk Blue in her time with him, but a little went a long way when you were me. It would do nothing for the magical burnout I was suffering from the psychic explosion, though. I would have to recover my magic on my own. She nodded as I continued. “I know we need to go to the Ministry of Image... but there’s a place out east of the city called Colter’s Field. Supposedly, that’s where the Cult of Iron Will is.”

“The Cult of Iron Will?” Violet replied.

“Yeah... the Minotaur mentioned them. Apparently their leader is a minotaur named Wrath,” I said, catching the eye of my love. She narrowed her gaze at me.

“Another lead on Pride?” She asked. I nodded. Past her I could see Steeljack and Patch, standing guard on opposite ends of the train car. The skyscrapers of the great city loomed all about us as the train rumbled its way forward. The station could be seen in the far distance. Our little stop had cost us time, but in several minutes we would be near our destination. I sighed, hoping that I was wrong and we’d at least get to the Ministry of Image before Envy showed her striped face. As the train bent its way around a corner, a glint of silver on the side of a car caught my eye.. I pushed myself up and away from Violet, who followed my gaze down the side of the train car.

“Oh. OH FUCK!” I shouted. The sides of the train had been literally covered by what looked like hundreds of those Envy’s little mines. Before I could even blink, all of them began lighting up and beeping at the same time. The bitch had tricked us, lulled us into a sense of false security in order to just blow us up. The train station loomed ahead of us now, the train speeding faster as it prepared to make an explosive entrance. I called out to my friends, reaching deep inside to try and find something... anything that could get us out of here in a pinch. My fight with Envy had left me physically and mentally drained, and despite everything I was unable to come up with any sort of idea for getting us out of this. The beeping got louder and louder as we approached the train station, the cars sliding along the track at a furious pace. I grimaced as the platform came into view, the beeping from the mines overwhelming our senses.

“We’re going to have to jump!” I shouted, wrapping a hoof around Violet. My marefriend followed after me as we pushed off from the side of the train car. On the other side of the car I could see that Patch and Steeljack had done the same.

We simply weren’t fast enough. As soon as we left the car the beeping went into a steady tone. Explosions rocked the side of the train, tossing us forward into the station. The force of the explosion coupled with the shrapnel from the devices propelled us into the wall facing the platform with a sickening ***crack***. I groaned from the pain, my ears ringing and my vision blinded

temporarily. I could hear my friends groaning next to me as well. I imagine if we hadn't gotten off the train then we probably all would have gone up in a fiery blaze. At least we weren't dead. Through the ringing in my ears I could hear the crackling of the flames from the now stopped train cars as the fire spread from car to car, consuming it and moving to the tracks below. Accompanying the crackle of the flames was hoofsteps along the stone flooring.

Shit, I thought as I tried to push myself up. A hoof launched out, striking me in the face and pushing me back to the ground.

"If you had listened to me and laid down your arms, your friends would not have been harmed," The smooth voice belonging to Envy sounded from above me. "I would have taken just you, the caps you're worth would see me through." I blinked. Did she really just continue the whole rhyming game? I thought that was just playful banter during our initial fight. I hadn't realized that she actually talked like that normally!

"F-f-fuck you and your stupid rhyming," I managed to choke out. Another hoof came across, striking me across my face as I tried to lever myself to my hooves. The force of the blow lifted me from the ground, sending me back into the stone wall. I groaned, feeling another rib crack beneath the pressure. I was surprised I hadn't passed out yet. Through the bloody haze, I could see Violet and the others trying to push themselves up as well to come help me. Envy took note of this and began to step towards them. I growled and ignited my horn, grabbing the zebra mare's legs with telekinesis to hold her in place. A headache like no other shot intense pain through my forehead. I only had a few moments of holding her before my magic would dissipate.

"Get out of here!" I shouted at my friends. "Run! Hide!"

"Are you crazy?! She'll kill you!" Violet shouted. "I just got you back. I'm not losing you again!"

"Vi, I love you but if you don't run and hide now, she'll kill us all! Now **GO!!!**" I yelled back at my lover. The zebra was struggling against my hold, and I could feel the last flickers of my magic draining away. The green unicorn nodded, pushing up against my other two friends as they turned and ran deep into the station. Soon they were out of sight. A growl erupted from the zebra as my magic finally broke, freeing her from my grasp. She wheeled about, turning upright and spinning into another kick which connected solidly with my chest. I grunted as I was knocked back once more. Beeping came from all around me as I realized more of those silver mines were being tossed in my direction. I tried to reach out with my magic, but the burnout was just too much. Explosions tore through the air around me, blasting me back against the wall. I felt more bones crack, but still was conscious for some reason. *What the fuck is going on? I should be dead by now*, I thought as I tried to get up. Blood streamed down my left eye, which had conveniently swollen shut. I chuckled and coughed, more blood erupting from my mouth as I did.

"That... that all you got?" I said, grinning through the pain and hurt. The zebra mare stared incredulously at me.

"How is it that you still breathe?" The zebra said, breaking her rhyme for a moment. I guess even she hadn't expected my unnatural endurance. A familiar form of a black maned unicorn stepped from behind the mare, grinning evilly.

"When you're finished playing with this striped bitch, you can get to the Ministry of Image already," Spark said angrily. "Then I can stop wasting energy on the stupid healing spell that's keeping your mule ass upright."

"What...?" I said aloud at the realization. Spark had helped me? Why? I thought about it for a moment, groaning. *Of course*, I thought. *If I die, she doesn't get what she wants*. "I suppose I should

thank you, you fucking bitch.”

“Do not waste your breath, for I have come to bring about your death,” Envy replied in Spark's place, grinning evilly as she stepped forward on her hind legs, unsheathing her steel blades as she moved closer. She stopped within inches of me, running the flat part of the blade along my shoulder. “Try to escape my blade this time, with one slice you shall be mine.”

“And I keep telling you,” I spat, blood splattering on the zebra mare's muzzle as I did. “Go to hell you fucking bitch.” I pushed back and kicked out, planting my hooves on the mare's chest in as strong of a kick as I could muster. I connected, sending the zebra flying back into a stone column. She slumped to the ground and didn't move. I doubted I had killed her, and right then I didn't really care. I only cared about getting away. I started to shuffle in the direction that Violet and the others had gone. I only hoped I wasn't too far off from them. Blood streamed down my leg, fresh wounds having opened up during the fight.

“Please be alright,” I said as I moved along, slowly but surely towards my friends.

I slumped against the wall, startling the green unicorn and my other two friends.

“Star!” Violet shouted, rushing over to me. She looked like hell. Her mane was singed from where the fire had licked it, and she had bruises and cuts all over. Patch and Steeljack didn't look much better. Both of my earth pony friends were sitting next to each other, tending to the other's injuries. They both smiled as they saw me. Violet looked up and down my side, her horn glowing as she began to cast her healing spell on me. Metal pieces struck the floor as shrapnel expelled from my healing cuts. I pulled out a healing potion from my saddlebags and downed it, hoping to help along the process. I was breathing hard at this point. My horn still flared with pain, the feeling of magic burnout pulsing through my entire head.

“I... I need to sit down,” I said as I plopped down against the tunnel wall. It had taken me a good hour to find my friends, as slow as I was moving. They had managed to find a tunnel below the train station that was hidden among the rubble. It was a good hiding spot. I certainly hoped that it would be a good place to hide away from Envy. I was a hundred percent sure that the zebra was still alive. If my experiences with Pride and the others had taught me anything, it's that they were absurdly difficult to kill.

“You feeling okay?” Violet said. I nodded. I was lying of course. I felt like shit, but I wasn't about to tell Violet so. She was under enough stress as it was. I laid back against the wall of the tunnel, trying to process what had happened since we left Filiet. I let my mind wander, thinking about Envy, and Spark's sudden interest in my physical health. I considered that maybe Spark knew I couldn't handle Envy alone and did it to keep me alive so that she could have me all to herself. The scary thought was... she was right. Envy was too much for me. Our only option was to run. I wondered how long we would have to keep running, how long Envy would keep chasing us. Fuck... five hundred thousand caps? I was surprised no other mercenaries had come after me yet. I suddenly found myself wishing I had Lucky around to speak to. I hadn't seen the green mare since the incident with the Cowpones. I hoped that she was okay. I glanced over at my other friends. They were busy bandaging each other up, Violet's horn glowing gently as she channeled healing magic into Patch and Steeljack. I sighed, hearing a light giggle from my right. I looked over, seeing the familiar black maned unicorn.

“Heya beautiful,” Spark said, grinning wickedly at me. I glared at the unicorn and then back to my friends.

“Violet? I'm gonna check the outside of the tunnel, just to make sure we haven't been followed,” I

said. She nodded in return as I pushed myself up from the wall and pushed past the debris blocking the entrance to the tunnel. The lavender unicorn followed behind me, an evil grin plastered all over her face. As soon as I assumed we were out of earshot I looked around to ensure that there was no pony following me. I turned and growled at the unicorn.

“What do you want now?” I said. The purple mare chuckled evilly.

“You know what I want. I want you. Do I have to spell it out for you?” She replied. I glared at her with cold eyes.

“You keep saying that, but I don't know what that means,” I said. “Why me? Why am I so fucking important to you?!”

“I thought it was obvious 'Goddess',” Spark said. My eyes widened at the nickname. “Yes... you understand don't you? Twilight thought the spell was going to work. She left the Twilight Society explicit instructions to carry out her wishes. But she was wrong. It didn't bring her back, it brought me instead.”

“Why? Why did it bring you here? Why are you in my head?!” I shouted, glaring at the lavender unicorn. She grinned.

“All in due time my dear,” Spark replied, turning away from me and walking down into the tunnel entrance, disappearing. I narrowed my gaze, pondering the unicorn's words. The Twilight Society certainly couldn't have known what Twilight's spell had done. But was Spark lying to me? Did her spell really bring back Magic and not Twilight? What was it that Twilight was trying to accomplish? My mind swirled with thoughts as I tried to understand. I became so lost in my thoughts that I almost didn't hear the hoofsteps clattering along the concrete. *Fuck me*, I thought as I whirled around, catching a strike in the face from the zebra who had been walking behind me. *Of course*, I thought as I was launched back into the air against the wall. The zebra mare sneered at me as she stepped forward on her hind legs.

“Ministry Mare, Ministry Mare...” She began to say in a bit of a sing-song voice, ditching her customary rhyming for a few moments. “You tried to bury me. It didn't work.”

“I see that you stopped rhyming,” I said, chuckling a bit as I tried to put some distance between me and the zebra. She circled around like a bird of prey ready to come in for the kill.

“Well... It's something that I do for my prey. Scares the shit out of them they say,” She said, grinning.

“Any chance I could convince you to leave me alone?” I asked. The mare's green eyes flared.

“You're worth far too much money to leave alone,” She said. “Besides. If I went back to the Lotus Triad empty handed, I would probably be killed for not completing the job.”

“I doubt they could kill you. You're all the same, the whole lot of you. Pride, Sloth, Greed...” I replied.

“So... you've met our brothers and sisters,” She said, surprise coloring her rich voice.

“I take it you don't see them too often?” I said. We continued to circle around each other, neither of us coming in to begin the fight anew.

“I haven't seen my equals in some time no. I am quite disconnected from them,” Envy said.

“Really? Then you must not have heard then? I killed Greed, and if you keep pursuing me I'll kill you too,” I snarled. The mare's eyes widened.

“You killed Greed? Interesting,” The zebra said, unsheathing her steel blades. “How is it that such a pathetic mare as yourself killed my brother in sin?”

“My little secret. What I'd really like to know, is what do you know about Pride? I owe that bitch a world of pain, and I'm definitely not planning on dying until I give it to her,” I said.

“Pride is nearly as enigmatic as I am. If you've met her you must be very special,” The zebra said. “Why would I reveal any secrets about her to you?”

“Was worth a shot,” I spat back, continuing my circling motion around the other mare. Her hooves clicked across the ground and she grinned. In a flash, she was in my face, slashing with those wicked blades of hers. I tried to jump back, activating my alicorn shield as the mare's weapons came deadly close to shaving off my head. The shield blocked the strike, throwing the zebra off balance for a moment and giving me enough time to turn tail and hoof it. I began to gallop as best I could through the rubble guarding the tunnel entrance, pouring on the speed as Envy gave chase once more. I groaned, leaping into the tunnel and surprising my friends with a loud crash to the ground. I righted myself and began talking, panic loosening my tongue.

“Gotta go gotta go gotta go!” I shouted as the zebra launched herself into the tunnel after me, drawing shouts of surprise from my friends. We scrambled down the tunnel, the striped mare hot on our heels. The tunnel itself was filled with all sorts of debris, forcing us to dodge the rubble as we tried to escape. We dug in deeper as the tunnel began to curve downward, ending in a fork. There wasn't much time to think as we dove into the right tunnel, immediately regretting the decision. The tunnel veered downwards, turning what appeared to be a sewage drain. The stench of death assaulted my senses as we started sliding down the drain. I couldn't hear anything behind the rush of the water that had joined us. We slid for what felt like forever, the slick filthy water carrying us along until we finally hit a drainage cover that opened up, dumping out into another tunnel below. Raw sewage and black water streamed from above, covering us in its filth.

I pushed myself up and took a look around. The tunnel was dark and dank, filled with rubble and debris. At the far end, a large steel door in the shape of a gear loomed ahead. I could hear groaning above me and realized that the only chance we had to escape Envy was right in front of us. I turned to my friends, noticing that they were trying to get up themselves. I motioned to Violet, pointing at the gear-shaped door. She nodded, wincing in pain as she tried to get Patch and Steeljack up.

“We have to move. It's our only chance to get away from her,” I said as my friends and I galloped down the tunnel towards the Stable door. I could hear clattering from the drain, indicating that we had been followed down the sewer. We arrived at the door, Violet pulling her PipBuck up and connecting it to the terminal. She began tapping away at the buttons on it, shouting at the terminal.

“Open dammit!” She yelled, pounding at the buttons on the keyboard. The terminal flashed **ACCESS DENIED** over and over as she tried different passcodes. The drain cover down the hall finally gave way, dumping the zebra mare that was chasing after us into the tunnel. She pushed herself up, grinning.

“Trapped like rats in a cage, you four have incited my rage,” She said as she stood up on her hind legs, unsheathing her wicked blades. Violet continued to pound away at the terminal as the striped mare began to stalk down the tunnel. She didn't need to end this quickly, I realized. If we were unable to get the door open, it would be all over for us anyways.

“It won't open!” My marefriend shouted angrily. Patch and Steeljack readied themselves for Envy, picking up their weapons. Somehow I doubted that even in this enclosed space that they would be able to hit the zebra mare. Patch unleashed a loud eruption from Para Bellum, the shot zooming past Envy as she dodged to the side. She was getting closer and closer now. Violet cried out in victory as the terminal emitted a chime that indicated she had managed to get the door open.

The steel door began to shift to the side. I grinned as my friends stepped inside the Stable proper. I

stuck my tongue out at the zebra mare as I stepped behind the door, which began to close. Envy reached out just as the door slammed shut, cursing at me in what I assumed was her native language. The image of the mare was replaced with the cold steel of the door. I breathed a sigh of relief as I turned around to see this Stable we had ended up in. The barrels of several rifles met my gaze. I looked up to see the rifles were held by four unicorns in Stable jumpsuits. My friends stood in front of me, their hooves in the air.

Oh. Fuck us, I thought.

“Hold it right there!” A voice shouted. A dark red unicorn mare with a bright red mane stepped out from behind the four Stable Security ponies. She waved at the Security ponies, who in turn lowered their rifles briefly.

“Who are you?” She said coldly. I felt a chill from the red unicorn. *Great... just our luck. A Stable that's still inhabited...* I thought as I stared down the red mare, who I assumed was the Overmare. “The door hasn't opened since the Stable was sealed.”

“We... we're from topside. We didn't know there was anypony still here, but we uh... didn't have much of a choice,” I said meekly. “We were sort of being chased.”

“Chased?” The unicorn said. “Oh stars, you four look like you've been through hell. You said you were from topside?” I nodded. “And you mean us no harm?” I nodded again.

“We're just looking for some place to recover and rest for a little while. Your big door should keep out old stripey,” I said, pointing back at the door. “My name's Radiant Star, and these are my friends Violet Iris, Steeljack, and Patch.”

“My name is ahh... Ruby Crystal, and I'm the Overmare of Stable 175,” The ruby maned mare said. “I think we can help you Miss Star. Please, follow me. We have an excellent infirmary that can tend to your needs.”

“Thank you so much,” I said as my friends and I moved to follow the red unicorn. The Stable Security ponies followed behind us. I couldn't blame them really. After hundreds of years being down here by themselves to suddenly be faced with topsiders, I would be pretty distrustful too. I decided to try and break the ice a little.

“So... are we really the first topsiders you've ever met?” I asked the Overmare. The red mare nodded.

“The door has never opened before. All we really know about the outside is what the sensors tell us,” She said. “Is it true what they say? That the topside is a radioactive hellhole?” I chuckled a bit.

“Well. The city above isn't fantastic, but there's definitely settlements. It's not as bad,” I said. *Liar*, I thought. *The Wasteland is a shithole and you know it.* “Anyways... so what's your experiment here in Stable 175?” The other mare looked at me like I was insane. I could see a bit of fear in her eyes, almost like I had said something completely offensive. For a second, I almost thought I saw her eyes change from red to blue and then back. *What was that?* I thought, dismissing what I had seen as a trick of the light my mind was playing on me.

“Experiment?” She asked quietly. I nodded.

“See, a lot of the other Stables out there... when they were sealed up they were given instructions of things to do in their Stable. Each one was different. It's very rare that we find a Stable that is still sealed, let alone one that has ponies living in it,” I explained as we continued to walk.

“I see,” Ruby said. “So other Stables survived?”

“Some of them. One of them even gave the Wasteland a savior,” I said. “A few years ago a mare named Littlepip crawled out of Stable 2 down near Ponyville. Shook things up a lot. Even took care of the Grand Pegasus Enclave.”

“Grand Pegasus Enclave?” The mare asked curiously. I nodded again and grinned.

“Got a lot to learn about the topside I guess. So what was the point of your Stable?” I asked again.

“Oh. No point. Nothing at all. I guess we were just meant to survive here,” She replied, a nervous tone filling her voice. I cocked my head at her.

“Really? That's kind of odd,” I said, looking at Violet and shrugging. I guessed they maybe didn't know yet what their social experiment was. Not every Stable really knew what they were supposed to be doing, but this was the Overmare. She of all ponies, should have known what the experiment was. Something felt off about this whole situation, but the siren song of the infirmary drowned out my misgivings.

The Overmare led us down a new hallway to a door that was labeled **Infirmary**. The door slid open and we shuffled inside.

“We have everything needed here to fix you up,” Ruby said, motioning to the doctor pony, a lithe unicorn stallion, just inside the infirmary. “Make sure these four get the special treatment.” The doctor nodded, waving for us to lay down on the beds inside the clean room. I slumped my saddlebags off and lay down as the two nurses, a blue and pink earth pony, began to attend to me and my friends. The doctor moved to the cabinet in the room, pulling out several vials of what appeared to be Med-X. He smiled warmly as he levitated out the vials, giving each one of us an injection. The familiar relief of pain followed, sending me into oblivious bliss. I sighed, stretching myself out for the nurse. She began to wrap me up, the healing magic of the enchanted bandages taking immediate effect.

“Ohh... this feels pretty good,” I said as the doctor injected another dose of something into us. I sighed, feeling even better than I did with the Med-X. “What was that?” I asked.

“Oh? That was the special treatment. It's a specialized drug to aid in the healing process,” The doctor replied. “We manufacture it here. It's one of our specialties!” I grinned.

“Well it's working wonders for me,” I said. The doctor smiled, and began looking over my ear. “What happened here? It looks... scarred.”

“I wouldn't waste your time on it doc. It's pretty well going to stay that way unfortunately,” I replied. It was pretty much true. While the ear had stopped hurting, I no longer felt much from it at all. It just sort of... hung there like a lump on the side of my head. I wondered briefly if the thing would ever heal, but I doubted it. Dusk Blue was pretty convinced that the wound was magical in nature, and even with normal healing magic it wouldn't be fixed.

“That should be all, you can stay as long as you need to here. I'm sure the Overmare will wish to speak with you before too long,” He said, motioning to the two nurses. They withdrew from the room, leaving us in the cold infirmary. I noticed immediately that the guards stayed just outside the room through the window into the hallway. It seemed to me that we weren't exactly guests here, but prisoners. *No. They're just being cautious*, I thought, shaking my head and trying to clear myself of any negative thoughts.

I turned over and smiled at my friends. We had all begun to look a little better from the fight with Envy. Violet sat up and trotted off to one of the private rooms. I got up and followed closely behind, bidding Steeljack and Patch a good night as I did. I entered the dark infirmary room and lay down on the soft bed. This was at least one good thing about Stables. Their beds and pillows were always so

nice and comfy. Violet plopped down next to me, nuzzling me close. I sighed once more. I had missed this so much. I pecked her on the neck, drawing a slight moan from my green love.

“Oh that feels good,” She said, looking up at me with her bright green eyes. My eyes widened, drawing a stare from the pale green unicorn. “You alright sweetie?”

“Yeah...” I said, chuckling nervously, catching another glare from my love. “Alright, look. I'm just kind of... worried you know? The bounty and then Spark keeps showing up and I haven't seen Lucky and I just... I'm scared. Scared of what's going to happen next.” She sighed, and kissed me on the cheek. Her warm lips pressed against me in a beautiful gesture of love. She pulled away and smiled.

“It'll work out. I'm sure that Lucky will turn up. After all, you said it seemed like she was connected to you right?” She said. I nodded. “As far as the bounty is concerned... I think we should see if the Minotaur will help us there. If he can make the city think the bounty is off we might be able to throw everypony off of our trail. First things first though, we need to get to that Ministry hub and get Spark under control.” I sighed, hugging her closely. It was exactly what I had needed to hear... a plan. Something, anything that would mean that we had this situation wrapped up. It had been so long since I felt like I was in control of anything.

“But... the Minotaur? How are we even going to get there? I only teleported there by accident,” I said, remembering the encounter with the enigmatic DJ. Violet smiled.

“We'll figure that out. Right now we should take a break, and rest up. We can only hope that Envy is waiting us out behind the Stable door,” She said.

“Speaking of... do you get a funny feeling about this place at all?” I asked. She cocked her head at me.

“What do you mean?” She replied. I shrugged.

“I don't know. Something feels off about it. I mean, if they have any sort of sensors for the outside world, why stay in here? Most Stables opened years ago,” I said, feeling rather frustrated. “It just doesn't fit, is all.”

“You have a good point. They seem friendly enough, albeit a little nervous. I would be too if I was meeting topsiders for the first time,” Violet said.

“I know, but... I kid you not, I thought I saw the Overmare's eyes turn blue for a brief second when we were speaking earlier,” I responded. Violet sighed.

“I think the overexertion we've all been experiencing has been getting to us,” She said, nuzzling me close. I sighed.

“I suppose you're right,” I replied, turning over and pulling some items out of my saddlebags. The set of memory orbs from the Fort Knowledge library rolled out and I looked to my marefriend.

“Supposedly one of these has a memory that came from Shining Armor. I figure... we're in a safe position, I might as well see which one,” I said. Violet smiled.

“I think you're more than owed a chance to keep figuring out this puzzle,” She said. “Don't worry, we'll keep watch over you.” I smiled and kissed her again, turning my attention to the orbs in front of me. They were all unmarked, and there really wasn't any discernible feature that would tell me which one of them belonged to Twilight's brother. I was sort of surprised, I had figured Twilight would have kept and marked any sort of item that had belonged to Shining Armor. I decided I would have to wing it and just pick one of them. I glanced at the first of the orbs, and latched out with my magic. The world fell away into nothingness as I dove head first into the past.

OoooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

This was a unique feeling. I was in a unicorn, but it wasn't Shining Armor. The body I was in was tall and lanky and definitively male. I felt a little slow, but my host was moving with fierce determination. A dark hallway extended beyond my borrowed sight as the lanky unicorn made his way to the door at the end of the long room. The door opened quietly as the unicorn stepped inside to an even darker room. In the center of the room in the dim light I could see a familiar purple unicorn standing over a pedestal. I felt the magic flow through my host's horn, resulting in that funny feeling I associated with invisibility. My host stepped softly into the cylindrical room, coming closer and closer to the Ministry Mare. She appeared to be lost in thought, the item on the pedestal catching all of her attention.

"Interesting," She muttered to herself, her horn glowing as she turned several pages of what appeared to be a book sitting on the pedestal. I glanced down as my host circled around the Ministry Mare, watching her intently. The book was bound in black leather, mystical runes scratched into each page in what appeared to be dried blood. My eyes nearly popped out of my head as I realized what I was looking at. It was the same as the Book that the Destroyer had brought to Maripony, but yet different. How many of these things did the zebras make? And how is it that Twilight acquired it? I thought that she had never finished the necromantic component of the spell! The mare looked up for a brief moment, horn flashing. I felt the invisibility spell drop as my host stared at the purple mare.

"So. Thought you could spy on me did you?" She said. "Snails. You should know better. Your mistress would be disappointed."

"Mistress Rarity asked me to keep an eye on you, eh," My host said, his voice a low and long drawl that I nearly thought would never end. "With good reason I can see. You're sneaking around, eh!" Twilight's eyes shifted from left to right.

"Me? No. I was given clearance to be here," The Ministry Mare said.

"Really? Does Mistress Rarity know you're here then?" My host said. "That book is classified to the Ministry of Image only."

"I can see why. A book on zebra necromancy? I knew Rarity had something like this. I just didn't expect it to be here of all places," Twilight spat, stepping back towards the door. A shield appeared in a cylinder around the room, preventing the mare from leaving. She looked back at my host, whose horn was glowing.

"Mistress Rarity placed me in charge of the Chicacolt facility. This entire building is at my command, eh," My host drawled.

"Let me go. The Princess needs to know about this. Then I'll be given unrestricted access to study it all I want," Twilight threatened, her horn charging up into what I recognized as a teleportation spell. My host grinned slowly.

"I think you'll find eh that this building prevents teleportation in and out as well," The lanky unicorn replied. "Now then... Mistress Rarity made it clear I was supposed to watch you, but seeing as how you've infiltrated one of our secret hubs, I have to decide what to do with you, eh!"

"You could just let me go. I am a Ministry Mare. You would never get away with simply detaining me," The lavender unicorn said. My host nodded slowly.

"You're right. That wouldn't work. However, you have seen too much here, and that cannot be ignored," He said, flaring his horn more.

"What do you propose then Snails? You know you could never overpower me. I am the bearer of the Element of Magic after all," Twilight said.

"Tsk tsk Darling, you of all ponies should know better than to threaten," A voice came from the darkness behind my host. The demure form of Rarity appeared out of the shadows, stepping forward smoothly beside the lanky unicorn.

"Rarity," Twilight said nervously. "What are you doing here?" Rarity sighed and stepped towards her friend cautiously. Twilight backed away for a second before stopping and staring straight at the purple maned unicorn. Rarity extended a hoof and pulled Twilight close into a loving hug.

"I'm so sorry dear," She muttered under her breath. My host could hear her very clearly despite his distance from the two other unicorns. "I'm so sorry I had to keep something like this from you, but you must understand... this book must never get out. It must never end up in the wrong hooves." Twilight began to sob into Rarity's shoulder.

"I... I'm sorry Rarity!" She cried out, tears streaming from her eyes. "I... I just... I need it. I need to finish this!" Rarity sighed and looked over at my host, her eyes watery with tears as well. She nodded, and my host let down the shield around the room. He bowed to the white unicorn.

"Thank you Snails. That will be all. I have some business to attend to here," She said, motioning to the sobbing Twilight. My host nodded and began to walk for the door. As he opened it, I could hear Rarity behind him saying "Now my dear... let's see if we can't help you..."

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I awoke to pure darkness, my mind trying to process what I had just witnessed. Did that mean that the Chicacolt Ministry Hub held the second book? Was it even possible? And what did Rarity mean by trying to help Twilight? The memory orb, while not being the one I had wanted to view, had raised even more questions. I was almost certain that Twilight had never been able to finish the spell, but something inside me made me wonder if Spark hadn't lied about that too. It seemed likely that she had. She had certainly made sure to tell me that Twilight was responsible for the instructions given to the Twilight Society, but was she lying about that too? I found it hard to believe anything the angry little phantasm had said up until now.

My eyes opened and I looked over in the darkness of the room, smiling at my marefriend laying next to me. I sighed, leaning into her neck and nuzzling her close. She awoke, grinning as she kissed me on the cheek.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," She replied, pushing herself up off the bed. The lights fluttered on and we exited the private room back into the infirmary. The doctor was standing inside the room. He smiled as we entered. Patch and Steeljack came out of their room as well. They looked a bit better, albeit a little tired looking still.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" The medical pony asked. Violet nodded. I refrained from saying anything. Memory orbs didn't exactly count as actual sleep. Granted, your body didn't go anywhere but your mind wasn't really resting. Instead I changed the subject as best as I could.

"So... do we get a tour of your facility?" I asked. The doctor's expression turned deadly serious.

"I'm afraid... that's out of the question," He replied. "The Overmare has forbid you to leave the infirmary." I grimaced. I was afraid that would be the answer. It seemed that the Stable inhabitants didn't exactly trust us yet.

"Well, we can we at least see the Overmare? We can't exactly stay here you know," I said. "We'd like to see about trading for some medical supplies and then getting on our way."

"I... I'll see what I can do," The doctor said, looking very shift as he spoke. *What is up with this*

place? I thought. I shrugged off the feeling I was getting as I nodded at the medical officer. "Now, let's make sure you all are doing alright." He looked to the two nurses, who smiled and brought out their needles and bandages. They began to check us over once more, injecting us with the special healing drug. I felt much more relaxed as the nurses finished up and the doctor left us to our own devices for a little while in order to find the Overmare.

What felt like a few hours later (but was really more like a half an hour according to my PipBuck), the door to the infirmary opened once more, revealing Ruby Crystal and her entourage of security ponies. I wondered briefly if the ruby mare traveled around the Stable with them at all times. She had a deathly serious look on her face.

"The doctor informs me that you wish to leave the Stable," The red maned unicorn said flatly. I nodded. She grimaced.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. Reopening the door is a dangerous thing. We don't trust you, nor do we trust the fact that you are the only topsiders who would invade our home."

"What?!" I shouted angrily. "We don't mean you any harm. We're sorry we barged in like this, but it is only us. What reason would we have to hurt you?" I thought about that for a second. I supposed there were lots of reasons. Stables held a wealth of technology, not to mention the Stable population itself would be very lucrative to slavers. Still, why the sudden change in attitude? I didn't understand why we would suddenly be denied exit from the Stable. In the back of my mind, things tumbled around, little signs of wrongness. Things hadn't been right since the moment we entered the Stable.

"And until we've ascertained that there is no threat, you will stay here," The Overmare stated with finality. I glared at her.

"Fine. But we need to get going soon. The longer we stay here, the less time I have," I said. "I'm not going to lie. I'm not in a good place right now, and I need to get some answers before something really bad happens." The Overmare snorted.

"We'll see. For now, you will stay here," She replied, turning and exiting the room. I groaned, turning to Violet and the others.

"So... ideas?" I said. "It doesn't sound like we're just going to get let out of here."

"I agree," Steeljack said quietly. "I dunno about you, but this place give me the creeps." Patch nodded.

"Something... isn't right. I can't place my hoof on it," She said. "I say we make a break for it. Violet can open the door again just as easily as she did before."

"Hopefully. I can only hope they didn't change the security codes," Violet chimed in. "But I agree with Patch. I didn't see it beforehand, but now... I don't know..."

"Alright, if we're going to do this we need to be smart about it. I don't want to hurt these ponies," I said. My friends nodded as we retreated to our rooms to get our things together. I packed up my saddlebags and looked to Violet. My green love smiled as she pulled together her bags. Moments later, we stepped out into the main room of the infirmary. I could still see the guards posted just outside the door. We needed a bit of a distraction to get the guards away. I ignited my horn and cast my invisibility spell over myself. I stepped towards the door, willing it to open with my magic. The guards turned, not seeing anything there as I stepped into the hallway.

"Hey did you see anything?" One of the guards said. The other guard shrugged.

"Must be a door malfunction," He replied. I grinned, using the opportunity presented by the guard's confusion to focus my magic on the hallway itself. A noise erupted from the hallway as several pipes burst, filling the end of the hall with steam. The two guards looked up and ran from their post,

shouting into their PipBucks for maintenance. I dropped my invisibility spell and nodded through the window at my friends. The door opened once more and we set off into the Stable. We came down the next hallway, noticing that there was no activity thus far. *I wonder if they're all off working or something... weren't these things supposed to be more populated? Not that I'm complaining about it right now*, I thought as we trotted along. According to my PipBuck, we were nearing close to the main Stable door. This was going to work! We'd get out of here and then we'd be right on our way to the Ministry of Image, and then I could get some answers about everything that had been happening to me since we got into this stupid city.

"We're getting closer!" I shouted. We rounded the next corner, the entrance finally coming into sight. We galloped full speed down the hallway, getting closer and closer with each stride. We made it within ten feet of the entrance lobby, when I noticed my friends were beginning to slow down and stumble. I stopped for a moment as they fell to the floor, groaning. Violet looked up at me as she fell unconscious, her eyes wide with fear.

"What...?" I said. "Violet! Patch! Steeljack!" What was happening to them? Before I could even process what was going on, I felt two sharp stings of pain in my backside. I turned around, seeing several Stable security ponies with rifles. I realized that I had been shot. I growled, bringing Stargazer to bear. I never even got a shot off before I was shot again from behind. Of course, I thought, as pain ripped through my body. I looked up through the haze at the Stable ponies, seeing them... change. Suddenly I was staring at several rows of blue multi-faceted eyes, all the same.

"What... what are you...?" I said as I fell to the ground and fell unconscious.

I groaned as I awoke. It was dark once more. *What happened?* I thought. My mind was drawn back to the events prior. My friends! Something had happened to them, and then I had been shot. A lot. I rubbed my rump a bit, feeling the telltale signs of medical bandages and my wounds healing up. Why would they heal me if they were going to lock us up? Why not just kill me? I was beginning to realize that we had been right about this Stable. Something wasn't right here.

It was then that I noticed the smell of fire around me. It wasn't like a normal flame smell, but had a distinct magical signature about it. My eyes fluttered open and I looked about what had to be the Stable's brig. It was bare, and I was alone. My saddlebags and Stargazer lay on the other side of the bars, sitting by the security officer's desk. The door to the cell was blown off of its hinges, and laying just inside the doorway... was a black body. It was smoldering, but I could tell it wasn't equine. At least not in any true sense of the word. My mind struggled for a moment as I tried to process where I had seen this creature before. It had two wings, but they were more insectoid in nature than pegasi. Two blue bulbous eyes were set into its skull, its sharp silver teeth lining every part of its mouth. I realized after a moment that this was the same sort of beast I had seen in Fillydelphia when I was attacked by Discord. It was a changeling. *What in Equestria is it doing here? And where's Violet?* I thought as I pushed myself up out of the bed, strapping my weapon to its harness and peering out into the infirmary proper.

There were more of the strange changeling bodies littering the room. These ones however, were wearing clothing. I peered closely at them, realizing immediately that they were wearing Stable jumpsuits. Something clicked in the back of my mind.

"Yep, they're the Stable ponies," A voice behind me said. A very familiar voice that I hadn't heard in a few days. I smiled, and turned about. The sight of the spectral green unicorn/pegasus filled my heart with a little joy at least.

"Lucky," I said aloud. The green mare nodded in return. "What happened to you?"

“Spark,” She said, smiling. “She... she sent me somewhere. I'm not really sure where, but while you were out I was able to reform here.” I groaned. Of course Spark had wanted to keep her away, but why? What threat was Lucky to her? I realized it was only after Lucky had died that I had begun to see the dark maned unicorn. Maybe Lucky was some form of catalyst that gave Spark the power to manifest herself? More questions swam through my mind, the most prevalent of them being...

“Where is everypony?” I asked, looking around the room. There was nopony but me, Lucky, and the dead changelings.

“I'm not sure. When I got here it was just you. But it looks like we're locked in here,” The green mare replied, pointing at the door. It was closed, a red light shining above it. I grinned.

“Not for long,” I said, letting the magic flow through me as I pushed hard against the door with telekinesis. The door buckled against the pressure, blowing out into the hall. It hit the wall with a ***crunch*** and fell flat to the floor. I stepped into the hallway, the stench of death filling my nostrils almost immediately. I floated out Stargazer and flipped on my E.F.S.

I nearly fell over at the amount of red that flooded my vision. Red bars were everywhere! I gathered my composure a bit as I looked for any sign of yellow to indicate my friends. Amidst the sea of red, three yellow bars appeared in the direction of the Stable's Atrium. They weren't moving, but the fact that they were showing up gave me hope. I clicked into my PipBuck's locator spell, and input Violet's PipBuck tag, getting a glowing arrow in my E.F.S. that would show me the way. I looked over at Lucky and nodded.

“Let's go get my friends,” I said, starting down the hallway. I made it to the end of the long hall before my first encounter with a live changeling. The mare (at least it looked like a normal pony mare) stepped out from behind the corner, brandishing a saddle mounted rifle. She let loose a barrage of bullets, her eyes glimmering evilly as she charged down the hallway at me. I put up my shield spell, causing the bullets to harmlessly deflect away. I snarled and pulled up Stargazer, pointing it at the mare.

“Who are you?!” I shouted. The mare chittered in a voice that sounded a lot like an insect. A blaze of green fire appeared around the equine, revealing its true nature. The soulless blue eyes of the beast before me made me shudder. It flapped its bug-like wings and chittered again. I quickly realized that even disregarding the language barrier that these things weren't interested in diplomatic solutions. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several burst rounds before letting the spell drop. Gunfire echoed in the hall as Stargazer's rounds slammed into the changeling, dropping it to the ground. Green fire erupted from the body as I smelled that distinct stench of burning flesh once more. *Must be some sort of release when they die*, I thought as I dropped my shield spell. I turned back to check on Lucky, seeing the green mare cowering below me.

“Really?” I said flatly. Lucky grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry,” She said, pulling herself up from the ground. “Old habits?”

“Right,” I said as I started to turn away. I noticed a large cluster of red bars heading in the direction of the brig. “And it seems now we should make some haste. They're coming to check on me, and when I'm not there to be checked on... they'll be hot on our trail.” The green mare nodded as she followed behind me. I turned down the corner, keeping a close eye on my E.F.S. as I walked along at a brisk pace. Within a few moments, we arrived at a small balcony overlooking the Stable's main Atrium. The Atrium of a Stable was typically a general meeting area where the Stable inhabitants could socialize. This however, was no typical Atrium. Looking down off the balcony, I could see a large hole in the center of the vast room. It looked as if it had been expanded over time, a testament to the creatures who developed it. The inside of the hole looked very much like one would expect a bee hive

to look. The organic, insectile look and feel of the changeling hive had spread to the Atrium around it. Blackened stalactites grew on the ceiling, nearly blocking the lighting in the large open room. I blinked as I realized the largest cluster of red on my E.F.S. was right here in front of me.

Changelings populated every part of the room below the balcony, the insectoid beasts milling back and forth. In the center of the commotion stood the red form of Ruby Crystal. She appeared to be directing the other changelings. Behind her three green crystalized cocoons arose from the ground. Inside of the cocoons were each of my three friends. I growled lowly at the sight of them. They appeared to be unconscious thankfully, but still in quite a bit of danger. I dropped from sight, trying to consider a plan of attack. I couldn't just go rushing in to try and save them. I silently cursed my viewing of memory orbs. If I had been up and about when the changelings had attacked us, I could have done something, anything to stop them. I had to hope instead for some form of alternative solution. *What exactly do these things want with us? Why leave me in the brig?* I thought. I considered the fact that I had been knocked out at the time, and the possibility that they didn't consider me a threat. Their mistake, really. They didn't know just how pissed off I could get over my friends' lives being threatened.

I looked over at Lucky, who merely shrugged. I sighed and tried to process any sort of plan, but was having a lot of trouble coming up with anything. I supposed maybe I could try to reason with Ruby Crystal, since she had been able to at least talk. I grumbled. I hated having to think of the diplomatic solution but it was probably my only chance at getting my friends out of this alive. I grinned and stood up, hopping off of the balcony and using my wings to glide me to the center of what was now a chattering commotion. I was immediately beset upon by several of the slobbering insect-like beasts. I held up my hooves, hopefully indicating that I was surrendering and to not kill me on site. The red Overmare grinned, and I could see that she too wasn't exactly a pony. Her eyes gleamed an evil blue and green fire erupted around her. Instead of the normal changelings I had seen up until now, Ruby Crystal had become something quite... stately. Beautifully built insect wings came from her back, and she had a well built frame with a very sleek black carapace all over. A horn extended from her head, where her flaming red hair lay down her neck and face.

"Hold her!" She called out, buzzing her wings and landing in front of me. "Well well. So you're the power source the little filly unicorn has been focusing on."

"Power source?" I asked, glaring at the changeling.

"Indeed. It's been a while since we've gotten visitors. At least a week at most," The black creature said.

"I assume you were lying when you told me that you hadn't met topsiders before?" I said. She grinned, her teeth showing through the smile.

"Every so often they find their way down here. We take them in, and we use them for feeding stock," She said, motioning around the room. I looked up, seeing hundreds of cocoons, each one containing a different pony in them. There were even a few griffons here and there as well.

"Feeding stock?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"Changelings feed on the powerful emotions given off by the various races of the Wasteland. A long time ago, our race fed on love, pure true love. But that was a long time ago..." The Overmare replied. I had been surrounded by this time, the changeling swarm all around me. "We have not tasted such powerful love in a long time."

"How did you get here?" I asked, deciding to try and prolong as much as I could while I thought of a way out of this.

"When this Stable was built, Stable-Tec in all of its infinite wisdom ended up building this place over

an old Changeling hive. We hid underground for many years, prospering on the emotions that drifted down from the Stable. Then... all of a sudden the emotions stopped,” She said. “The inhabitants of this Stable had gone mad you see, driven insane by some form of drug that the Stable doctors had administered.” My eyes went wide. I guess that explained the social experiment of this place. I quickly remembered the needles the doctor had injected us with.

“What did you give us when you brought us into the infirmary?” I said nervously, hoping that it wasn't those kinds of drugs. The changeling grinned, catching onto my nervous speech easily.

“Strong sedatives. Put your friends to sleep, but it didn't seem to have any effect on you because we had to put you down by force,” She said. “Afterwards, you were completely out of it and unresponsive. Imagine my surprise to see you here now.”

“I'm not exactly normal. I've got this thing in my head. It must have overrode your drugs. So what happened to the Stable ponies then?” I replied. I was beginning to get a bit uneasy. I was pretty sure I knew the answer already.

“We tried to make contact with them, but they were violent and uncontrollable. We were forced... forced to kill them, keeping only the most lucid as food. We took their place in the Stable, a mockery of what they were. Since then... we've survived on the emotions of pain and anger,” The changeling said.

“And now you want me and my friends for a snack? I don't think so,” I said angrily. The changeling licked her lips a bit, grinning widely. Her sharp teeth gleamed and her red hair shimmered.

“Such a powerful emotion, anger. But love? Love is truly an amazing emotion. It tastes so... incredible,” She replied. “Your little friend has it in spades for you my dear. Your emotions will feed us for quite a long time.”

“I can't let that happen. I have too many important things to do still,” I said. “Let my friends go. Now.” The changeling laughed, a tittering noise amidst the chatter of the swarm surrounding us.

“Let you go? Why would I ever think about doing that?” She said. “I need to feed my children after all.” I glared at the changeling overmare. That was it then. My friends would be food for this bitch and her swarm. What would she need me for? She could just get rid of me, and that would be the end of it. I looked up at Lucky briefly, the green mare cowering just above the balcony. A chuckle erupted in the back of my mind, indicating the familiar presence of Spark. The dark maned unicorn stepped out from behind the changeling queen.

“Caught in a bind sweetie?” She said. I stared at the unicorn, growling under my breath. She grinned, her horn lighting up as time around us began to slow to a stand still. “There. Now we can talk without anypony or *anything* bothering us.” She motioned at the changelings surrounding us. It appeared that nopony else could hear us or even acknowledge us.

“What do you want now Spark? I'm getting tired of these interruptions,” I said aloud, stomping a hoof in irritation. The dark mare sighed.

“You're wasting time sweetie,” She replied. “You have an appointment to keep.”

“What's so important about the Ministry of Image Hub? Why do you want me to get there so badly?” I asked.

“Answers sweetheart. You get there, I'll tell you everything you wanted to know,” The dark unicorn said. “But in order to do so, you've got to get out of here.”

“Got any ideas then? I'm afraid to tell you that I'm fresh out of them,” I said.

"I have a few. One of them includes giving me control for a little bit. I'll get us out here, in no time," The dark mare said, grinning. I glared at her. Of course there was that. That was her goal after all. I couldn't see any other way out of this unfortunately.

"Fine," I said. "Just get it over with. But as soon as we are clear, I want my body back," Spark chuckled. I could hear hoofsteps behind me indicating Lucky's presence.

"Don't do it Star. I don't trust her," She said. Spark laughed, a choppy bark of sound.

"Please. You have any other bright ideas greenie?" The dark maned unicorn said. Lucky glared at her silently. "Of course you didn't. Now, let's get this show on the road." I nodded as Spark stepped up to me. Her horn ignited for a brief second... and then suddenly I found myself staring at my own body. It was a strange feeling, but I was staring at myself almost as if I were looking in a mirror. I looked down for a moment, realizing that this spectral form of me looked just like I had before the spell. I was blue again! I looked back up, seeing my body turn around to look at me and Lucky. Lucky stepped up next to me, placing a hoof on my shoulder. I could actually feel her touch as the purple alicorn began to speak.

"Alright then. Watch... and learn love," I heard my voice emanate from the other mare's body. Suddenly as if a dam had burst, time started again. The changeling swarm buzzed about as Spark turned back to the Overmare.

"So... you feed on strong emotion?" I heard myself say, a grin forming on Spark's mouth. "Well, can you handle this then?" I felt a rush of power exude from the purple mare's body. I assumed that the changeling queen had felt it too, as she began to dip to the ground before me. She groaned in pain.

"Stop! It hurts... please... stop..." I heard her shout, growling as she tried to push herself up. The changeling swarm around us began to fall one by one, unable to withstand Spark's power. *Have I always been able to do that?* I thought. *Or is this something Spark is able to do?* Spark chuckled.

"Spark. That's enough. Get them to free Violet and the others," I shouted at the purple mare. She glared back at me for a moment.

"Hold your horses, I'm having a little fun with them first," She said menacingly, turning back to the changeling.

"Release them," Spark said with a commanding voice. The changeling queen forced herself up.

"Please... anything... just... take them!" She shouted. The cocoons surrounding my friends began to disintegrate, shards sparkling and tinkling like fine crystals. I could hear the groans of my friends as they began to wake up. They looked disoriented as they tried to process what was going on. Violet looked over at my body and smiled weakly. I watched as my body moved over to my friends. Her horn ignited and I felt the familiar tug of magic on my spectral form. *Teleportation?* I thought. *How can she...? Where is she even going to teleport?* The purple mare released the magic, and the world disappeared.

I looked about, realizing that I was back in the same room with the same circular structure and the six doors. I groaned for a moment, wondering how I had gotten here when I hadn't exactly gone unconscious. Unless the strain that Spark had put on my body by teleporting the whole group to Celestia knows where had knocked my body out, I couldn't understand why here, of all places.

The torch in the center of the room went out once more and the flames zoomed across the circular floor to the door emblazoned with the cutie mark of a cloud and a rainbow colored lightning bolt extending from it. The door opened and I stepped through. Almost immediately I began to fall, landing a short

distance away from the door on a nice fluffy cloud. I looked up and saw the door entrance suspended in the air. *Well, that's... amusing*, I thought as I pulled myself up. I looked out upon an entire city suspended in the clouds. It was a city I had only ever seen in books. *Cloudsdale*, I thought, smiling. The shining capital of the pegasi looked incredibly beautiful with the sun shining down above it. I started forward, bouncing from cloud to cloud. Before long, I had ended up inside a large cloud coliseum. Pillars of white fluffy goodness extended along the large open space in the center of the arena, where a cyan pegasus was flying about. I flapped my wings a bit and took to the sky, catching the eye of the mare as she zoomed past me.

“Hey you!” She shouted, her voice brash and vibrant. “You think you got what it takes to roll with me?!” I grinned.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked, trying to keep up with the cyan pegasus as we sped about the coliseum.

“How's about a race? See if you got the stuff,” The mare replied, grinning widely. I nodded as we came to a stop above a cloud far above the coliseum. The cyan mare pointed at the far end of the arena. “Alright, here's the scoop. We race to the other end of the coliseum and then right back here. Very simple.”

“Alright. What happens if I win?” I asked coyly. The other mare snorted.

“As if!” She exclaimed. “Nopony can beat me. I'm the fastest flier in all of Equestria!”

“We'll see,” I said. “How do we know when it will be time to start then? I only see the two of us here.”

“Don't you worry about that,” The cyan mare replied, pointing across the clouds. A spectral pegasus appeared, waving a flag. The blue pegasus put herself into a starting position, cricking her neck for extra flare. I grinned and put myself in the same position. The spectral pegasus stared blankly at the two of us, and waved the flag. I pushed off of the cloud and shot forward, keeping pace with the cyan mare initially. The rainbow maned pegasus grinned however, and pushed ahead of me, her tail leaving streaks of color behind her as she shot through the air. I couldn't help but admire the pure athleticism she embodied. She moved powerfully, but at the same time gracefully, through the sky. I shook my head, trying to focus on the race at hoof. I flared my wings and pushed forward, picking up speed as I caught up to the cyan mare. I grinned at her as I began to pull away just as we hit the halfway marker. Banking into a tight curve, I pulled around and began to speed back towards the finish line. The rainbow maned pegasus growled as she came up next to me.

“Oh no you don't!” She shouted, whipping through the wind as she moved ahead of me. I pushed my wings even harder, trying my best to even keep up with the blue mare. I was so focused on the race that I didn't see the cloud in front of me. I grunted as I slammed through the cloud, the sudden impact sending me veering off course. I heard the cyan pegasus chortle with laughter as she raced ahead. I growled as I banked around, turning upwards and heading as fast as I could towards the finish line. I picked up speed once more, but I realized that I would be unable to catch the cyan mare. I groaned as I watched the mare speed across the finish line, cheering hard for herself. I crossed the finish line shortly afterwards, stopping on the cloud the mare was standing on. She chuckled profusely.

“Good effort, but like I said. Nopony can beat the fastest flier in all of Equestria!” She exclaimed. I huffed angrily.

“Would have had you if not for that stupid cloud,” I said. The other mare giggled and stuck her tongue out at me.

“Anyways, let me guess... not Rainbow Dash?”

"You'd be correct. But you might say Dash rubbed off a lot on me. I'm Loyalty, nice to meet you," The cyan pegasus replied. She sat down on the cloud in front of me. I plopped down on my rump as well, staring at the curious mare.

"So... I'm supposed to like... learn how to be loyal then?" I asked. Why of all virtues would I be shown Loyalty? This really didn't make much sense. Loyalty giggled a bit.

"Loyalty takes very many forms. It was a brave thing you just did, giving yourself up for your friends. It really shows how loyal you are to them Star," She said.

"I just hope it wasn't the wrong thing to do," I said, averting my eyes to the cloud below me. "Honesty told me that Spark wasn't always this way. Why is she doing this?"

"Honesty was right. Spark used to be just like the rest of us, pure and whole. Now... now she's less than she was. She became obsessed with surviving," Loyalty said. My eyes picked up and my ears perked forward.

"Surviving? What do you mean?" I asked.

"When we were joined with the Ministry Mares, we all knew that the bonds that created us were beginning to break. Spark refused to believe that it was going to happen, but she stressed over it much more than the rest of us. She was so adamant about survival, that in her denial she pushed Twilight to try to come up with ways to keep her alive," The cyan mare replied. "The whole I.M.P. Project came from Spark pushing Twilight to think about creating alicorns as a means to end the war." I blinked. If Twilight hadn't gotten that extra push from Spark, the whole I.M.P. Project would have never been completed and the alicorn race as it was today would have never existed! My eyes widened at this revelation.

"What was she so afraid of?" I said.

"She was afraid of not existing," Loyalty said. I looked at the cyan mare intently. "You see, if the bond that brought us all together suddenly no longer was there... we'd cease to exist and the Elements of Harmony would be useless."

"But... didn't you all survive anyways?" I asked curiously. Loyalty nodded.

"I always personally thought Spark was a little loopy, but at the time... some of us fell right into her delirium. Take Laughter for instance. She and Spark were quite close," She said.

"Spark told me that Twilight messed up, that the spell that's affecting me brought her back instead of Twilight," I said. "Wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?" The cyan mare shook her head.

"I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if she did something like that," Loyalty said. "She always was a little... out there for an egghead." I nodded, looking out amongst the clouds at the city.

"This place... it's beautiful by the way," I said, motioning to the view before us. Loyalty grinned.

"How about another race?" She said. "This time around the whole city?" I smiled.

"I'd love to," I said, sitting up and flapping my wings. "On the count of three?"

"On the count of three."

"Three two one go!" I shouted quickly, taking off into the sky and heading towards the city proper. Loyalty shouted behind me and began to follow me, a wide smile on her face. Blackness overtook me as we glided into the sun.

My eyes opened slowly as I took in the surroundings. I felt... normal I guess is the word I would use. I looked down, noticing I was back to my normal purple coat color. I looked about, seeing Violet and the others lying about the tunnel we were in. We were in what appeared to be one of the side tunnels underneath the subway station. I groaned as I forced myself up. I made my way over to Violet, nudging her. She sputtered awake, turning over to look at me. A smile emerged on her face once she saw me.

“Star...?” She said quietly. I nodded, nuzzling her close. A few groans to our side indicated that Patch and Steeljack had awoken as well. The two sat up and looked around.

“Where are we?” Patch said. “Last thing I remember is us trying to escape from the Stable.”

“You uh... were sort of being used as feeding stock for a changeling hive,” I said, grinning sheepishly. My friend's eyes widened collectively.

“You mean we... we were being used as food?” Steeljack said, looking over himself and Patch for any wounds. I giggled at his self examination.

“Not that kind of food. I guess changelings feed on emotions,” I said. I began to take some stock of what we had left. Our bags and belongings had been left untouched. I was sort of surprised the changelings hadn't stripped my friends of them. I guess even changelings weren't too savvy about prisoners.

“Actually... that was me. You're welcome by the way?” A voice in the back of my mind echoed. I winced at the headache it caused. I looked casually at my friends. They had moved to gathering up our stuff. I quietly looked to the side, trying to hide the obvious pain that Spark's interactions were now apparently causing me.

Hello again, Spark, I said to the voice in my head. *What did you do then?*

“I managed to locate and teleport all of your gear too,” Spark replied. ***“Coincidentally, that's what knocked you out when we landed. Used up a little too much power saving your sorry ass.”***

Gee thanks. So what happens now? You said you would give me some answers, I said to Spark. A chuckle erupted from my side. The dark unicorn appeared next to me, grinning widely.

“In due time sweetie. In due time,” She said, before disappearing again. I looked over at my friends again.

“I think we should get going. I don't know that Envy is still around these parts, and we need to put some distance between us and that Stable,” I said. Violet nodded, gathering up the rest of our bags with her magic. Stargazer clipped to its harness and we set off down the tunnel, trying to find the way out. We walked quietly and quickly, trying to pay attention to our surroundings for any indication of hostiles. My E.F.S. was fairly dark, and showed nothing more than the yellow blips of my friends. I breathed a sigh of relief as we came to the end of the tunnel. Light streamed from the drain above us. I grinned as I latched onto the drain with my telekinesis, moving it away. More light flooded the tunnel.

“Looks like we're just below the streets,” Violet said. Happily, we used our magic to float the earth ponies up the drain to the Chicacolt street, and I lifted Violet up afterwards. A few flaps of my wings brought me to the drain, and Violet tugged me through onto the dirty asphalt. As we stood up finally on the street, the ruined skyscrapers of Chicacolt spread out before us. I breathed in the air, smiling.

“Feels good to be back above ground,” I said. My friends nodded as we began to walk through the city once more. In the distance to the south we could see Filly's Tower, the black structure looming over the center of the city. I looked at my PipBuck, the mapping feature showing a new location: Ministry of Image Chicacolt Hub. An arrow popped up on my E.F.S., showing that the building we were seeking

lay to the east of us. I indicated this to the others.

“You know... if this was supposed to be a hidden hub, how does your PipBuck know about it?” Violet questioned. I shrugged.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “It just seems to know. I know this it though. The memory orb that I looked at in the Stable... it took place there. There’s something there, I can just feel it.” My love nodded and we continued on in silence once more. After about an hour, I decided that Envy must have thought us to be dead and had left us once more. I couldn’t help but shake the feeling that we’d see the zebra mare again though. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have a little noise as I clicked on the radio. The brash and arrogant voice of the Minotaur assaulted our ears.

“Wheeeeeeeee! It’s that time again kiddies! Yes, it’s time for the Morning Moo Madhouse! And I am your host. The one. The only. THE MINOTAUR!!!!

That’s right kiddies, it is I. The eye in the sky giving you all the latest news and musical hits Chicacolts has to offer!

First off. Some news on the Ministry Mare. The last she was seen folks was on a train fighting a zebra! Then the train blew up! Since then, we’ve lost visual contact with her. If you’re out there Ministry Mare, wave a hoof and let us know you’re alright! Of course, you do still have that bounty to worry about, so that might not be the best thing!

In other news, the MMMM has taken the fight to the Lotus Triad. It seems that a particularly outspoken member of the bakery bad boys has a bone to pick with the Triad over the bounty placed on the Ministry Mare’s head. It’s gang wars in the streets friends! If you’re close to or living in a gang zone, you might want to get out pronto. Those of you in MMMM territory especially should lay low for a little bit. It’s good for your health. Trust me!

That’s it for this hour kiddies. We’ll be back in a little while for your regularly scheduled horrible programming. That’s right! A full hour of the worst jokes and stuff you’ve ever heard! We’ll even give good old Cotton Candy a call and see how he’s doing! Until then, have a little REO Skywagon!”

I clicked the radio off before the music could start playing. I sighed. I couldn’t tell if the Minotaur was trying to help me or get me killed!

“You don’t suppose that MMMM member that he talked about is Danish do you?” Steeljack piped up as we neared closer to our destination. I shrugged.

“Possibly. I wonder if that means the MMMM are on our side,” I replied.

“I don’t know. But if they’re actively fighting the Triad, maybe it will keep some of them off of our back for a little while,” Violet said. I nodded as we continued on in silence. Nothing really more had to be said. I took a few moments while we were walking to keep an eye out for Lucky. I knew that if she had been sent away again that she would eventually find her way back to me. I certainly hoped so. I had made a promise to her to try and fix things, and I intended to make good on that promise.

Within the hour, we found ourselves in front of what we assumed was the Ministry of Image Chicacolts Hub. At least that’s what my PipBuck said. The building was a generic office building with little to no decoration, much like the other MoI hubs I had seen in my time in the Wasteland. The Ministry of Image typically operated in secrecy, hiding away in boring buildings like this all across Equestria. The only real Ministry hub was the Canterlot hub, and that was now an unfortunate pile of rubble. Most other hubs were just like the one looming over us: drab and gray. I looked up at the building, hoping and praying to Luna that the answers I had sought for so long were inside.

We stepped into the front door of the building, leaving the sunny day and entering into the dark and

dreary office. Skeletons of long dead ponies littered the main floor of the building, situated everywhere from cubicles to the tiny break rooms and offices that lined the walls. Most of the terminals in the place were dead, but a few here and there still had power. Unfortunately, most of these were also crashed and couldn't provide much information on the facility. The other strange thing about the place was that none of the offices provided any knowledge that this was actually a Ministry hub. Despite what my PipBuck said, this place appeared to be a normal office building for some sort of forms company. Thankfully, my E.F.S. showed absolutely no activity within our vicinity. I decided that it was time Spark owned up to her promise to tell me everything.

Spark...? I said to the spirit in my head. A chuckle came from behind me as the dark unicorn stepped out.

"Well. You made it here. Good. Follow me," She said. I cocked my head curiously. *What are you playing at now?* I thought. She turned, grinning widely as she made her way down the hallway. I motioned to my friends.

"This way. I think I see something," I said, stretching the truth to get them to follow me. I felt kind of bad about it, but I don't think they'd believe that Spark was leading us let alone trust her. The spectral mare led us down to a set of stairs that extended deep into the building. We walked in silence as the light around us got darker the farther we went down. Eventually the stairway ended abruptly at a basement level. A long dark hallway stretched out before us. Spark motioned at the door at the end of the hallway, nodding before she disappeared. I started trotting down the dark hall faster and faster until I reached the door. I pushed forward on it, finding the door locked. I growled, reaching out with my magic and pushing on the door hard. I felt resistance as I gritted my teeth, pouring more energy into the spell. The door must have been keyed to specific magic to enter, much like the door in the M.W.T. hub had been. I had no time for such subtleties. I growled, angry that I had come so far to be blocked by a damn door. Magic streamed from my horn, lighting the entrance up like fireworks. Finally, the door buckled and bowed away from my wrath, exploding outward into the room with intense force. I strode into the middle of the same dark cylindrical room from Snails' memory orb, my eyes only on the prize in the middle of the room. I could hear my friends behind me, but my senses focused only on the pedestal before me.

The pedestal in the center of the room was a very simple marble affair. It was what lay on top of it that interested me. A dark black bound leather book (at least I assumed it was leather) sat there surrounded by a magical field. It was some form of shield. I reached out with my magic, touching the field. Instinctively, I realized that I already knew what I was doing here. Something about this felt... right. I was about to break open the shield when a voice stopped me.

"Star!" The familiar voice shouted. I looked up, seeing Lucky standing across the room on the other side of the pedestal. "What are you doing?"

"Fulfilling a promise I made," I said quietly, hoping my friends standing behind me couldn't hear me. "A promise I made to you."

"Star... you don't need to. I'm fine. It's not your fault," Lucky said, tears welling up in her eyes. "Please... please stop. I don't like this place."

"It's too late Lucky. I'm sorry... but I need answers. I need to know why this thing is so important," I said, tears flowing from my eyes as well. I could hear Violet and the others behind me, calling my name.

"Star? You alright?" My marefriend said, stepping up next to me. I looked down at her for a moment.

"Yeah... Yeah I'm fine. Just... never thought I'd find this thing," I said, motioning at the book. "I think perhaps you should stand back though. I'm not sure what will happen once I open the shield." Violet

nodded and moved over to Steeljack and Patch, informing them of what I was about to do. I looked back at Lucky.

“Whatever happens. I'm sorry. I made you a promise and I'm going to fix you,” I said with finality, my horn igniting as I broke the shield. Lucky tried to shout out to stop me, but it was too late. The shield fell away with a splash of magic. I closed my eyes for a second, waiting for whatever came next. I opened my eyes, a flash of light nearly blinding me. A holographic figure appeared before the pedestal of a demure white unicorn with a gorgeous purple mane. *Rarity?* I thought. The purple mare began to speak.

“Twilight...? It's me. It's Rarity. I know we left each other on bad terms darling, but I shall always be first and foremost your friend. If you're here... well then the rest of us are dead. We've squandered our world, and I failed you all. What is left here is my legacy to you. This book contains many secrets about the soul, much like the other one of its kind. This book is rather special however, as it contains information about calling the soul back from the afterlife. I know the death of your brother hurt you deeply my dear, but I implore you to destroy this vile thing. Do not open it. You've heard it. The book calls to you, it wants you to exploit its secrets.

It lies. Do not listen to it. The spells contained within are too vile even for me, one who has dabbled in such secrets.

Please Twilight. I love you, please just... please...”

The hologram sputtered out of existence as I stared at the book before me. I could hear whispers coming from the thing. The black leather book sat there, mocking me openly. It dared me to open it.

“Star...?” I heard Lucky and Violet say at the same time. They didn't matter now. Yes... the only thing that mattered was the book. I could feel it calling to me, this was why I was here. This held my answers. I felt it in my bones. I reached out with my magic, picking up the book and opening it. It implored me to continue... to learn from it and to use it. I grinned widely as I absorbed the contents of the book. I heard Spark speaking alongside me.

“Now... the tiara. Use it. This is the final component. What you've been waiting for,” She said. “Use it, and I will tell you everything.” I looked over at her. I rummaged through my saddlebags, pulling out the dull tiara. I placed it on the top of my head.

“Everything?” I asked quietly. She nodded, her grin showing entirely too many teeth.

“Everything,” She replied. I turned back to the book and reached out again for my magic. I looked to Lucky.

“I'm going to fix this. Fix you, this will work... trust me...” I mouthed as I let loose with my horn, the magic overwhelming me. A brilliant light flashed in the center of the room, expanding out and enveloping me in its warm glow. I looked up to the ceiling, smiling as I realized with great truth that this was what I was supposed to be doing. This was it. The end of my search. I could hardly believe it.

Then the darkness came swirling about me. Spark cackled wildly as I looked about, a scared look replacing my confident smile. Something wasn't right. What did I do? What did I ---?

“What's happening?” I shouted as the darkness surrounded me. The cylinder of pure dark spun around the room. I could feel an evil presence resonating from it. Spark grinned widely, her eyes gleaming with triumph.

“You fool. You've played right into my hooves. Did you think for one measly second that I was actually helping you? That I'd actually tell you what this place meant for us? This is where I take

over,” She said as she grabbed onto me with her hooves. “The tiara combined with this book was the final act needed for my ascension to become a Goddess! You see, I planted that thing there with the help of Twilight. She thought it was the Element of Magic, but she was wrong. The real Element Tiara is far far away. This one was a fake, meant only for me.” *What?! I thought as I felt forced out of my body. A fake tiara.. ascending to a Goddess?! This isn't what I wanted. I wanted you out! I wanted...* I thought. This feeling of disconnection was different than before when Spark had taken over in the Stable. This felt... wrong on so many levels.

“No!” I shouted as Spark gave a final push, knocking me out of my body. I flailed my spectral hooves at her, but the frantic blows passed right through her. She entered into my body with relative ease, sighing with contentment as she did so. I looked down for a moment, realizing that like before I had turned back to my regular blue alicorn form while I was outside of my body. I wondered briefly if I would ever see that blue coat in the flesh again. I floated to the ground below me, watching in horror as the darkness ceased and the book slammed shut on the pedestal. I looked over at Lucky. The green pegasus/unicorn stared at me with tears in her eyes before looking away. *Great... now you've gone and done it*, I thought, looking back at the purple alicorn before me. I noticed immediately that my cutie mark had changed, the star colors inverting to match the exact cutie mark of Twilight Sparkle.

Violet and the others stood at the far end of the room, watching the spectacle of magic that had just occurred. They had concerned looks on their faces. My green marefriend stepped forward to my former body, placing a hoof on its shoulder.

“Star...? Are you alright?” She said cautiously. I saw a gleaming grin emerge from my body's face. Spark looked down at my love and smiled. I shouted angrily to try and get my marefriend's attention as Spark turned away, picking up the book and taking off the tiara, placing both items into my saddlebags. Her reply came shortly after, her voice smooth as silk.

“Never felt better, my love.”

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

Quest Perk! Psychic Spark: Thanks to your influence from the spirit of Magic, you can now use the Psychic Explosion spell at will.

Spark Level: 99%. Spark is now in control of your body. What does this mean for you? Only time will tell. There however, is still a chance.

Reputation: You are now liked by the MMMM. Seems like you've got a friend indeed.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 16: Virtues

I felt it the very moment I realized how happy I was to hear you, to see you, how much I cared about you. The spark ignited inside me when I realized that you all are my friends. You see, Night Mare Moon, when those Elements are ignited by the... the spark, that resides in the heart of us all, it creates the sixth element: the element of... magic.

One upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria... I'm sure we've all heard that before, but I digress. Once upon a time there were six friends whose essences embodied the very nature of the six virtues of ponykind: honesty, kindness, generosity, laughter, loyalty, and magic. Through their friendship, these six friends accomplished great things and saved Equestria from great evil.

Then came the War. War was such a foreign concept to the six friends, who grew from scared little fillies into the formidable Ministry Mares that controlled the Equestrian government. War may never change, but it does change ponies. In the end, the six virtues of ponykind became corrupted and worn, tired of the senseless conflict that Equestria had become engaged in.

I wonder... will the virtues of ponykind ever become the core of our lives ever again?

“Spark! You horrid BITCH! Get out of my body so I can rip you apart! I’ll kill you!” I screamed, at the top of my... lungs. The depths of my profanity reached new heights as I continued to shout and scream. My rage faltered as the lack of bodily sensation sunk in. I was furious, angrier than I had ever been before - even when I thought Envy had taken my love away from me. I took a deep breath, hesitating again as no sense of air rushing into my chest filled me.

“Spark!” I shouted angrily at the spirit now controlling my body. The corrupted spirit of Magic gave me a wicked little grin as she regarded my presence. Not long after she had stolen my body, Spark and my friends had made their way out of the cylindrical room and back into the Ministry of Image Hub's main office floor. Currently they sat in one of the side offices attempting to rest after what Spark had written off as just magic burnout. *Come on Violet, can't you see she's playing you?!* I thought as I glared at the purple alicorn. Naturally, I had followed behind them. I had to formulate some form of plan after all for getting my body back. Lucky followed behind me, staying strangely silent the entire time. I had tried to speak with her, but she had just turned away from me. I sighed, returning to the scene unfolding before me.

“Star?” Violet said, sitting down next to my body. Spark looked over at the green unicorn and smiled.

“Yes my sweet?” She replied, her words rolling off her lips like velvet. I groaned. *I hate you so much*, I thought. Violet smiled softly.

“Are you sure you're alright? I'm not exactly sure what happened to you back there,” She said, placing a hoof on my body's shoulder.

“I'm fine, just a little shaken up. Really I've never felt better,” Spark said. “It was just a little rough on me is all.”

“Hey, what happened to your cutie mark?” Violet asked. Spark looked back at her flank and scrunched her face up into an expression of confusion.

“I don't know,” She said. “Think that happened back there at the Ministry hub?” Violet shrugged.

“I'm not sure either. I just hope it doesn't mean anything bad,” The green mare replied. Spark nodded.

"Yeah, me too," She said. I glared at her.

"So... Did you learn anything from that book you picked up?" Violet said. Spark nodded and pulled the black book out of her saddlebags. She ran her forehoof over the leather and I was able to finally take a closer look. I shuddered when I realized that the material wasn't leather, at least not in the traditional sense. It was zebra skin. I felt a surge of disgust that failed to turn into nausea, driving home my spectral state again.

"I think this is what she used to cast that spell. I just need to study it a little more," Spark said, placing the book back inside her saddlebags. Violet nodded, and I thought for a second I saw a gleam in her eyes. She stood up and went back over to check on Steeljack and Patch. The two earth ponies were busy tending to each other. Leaving Spark, I followed Violet over to listen in.

"Is it just me... or does something seem off about Star?" Violet said quietly. *Yes!* I thought. *That's my girl! Expose her Violet! Do it filly!* I squealed with joy as I watched my friends speak.

"I'm sure it's nothing. I mean, all she did was stare at some book for a little bit," Steeljack responded. Patch nodded as she lay next to her coltfriend. She had pulled out Para Bellum and was polishing the weapon with a soft cloth. I groaned. "She's probably just stressed. We all are." Violet sighed.

"I suppose you're right, I just... I can't place a hoof on it," My green love replied. I stomped angrily, scowling harder at the lack of physical feedback from my ghostly form. This wasn't fair! She was so close to exposing Spark for what she was. I began a new tirade of shouting, mostly profanities of course. A cough from behind me interrupted me. I turned around, seeing Lucky standing there.

"They can't hear you remember? Just like you could only see me, only she can see you," She said, glaring at me. I stepped towards her and reached out with my hoof. Lucky shrank back from me, her gaze hardening as she stepped away.

"Lucky... I'm... I'm so sorry," I said. "You've got to believe me. I didn't... I didn't know it would end up like that."

"You ignored me. Stupid Lucky, she doesn't know what she's talking about, right?" The green mare said. "Just like when I was growing up. I was always the little filly, always the child. I was cast aside, pushed away from everypony else. Treated like I was an outcast and a failure because I was different." My eyes widened.

"I... No.. I wasn't... I didn't mean to. You have to believe me, I was trying to save you!" I cried out, tears filling my spectral eyes. Lucky sighed, looking down at her hooves.

"I... I don't know. I'm just... I'm so mad at you Star. You ignored me when I told you I didn't trust her!" She shouted back, pointing at Spark. The purple alicorn appeared to be sleeping. She cracked one eye open.

"I can hear you two you know," She murmured. "I'd rather appreciate it if you would fuck off and go somewhere else." I growled at the spirit of Magic.

"Go fuck yourself. Give me back my body," I said angrily. Spark tittered at this request.

"Pish. I don't think so. I rather like it here," She said, putting her head back down and closing her eyes once more. I groaned, plopping down onto my rump.

Of course, I fell through the floor. This had been happening since Spark had stolen my body. Being spectral I found that I was able to move through walls and floors, and on occasion I would lose some semblance of control of this ability. I struggled for a bit, but finally managed to pull myself up back into a lying down position. Lucky stepped over and sat down next to me. Her eyes were teary. I

placed a hoof on her shoulder and pulled her into a fierce hug, surprising the pegasus/unicorn.

"I'm so sorry," I said, beginning to cry. The tears flowed from my eyes freely as I sobbed into the other mare's neck. "I... I'm so so sorry. I wish I could take it all back. I wish..." Lucky sighed and returned the hug.

"I... I'm sorry too," She replied softly. "But right now we have to figure out a way to get you back inside your body so you can fix things." I pulled out of the hug and began to wipe my tears away, nodding as I looked over at my body and then back to my friends. They had gone to sleep as well, Violet having laid down next to Spark. I nearly retched at the possibility of that bitch nuzzling my marefriend, doing... other things to her that I couldn't even begin to imagine. The very thought of it made my blood boil over. I sighed. Lucky was right. There was nothing I could do at the moment other than to come up with a plan to get back into my body. To do that I would have to sneak another peek at that book. It was what allowed Spark to get in, but why did it do that? I shuddered again as I thought about the book covered in zebra skin. I mean, who in their right mind would bind a book in skin? Then again... it was a book devoted to necromantic spells, so I guess that made sense. I looked to Lucky as I stood up, my tears dried up and gone. The green mare smiled.

"So... any thoughts on getting my body back?" I asked sheepishly. Lucky facehooved.

"You mean you don't even really know how Spark got in?" She asked. I shook my head.

"It had something to do with that book. But I don't know... I'm not sure how we're going to get a look at it without Spark noticing," I replied. Lucky nodded. We walked down the hallway, leaving my friends and the bitch in peace for the moment. No sense in talking about our plans with her being able to listen in. The office was quiet, the only noise the humming of the crashed terminals that littered the cubicles and hallway. Clearly, somepony was not happy with their terminal system on the final day of the war. I struggled to come up with a plan. There had to be something I was missing, some angle. My eyes widened as I remembered a certain demure white mare.

"Of course!" I shouted, drawing a stare from Lucky. I giggled for a second, realizing that I had said that out loud. "I've got an idea... I think I know who I need to talk to. I just have to figure out how to get to her."

"What do you mean?" Lucky said, cocking her head at me.

"I... I have these visions sometimes. For the most part, it's been Twilight's emotions that I've had to talk to... but lately, I've been meeting the Virtues," I explained as we walked.

"The Virtues?" Lucky asked. I nodded.

"The first one I met was Generosity, whose original bearer was the Ministry Mare Rarity. She was the one who told me about the Ministry of Image hub to begin with," I said. We stopped at the end of the hallway as I tried to rack my mind about how to get back to that room with the torches. It had only ever happened to me when I was knocked unconscious. I had no idea how to get back there. I sighed, trying to rack my brain. Come on... think think! I thought as I began to pace the hallway.

"So... how do you talk to them?" Lucky asked. I shrugged.

"I don't really know," I said. "Every time I've met them, my body has been unconscious. It's like some sort of reflex. I don't even know how to make it work."

"Well... it sounds like a potential plan at least," The green mare replied. A whirring sound from down the hall caught my attention. I cocked my head curiously at the sound.

"Do you hear that?" I said, starting back down the hallway towards the source of the sound. I peeked into the office where my friends were. They were still asleep. The whirring noise got louder and

louder. My eyes widened as I realized that the noise was coming from a metallic silver orb that was floating down the hallway. It appeared to be a sprite-bot, a device that had been developed by the Ministry of Morale to promote Equestrian patriotism. It was also only humming softly, which in itself was rather odd. Most of the time, sprite-bots played some form of patriotic music. They were normally quite loud.

“Umm... oh shit,” I said, realizing what the floating ball really was. It was an explosive. The whirring turned to a beeping noise as the sprite-bot bomb landed on the floor in front of us. I knew that I had nothing to fear from this thing being a spectral pony and all, but my flesh and blood friends including my body, regardless of the whore inhabiting it, wouldn't survive if this thing blew up in their faces. I turned on a dime and pushed through the nearest wall, emerging back into the office as Lucky followed behind me. If I couldn't warn my friends, then maybe I could warn Spark.

“Hey –!” I started to shout before a massive explosion drowned out my voice. Behind me the wall caved in, spraying debris everywhere. My friends scrambled to their hooves, shouting as Spark stood up in front of them. I followed her gaze and looked past the dust in the air. A groan escaped my lips as I saw the sinister form of Envy standing just beyond the hole in the wall, an evil grin creeping across her face.

“Not her again!” I whinnied. Lucky cocked her head at me.

“Who is this?” She asked. The zebra pulled aside her cloak, revealing her wicked implements of destruction.

“Her name is Envy. She's a zebra bounty hunter. I've sort of got a five hundred thousand cap bounty on my head, courtesy of the Lotus Triad,” I explained. Lucky's eyes widened.

“*Five hundred thousand caps?! You're shitting me,*” Lucky gasped. I stared at her blankly. She giggled. “Okay maybe not.” I looked back to Spark, who glared at the striped mare.

“Ministry Mare of Twilight, I have been searching for you all night,” Envy spoke. “It seems my search was not in vain, let us begin our dance again.” Spark grinned. She pointed a hoof at the zebra.

“Well. You want me? Come get me,” She said. Envy snarled and rushed forward at the group, passing through me. It felt kind of... weird. Spark put her hoof down and her horn flared, sending out a wave of magic that slammed into Envy, knocking her back out of the hole and into the wall beyond. Violet grimaced.

“Alright, while we've got her occupied let's get going!” She shouted. Patch and Steeljack nodded as my friends made their way out of the small office and into the hall. Spark stepped out behind them, pausing to regard the zebra lying in a heap next to the rubble of the wall. She grinned evilly.

“You guys go. I'll take care of her,” She said. Violet scowled.

“What?” She asked, staring blankly at the purple alicorn. “You can't. The last time we went up against her she almost killed you!”

“Violet, if we don't end this now we won't be rid of her,” Spark said firmly. “Just go already. I'll be fine.” Violet sighed and nodded. She looked to my other friends.

“Let's go. Don't be late, Star. Please,” She said as she turned back one last time before she took off after the two earth ponies. I looked to Lucky.

“Keep track of them. If we're going to have a chance, we have to stick together,” I said. Lucky nodded, turning and heading after the other three. I turned back to the scene unfolding before me. Spark stood over the fallen zebra, grinning madly.

"Now then. I'm getting sick and tired of all this rhyming bullshit you keep spouting," She said. Envy pushed herself from the rubble, snarling as she lunged at the lavender mare with her deadly blades. Spark dodged the attack, launching a hoof strike into the zebra's shoulder. Envy grunted in pain and lashed out with a blade, catching Spark in the neck and drawing a thin line of blood from the purple alicorn. Spark growled, igniting her horn and creating a stronger version of my normal shield spell. The shield expanded outward, slamming the zebra into the ground once more. Spark leaped backwards, dropping the spell as she grinned. Envy sat up, breathing hard.

"What...? What happened to you?" She panted, dropping the rhyming from her voice.

"I got smarter, you striped bitch," Spark replied coldly. "Now. Let's end this little game." She lifted Stargazer with her magic. I felt time stop cold. Well that's a new feeling, I thought. Apparently I could feel when Spark used E.S.A.T.S. in my body. The purple mare dropped the timing spell and Stargazer fired, the bullets ripping across the small hallway. Envy snarled and pulled her cloak over her prone form as the minigun's rounds slammed home. The body of the zebra melted into the floor, covered by the dark cloak. I blinked. *Did she actually get rid of Envy?* I thought as I watched Spark triumphantly step towards the cloak lying on the floor. Her eyes darkened with anger as she turned, glaring at me. No... wait, glaring past me. I felt something pass through me again, which was still a very weird feeling, as Envy launched once again at Spark from behind. The zebra slammed into the purple alicorn with a hoof, knocking her into and through the wall.

"It will take more than that to kill me, Ministry Mare!" She shouted as Spark flew into the next hallway over and struck the wall. The alicorn hung on the wall, groaning in pain. I thought that maybe for a brief moment that she had been seriously hurt, before seeing the wild grin painted on her face. It was all an act. She was luring the zebra in for some reason. I floated through the next wall into the hallway as Envy leaped in, tossing a few of her deadly mines towards Spark. Spark dropped to the ground, swatting the mines back with her magic. Envy's eyes flew wide as the explosives came hurtling towards her face. The mines exploded outwards, propelling the zebra backwards into another pile of debris. She thrashed, trying to push herself up and back into the fight. Spark was there in a flash, slamming downwards with a frontal assault that was as vicious as the spirit of Magic herself. Envy tried to block the attack, growling as the alicorn's hooves struck her, pinning her down into the concrete below.

"What was that you were saying about killing you?" Spark said, glaring at the zebra as she held her down. She chuckled haughtily, lording her very presence over the other mare. "Because I think I'm just about to."

"Spark!" I shouted at the alicorn, catching her attention. She sneered viciously at me.

"No. You don't get any say in this Star. I'm in control now," She said angrily. "I'm going to end her. I don't think the Wasteland will miss one pesky little zebra."

"You've beaten her, can't you see that?" I said, pointing at Envy. The zebra was struggling still to hold on, but even I could see that Spark's attacks had badly injured her. Despite how few attacks Spark had actually laded, the amount of damage she had inflicted was easily four times greater than what I could have done. The purple alicorn laughed.

"Yes. And I am thoroughly enjoying this." Spark replied, twisting a hoof on Envy's shoulder. The striped mare groaned in agony as Spark twisted even harder, taking sadistic pleasure in the act. She extended her neck down, stopping short of the zebra's face.

"I'm going to kill you, you know that? I'm going to end your fucking life right here and now, and I'm going to feel sooo good about it," She whispered softly into Envy's ear. The zebra flailed her front hooves, managing to catch Spark in the leg with a stray hoof strike. The impact of the blow knocked

Spark off of her, forcing the bitch back into the wall. Envy pushed herself up quickly, leaping back to her hooves. She rapidly flipped several mines towards the purple alicorn, who disappeared behind a hasty shield spell, covered in mine explosions.

"Like I said, it's going to take more than that to get rid of me," Envy panted as the smoke cleared, revealing Spark's shield through the haze. Envy flowed in like a striped waterfall as the shield spell dissipated, her knives flashing from under her cloak. One of her desperate attacks sliced into Spark's shoulder, drawing a spurt of blood. Spark snarled in pain as she tried to dance out of the way of the zebra's relentless attacks.

"I don't know what happened to you, but you're not the same pony I fought a few days ago," Envy said. "Who are you, Ministry Mare?" Spark grinned.

"I'm not the same mare," She said. "I'm the new and improved version." I snorted at this. How full of herself could one get? Envy and Spark circled each other like two hunters ready to pounce on their prey.

"Interesting. So where's the other one?" Envy replied.

"She's not important," Spark said. *What?! I thought. What do you mean I'm not important?* I glared at the other mare. "Let's just say she's indisposed at the moment. For now, you get to deal with me." Envy's gaze narrowed as the game of circling continued.

"Well, shall we get back to it then?" She said, lunging forward at Spark, her wicked blades coming in for another close strike. The alicorn dodged, bringing down her hoof in a controlled fashion upon the zebra's forelegs. I heard the crunching of bones as the zebra hit the wall. She let out a grunt of pain as she struck concrete. Her breath was ragged. She stood, holding her side with her left foreleg. Blood streamed from her side where she had hit the wall. She lifted one of her blades and flicked her hoof, tossing the knife at Spark's head. *Idiot, that's not a good move*, I thought. Spark reached out with her telekinesis and grabbed the blade mid-flight, sending it soaring around and back towards the zebra. The blade struck home, embedding itself into Envy's neck. She cried out as blood flowed from the wound. Reaching up, she pulled the now blood-stained knife free. Spark chuckled.

"Now then. Let's finish this... shall we? I'm getting terribly bored of all this," She said, igniting her horn once more. A flash of metal passed through my as the alicorn levitated every stray piece of metal that littered the hall, aiming them directly at Envy. The zebra snarled and panted, trying to move as the assault of metal shards began to soar through the air. I tried as hard as I could to reach out with my magic, but nothing came. I shouted in protest, my cries ignored by the bitch as she flung the swarm of metal forward. Envy ducked, tossing out a glowing silver ball from under her cloak. I cocked my head curiously, wondering what this would do. The glow expanded as the device began emitting a high pitched sound. The sound cut through the air, shattering every piece of metal that Spark had launched at her.

"So am I," Envy said. "End your life I will, it is not I you will kill." The zebra pushed forward, battering at the purple alicorn with her front hooves. Spark grunted as Envy struck, the striped mare putting all of her effort into pummeling the lavender mare. Spark snarled and fired up her horn, launching into a teleportation spell. She reappeared behind the zebra, striking the other mare in the back with a particularly spectacular buck. Envy soared into the wall with a sickening ***crunch*** and fell to the ground. Spark grinned widely.

"Enough!" I shouted, finally catching her attention.

"Oh what? Leave me alone, little Star. You're not going to stop me," Spark said, glaring at me. I growled at her, causing her to chuckle cruelly.

"No. But you really need to think about the wear and tear you're placing on my body, you stupid bitch," I said angrily. I knew just by looking at myself that I was going through hell. Combine that with the amount of magic that Spark had used up in just this short period of time meant that my body couldn't hold out for much longer without needing a whole lot of unconscious downtime.

"Please. I could tax your body all day long and not need to ---" Spark began to say as her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fell to the ground, passing out. I felt a familiar tug on my spectral form, one that I had seriously hoped I would feel. It was time to talk to a Virtue. The world fell away into blackness, my last sight Envy limping over to the prone form of Spark. *Serves you right, bitch.*

Victory! I thought as I looked around me, taking in the familiar scene of the circular room with the six doors. I grinned as I trotted happily into the room, waiting for the chance to speak with Generosity once more. The torch went out and the fire blazed, heading across the room. My eyes widened when I realized that they weren't going towards the door emblazoned with Rarity's cutie mark. Instead, the fire landed on the door next to it that bore the symbol of Fluttershy, the Ministry Mare of Peace. I groaned as the door opened. Having no other options, I stepped through the entrance, appearing in a secluded wooded clearing with a dirt path leading into the forest. The chirping of birds and the chatter of woodland creatures met my ears as I continued deeper into along the forest path. In the distance I could hear a mare singing, her gentle voice carrying along the wind as a chorus of chirps and squawks joined in. The path eventually opened up into a small grove, where a beautiful yellow pegasus mare was conducting what appeared to be a small collection of sparrows, blue jays, and cardinals. I stepped into the grove as quietly as possible. The pegasus barely noticed I was there, thoroughly engrossed in her choir. I let out a tiny cough, hoping to get her attention, but alas it was not heard.

"Umm, hello?" I said a little louder. The pegasus continued her singing, humming along merrily with her menagerie. I frowned. *Come on! I really need to talk to you!* I thought as I stared at the buttery pegasus.

"Hello?" I said, increasing the volume of my voice more. Still the mare continued to ignore me. I groaned, getting more frustrated by the second.

"Hey!!" I shouted, finally catching the yellow pegasi's attention. She shrieked out in fear as her bird-friends scattered. Within seconds the mare was cowering behind a tree. I sighed, realizing I had scared her. I stepped forward cautiously.

"Hey there... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," I said softly, trying to coax the mare out from behind the tree. She stepped out, shaking from head to hoof. I smiled. "There we go."

"S-s-s-sorry... old habits die hard I guess. I didn't hear you," She said so quietly I wouldn't have heard her if not for my alicorn hearing.

"That's okay. I should have probably been a little smarter about that," I said, chuckling. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess you're another of the Virtues right? Please tell me that you are." The mare smiled and nodded.

"I'm... Kindness," She said even quieter. "And you're Radiant Star right?"

"That's right. I'm so glad I'm talking to at least one of you. I was really hoping to speak with Generosity," I said in a flurry.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"It's her. Spark. She took over my body. I need to know what to do," I said, panic sharpening my tone. Kindness flinched, then smiled, shaking her head. The elegant little pegasus motioned for me to

sit next to her. I plopped down, completely unsure of what was to come next.

"I... I see. Spark? You mean Magic right?" She said. I nodded. She looked down at her hooves, a grimace on her face. "I... I don't know. She's very strong Star. It's going to take something major to get rid of her."

"What do you mean?" I said. "How do I get rid of her?"

"I... I think you're going to need to talk to Generosity and Laughter first," The kind mare replied. "They'll know what to do. They were closest to her."

"And what about you?" I asked. "How well did you know Magic?"

"We were friends, but not super close. I spent my time guiding Fluttershy through her Ministry," The pegasus responded. By this time the birds had returned to the grove, chirping along happily. I smiled.

"I just wish I knew more about her. I get -- I just feel that I could fix all this if I only had some idea about her motivations and what she wants," I said with a frustrated tone. Kindness perked up at this.

"There... That might be possible. There may be a way you can accomplish that," She said. "Some of Twilight's memories might have some answers. You just need to be able to tap into them."

"How can I do that? I can barely do anything in this form," I said. Kindness smiled softly.

"If you concentrate hard enough, you should be able to access Twilight's full range of memories. Spark can't block them from you while she's controlling your body," She stated. I looked away for a second, pondering what she was saying. If I concentrated, I could get into Twilight's memories. I could finally figure out everything that had happened! I nodded, knowing what I needed to do.

"I think I know how. If I can catch that bit -- Spark off guard, I can get past her with Lucky's help. She has some sort of distraction effect on Spark. When Spark began manifesting as a visible spirit she was able to help keep her away at times," I said, feeling enlightened about the plan at hoof. Kindness simply smiled and put her hoof on my shoulder.

"Be strong Star. This will all work out in the end. It just has to," She said softly. I smiled at the butter-colored mare.

"Thank you. Looks like your birdie friends are back now. W-Would you like to continue your singing? It was nice," I said. Kindness stood up and fluttered her wings, hovering in front of the choir of birds. She cleared her throat.

"Umm... excuse me everyone. Let's start from the top shall we?" She said confidently to her assembly. I smiled as the birds began to sing, their tones mixing together in a beautiful display of harmony. I watched the pegasus direct the chorus, and even began singing along myself, as the cheery tune eased me out of this world and into the black.

Darkness gave way to bright light as my eyes opened. I looked down, hoping that Spark's untimely fainting had allowed me to resume control. Seeing my familiar spectral blue coat, I groaned. Of course not! That would be too easy. I stood up, trying to take the measure of my surroundings. It was definitely not the Ministry of Image hub. In fact, it appeared to be some form of office in an abandoned warehouse. I looked down, seeing my real body lying strapped down to a table. Standing off to the side, looking cautiously out the window was Envy. She looked like she had been through hell, and I didn't doubt it. Spark had really done a number on the zebra. She was breathing heavily, but I could see the telltale signs of healing magic already doing their work on her wounds. *Where are we?* I thought as the striped mare turned away from the window at the sound of a groan. I looked back to

my body, seeing that Spark had awakened.

“Fuck... what happened?” She said venomously as her eyes fluttered open, locking onto the zebra in the room. “Oh. You're still around are you?” Envy glared at the alicorn.

“Regardless of how much I yearn to make you scream, a greater lust than revenge is had.” She said. “Once you are in the hooves of the Lotus Triad, I shall be far richer than anyone could ever dream.” I grinned. Wait a tick. This is my body too. The Lotus Triad is just going to end up killing me... I thought as I watched the scene before me unfold. I glared at Spark.

“Yes, well. That's unfortunately not going to happen,” Spark replied, her horn glowing as her bonds unraveled before the zebra's eyes. The striped mare moved in to neutralize Spark, but the alicorn had already rolled off the table. Envy snarled, tossing a knife out from under her cloak towards the lavender mare. The blade flickered with Spark's magic and shot back towards Envy, striking the zebra in the right shoulder and pinning her against the wall. Spark's horn flared with power, yanking another knife and plunging it into Envy's left shoulder as well. The zebra yelled in pain as the magic that was healing her tried to keep up.

“Now then. Let's have a little chat you and I, shall we?” Spark said. “I want to know everything you know about Pride.” I looked over at Spark with confusion. *Pride?* I thought. *Why does she want to know about her?*

“Why... why are you interested in her?” Envy said, grunting in pain.

“I seek to remove her from this world. She is a false Goddess, and does not deserve to live,” Spark replied. “Tell me, and I may make this easy on you.”

“Fuck... you. I shall never betray my brothers and sisters,” The zebra said, spitting at Spark. The alicorn snarled, reaching out with a hoof and smacking the other mare across the face.

“Tell me what I want to know,” She said. “That bitch is going to get what she deserves.” Envy groaned, trying to struggle against the knives holding her to the wall.

“If you want to know more about her... about us... find Stable 180. That's... that's all I can tell you,” She managed to say through bits of pain.

“Stable 180?” I asked, knowing full well that Envy couldn't hear me. “Where the hell is that?”

“Where is Stable 180 located?” Spark echoed. “Tell me. You stupid, stupid zebra.” I could see that even with the healing magic, Envy was in a great amount of pain. Her eyes kept sliding closed, jerking open whenever Spark twisted one of the knives holding her up.

“I... I don't... Wrath. Speak to Wrath. He will tell you what you need to know. But warning upon you, he will kill you. He is not as weak as I am,” She said. Spark shot me a glance.

“I take it you know who she is talking about?” The alicorn said, addressing me directly. I glared at her.

“Why would I help you again?” I replied.

“Because, you obviously have been planning something behind my back with the green bitch. I also know you want to know about Pride as much as I do,” She said angrily. Envy groaned and looked up at the alicorn.

“Who are you talking to?” She said weakly. Spark snarled and glared at her.

“Shut up. I'm done with you,” The purple mare replied. Envy went silent, staring death at the mare.

“Fine. Wrath is located at Colter Field. He's a minotaur, and the leader of the Cult of Iron Will. You seriously didn't pick up on this when we met the Minotaur?” I asked, clearly confused. Spark stared at

me blankly.

"I don't pay attention to everything you do Star. You're kind of boring," She replied. I glowered at her. She turned her attention back towards Envy.

"Now then, what to do with you?" She said, grinning. Envy snarled weakly and struggled fruitlessly against the knives pinning her to the wall.

"When I get out of here Ministry Mare... I will find you. This I swear," She said, continuing on to speak in her native tongue. It sounded rough through her ragged breathing, but if I had to guess it was some sort of curse.

"Listen here, you," Spark said, coming in close to the striped mare's face. "I'm going to make this perfectly clear. You will stay away from us. If I so much as smell you, I will end you." Envy simply stared at her, saying nothing. Spark pulled out another of her blades from the zebra's cloak with her magic, hovering it in the air between the two mares.

"Spark! That's enough!" I shouted. Spark turned and glared at me, venom in her eyes. She whirled back to Envy furiously, sending the knife soaring towards the zebra's head. "No!!!" I yelled as I heard a ***thunk*** noise. I stared past the purple alicorn. The blade was embedded in the wall next to Envy's head and her eyes were closed. Spark grinned widely.

"We're done here," She said, stepping through me and proceeding to the door. Pushing it open, she headed into the warehouse as I followed behind. The warehouse was barren and had definitely seen better days. Rubble lay strewn about the floor and dust covered everything in sight. I strode alongside the bitch controlling my body.

"Your friends are nearby. I can only assume they came looking for you." Spark said. I glared at her, but said nothing. Spark latched onto the main warehouse door with her magic, easily pushing it open. We stepped out of the warehouse and turned onto the corner, seeing Violet and the others standing at the far end of the street. Spark waved as we made our way down to them. Violet hugged her as we made contact. I could see Lucky on the other side of the group. She nodded at me.

"You alright?" Violet said, breaking the hug. Spark nodded. I stepped past the group as they tried to figure out where they were going next in order to speak to Lucky. She patted me on the shoulder as I trotted up next to her.

"What happened to you?" She asked. I could hear Spark explaining how she just managed to escape Envy. *Liar*, I thought before turning my attention back to Lucky.

"Well. She got knocked out and I got to speak with one of the Virtues, just not the one I wanted to," I said. "But I have an idea. I need you to distract Spark for me. I think... if you're messing with her I can get into Twilight's memories."

"Twilight's memories? Why would you need to do that for?" Lucky asked.

"Something Kindness said. I think they might be able to help me figure out what happened with Spark," I replied as we followed behind the rest of the group. We had been keeping to ourselves, hoping that Spark hadn't noticed what was going on. I nodded to Lucky and moved in a little closer to Violet and the others. They were talking amongst themselves while walking through the ruined city. There wasn't a soul in sight. I wondered briefly where we were in relation to the Ministry of Image. I lifted my foreleg to check my PipBuck and sighed. Not having one kind of sucked. Instead, I tried to pick up on what my friends were saying. Spark was walking ahead of the others, keeping to herself and reading the book from the MoI hub.

"Everything is fine Violet," Patch said quietly. "She's had a hard time. If I were her, I'd be feeling

pretty nutty too.”

“I know, but I just can't shake it. Something just... Isn't right,” Violet said. I cheered silently. I knew my love was smart, but I was ecstatic that she was already questioning things. Steeljack nodded.

“Do you know where we're going now?” He asked quietly. “I mean, she really isn't being too up front about things.”

“Star wants to investigate Pride now. I'm not sure what changed at the Ministry of Image. She's been looking at that book this entire time. She said there's answers in it, but... I'm not sure,” Violet replied. “It kind of scares me. There's something wrong with it.” She stepped forward up next to Spark and nudged her, getting the purple alicorn's attention.

“Yes sweetheart?” I heard Spark say. I growled. I really wanted to kill this bitch. Not just for taking my body, but for acting this way towards Violet. I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. I needed to focus to get into Twilight's memories. I noticed Lucky moving into position and grinned. It was almost time.

“Do you know where we're headed to? Just wanting to know so I can mark it on my PipBuck,” My marefriend asked. Spark smiled and tucked the book away.

“Sure. I've been thinking about what we talked about before. Heading to Colter Field to see this Wrath fellow that the Minotaur told us about.” She replied. Violet nodded.

“I see. And anything more from that book?” My love said. Spark shook her head.

“No. Nothing yet. There're answers here Violet, I can just feel it,” The purple mare said. I nodded over at Lucky, who moved into position and began to chatter animatedly at the other alicorn. I could definitely see that she was distracting the mare. A twitch had begun to develop behind Spark's eyes as she tried to stare death at Lucky without being noticeable by the others. I focused as hard as I could and jumped forward into my body. I felt myself latch on and I could hear Spark's voice in the back of my head shouting at me as I began to melt away into pure darkness.

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I felt my hooves touch down on a strange rolling landscape that was spread out before me. The sky was dark and the ground was checkered, like I was standing on a giant chess set. I trotted along, trying to figure out where I had ended up. Where am I? I thought as I came across a tree. No... wait. A tree house? Yes, it was a tree house that looked a lot like Twilight's. I stepped up to the tree house's door and knocked on it. No answer. I pushed open on the door and stepped inside.

“Hello?” I called out. The interior of the tree house looked much like a library. There was nopony around, no sense of any presence, no noise or movement. I trotted into the center of the library, looking around at the books on the shelves. They didn't have any titles on any of their spines. I sighed and picked one up off the shelf. I opened it, my eyes widened. The pages inside were moving pictures, showing various scenes from Twilight's life. Memories, I thought. Interesting. I wonder which one I should be looking for. I looked up at the ends of the book shelves, noticing the pictographs on the sides of them. A glimmer of light crossed my eyes, revealing a stylized drawing of the Element of Magic tiara. I trotted over to the shelf, seeing only one book sitting there. It too bore the Element tiara on its cover. I opened it up and felt the light of the memory wash over me as I fell into it.

It was a familiar feeling being in Twilight's body. Having experienced many of the original Ministry Mare's memories before, I was used to it by now. I was in a long hallway filled with stained glass windows. It appeared to be one of the palace hallways. At the far end of the hall was a massive door with a horn lock in the center of it surrounded by six colored jewels. I looked up at the stained glass as

I walked, taking in the scenes portrayed on them. A group of six ponies surrounding a single wicked alicorn. A group of six ponies and a draconequus set in stone. Six ponies, six Elements. I stopped at the door.

“Alright, we're here. And we're alone. You can show yourself now,” I said aloud. A giggle burst from my right as my shadow took form, turning into a very familiar dark maned unicorn. Spark had a very wide grin on her face.

“So. You finally decided to accept my offer?” The dark mare asked. I nodded.

“Please. Show me how I can save my brother,” I replied. “The sickness is getting worse every day. I'm afraid. I don't want to lose him Spark.”

“And you won't, my dear, sweet Twilight. I have a plan to save your poor brother,” The Element of Magic responded. She motioned at the door. “All you have to do is open this door, and I can access the Elements of Harmony. With them, I can come up with a spell that will save Shining Armor.”

“I... I don't know... what if Luna finds out we're here,” I said nervously. Spark grinned.

“She won't, trust me. And if she does, you can say that you needed the Elements for that one project of yours,” She said. My eyes widened.

“You mean Gardens? Well I suppose if I wired the Elements directly into the Crusader Maneframe, it would boost the power output exponentially,” I said, thinking about the implications that the megaspell could have with the power being reinforced by Equestria's most powerful magical artifacts.

“Twilight sweetie, focus please. We're talking about your brother here, remember?” Spark interjected. I sighed, and nodded. I summoned my magic, feeling the otherness flow through me as Spark lent me her power. The door before us opened easily, revealing six pedestals inside that each held a gleaming necklace along with a golden tiara. Spark grinned and stepped into the room.

“Alright. Time to get to work. Oh giiiiirls!” She called out into the dark room. The gems on the necklaces began to glow as the Elements of Harmony were activated. Spark was gleeful as she pushed her magic into the swirling rainbow of color. It was stunningly beautiful. But as I watched from within Twilight's body, something felt... off about it as well. There was something clearly sinister about Spark's intentions. I could feel it even then. How long ago did the Element of Magic get this bad? I thought as I watched the dark maned unicorn work her terrible magic. The rainbow spiral coalesced into a flash of magic, temporarily blinding me. When my eyesight recovered, I could see a scroll lying in the center of the room. Spark grinned as she picked up the piece of paper with her magic.

“Here it is. I hope you know, Twilight, this is very special magic,” She said, handing me the scroll. I looked down at the scroll, seeing a mixture of languages from changeling to zebra. I looked up at Spark.

“What does it do?” I asked curiously. Spark grinned.

“In order for this to work, you're going to need to do something very hard. You're going to have to let your brother die,” She said. My eyes widened.

“But... I thought this spell was supposed to save him! It was supposed to be a cure!” I shouted at the dark mare.

“Trust me. This is better than a cure. This is a way you can bring your brother back into a healthy body,” Spark replied. “Face the truth Twilight: your brother's body is dying. His shield spell will only keep the sickness at bay for so long. With this... with this you can bring him back to life, completely healthy, even better than he was before.” I looked down at the scroll again, considering the horrible implications. *If there was a way you could bring a loved one back... would you?* I thought. *Even if it*

meant the complete subjugation of another?

"If I do this... what do you want? You mentioned payment before," I asked suddenly. Payment? I thought. What does she mean by payment? Spark smiled knowingly.

"Yes. I would like just one thing Twilight. I want to survive. I want to live forever. Immortal. I want you to use this spell, this one I just gave you... to give me my own body," She replied. I cocked my head at her. *Of course*, I thought. *That's what she wants*.

"Exactly how am I supposed to do that?" I asked.

"There will come a time when you will need to leave the completed spell for another to cast. It will give me a body, one that is strong and will bear my spirit," She said. "I will be drawn into that body, and it will serve me, forever. It's the least you could do for little old me, after everything I've helped you with."

"And that's all you want if you let me use this to save Shining Armor?" I replied. She nodded. "Deal," I said instantly. "I'll do it. Just give me the power to save my brother."

"Excellent," Spark said. "Now then, let's get out of here before we're seen." She dissipated into nothing. I sighed and turned back to the open door, igniting my horn and gently closing it. I trotted back down the hallway, looking up at the stained glass windows. I stopped for a moment, pausing to look at the one of the Six defeating Nightmare Moon.

"You can come out now Radiant Star," I heard Twilight say. *What?* I thought as I felt myself become disconnected from the unicorn's body. Suddenly I was standing in front of Twilight. She stared intently at me. "So. You saw that I assume?"

"How...? How am I here?" I asked, clearly confused.

"This is a dream Star. This is a real memory, but because it's my memory, it's inside your head," She replied. "Because of that, I can see you and you can see me."

"So this isn't real?" I said, cocking my head at her.

"It is, and it isn't. But that's neither here nor there at the moment. I'm here to tell you something important," Twilight replied. "If you're here, that means Spark is in control. Am I right?"

"Yeah... but how did you...?" I sputtered. Twilight raised a hoof, silencing me.

"I was prepared for this. To show you this memory. To show you where it all started. You needed to see this," She said. "You needed to know. So you can beat her."

"Why did she do this? Why did she push you to this?" I asked, motioning to the door behind her. Twilight sighed.

"At some point during the war, I began to notice that she started appearing to me. She spoke of power and how she could help me end the conflict," Twilight began. "At first she seemed like she only wanted to help, but after a while... she started scaring me."

"Scaring you?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"She began coming up with these crazy plans. They all involved forbidden magic, and she started becoming... dark. She took sick pleasure in her ideas, and how they would kill the zebras," She replied.

"What changed?" I asked.

"Are you familiar with the story of Nightmare Moon?" Twilight asked. I nodded. "When my friends and I turned Nightmare Moon back into Princess Luna, I think we started this whole miserable thing. I

think the whole war, all of the pain we caused. It all came from that single event. I think Nightmare corrupted the Elements of Harmony, twisted them for her own selfish sick game.”

“So what does this have to do with what just happened?” I said.

“This was the point that I realized something was truly wrong with Spark. When my brother... when Shining Armor was afflicted with the Littlehorn agent. I felt as if everything in my world was breaking down. I was... desperate. I only wanted to save him. Spark offered the way to do so,” Twilight said. “But the way she offered... I tried to understand it. I tried to understand why Spark wanted to survive so badly. And now, I know why. She wanted you.”

“Me? Why am I so important? Why was I chosen for this?” I asked. Twilight sighed.

“Because I chose you. I chose you to receive my power, for this exact reason. To defeat her for good and put the Elements right again. It's all her, Star. It's always been her. She's the corrupt one,” She pleaded with me.

“Well that's all fine and dandy, but how am I supposed to defeat her if I'm not in control of my body?!” I shouted at the lavender mare. She smiled.

“There is a memory orb in your possession that came from my memories. You found it with the ones in Tenpony Tower, correct?” She said. I nodded blankly. That was the orb Pride tried to get me to view. What does it have to do with anything? I thought. “You'll need to trick Spark into activating the orb. Once she does, I'll be able to hold her from there.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I said. I still wasn't sure if this whole thing was even real or not, let alone if the mare was telling the truth.

“The power I held is locked in that orb. When the Twilight Society cast the spell it stuffed Spark into your head, and my power into the memory orb. This was purely intentional. Spark was always supposed to think she had won. That, Star, is her greatest weakness. She thinks she has you now, but her control is not absolute,” Twilight explained. “The same spell that you used to access my memories is called a mind dive spell. It will allow you to access the dreams and thought of another. I trust you know the best way to use this.” I nodded, thinking of a particular green filly that had been extremely suspicious of Spark. Twilight's eyes shifted from left to right as she continued. “Now you've gotta go now before she figures out I was here. Be safe Radiant Star. I will see you soon.” The world around us began to filter into white as I called out to the mare to find out more. Soon, it was the only color I saw.

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I reappeared in filth and ruin, staring at my nose embedded in a rotten plaster wall. Panicked, I thrashed backwards and fell over. I frantically hoofed at my nose, finding no damage at all. I looked up at Lucky's giggle, and remembered I wasn't currently flesh and blood. My mind whirled with a maelstrom of bits and pieces of information, the most important of which was tricking Spark into looking at Twilight's memory orb. I looked around, realizing we were in a dark room. Violet and the others were laying about. They appeared to be sleeping. Spark was nowhere to be seen. Lucky smiled.

“Hey,” She said. “Are you alright?” I nodded.

“I'm... I'm fine. Where are we?” I asked.

“Abandoned store,” She replied. As the darkness coalesced into shapes, I could see that we were behind a counter of some sort with a register terminal attached to it. “Stopped here after you went in.”

“And Spark? Where is she?” I said. Lucky motioned for me to stand and pointed at the far end of the

room. I popped up over the counter and looked in the direction she indicated. Spark stood at the end of the room, engrossed in the book from the Ministry of Image. I wondered if Violet even knew that the fake me was awake. I looked back down at my love, wishing and hoping that someday I could hold her again. If I ever got that chance, I swore to Celestia that I would never let go. I looked over at Lucky.

“Well, while she's distracted, we can talk. I'm assuming we're still on our way to Colter Field?” I asked. Lucky nodded. “Good. That will give us some time to come up with a plan.”

“What do you mean?” The green mare asked.

“I need to contact Violet. You've seen it, she's already suspicious of her. We need her help. If she can expose Spark, the others will help,” I said, motioning to my sleeping lover. “Any ideas?” Lucky shrugged.

“Maybe that book Spark has been looking at holds some idea,” She offered. I looked over at Spark and thought about what Twilight had told me about her. Quite frankly, she scared the hell out of me. I nodded and slowly made my way over to the purple alicorn. She was so focused on the book, she didn't see me as I stepped up next to her. However, something told me she knew I was there.

“So... you're back,” She said flatly. I sighed.

“Hello Spark,” I replied.

“That was a bit of a stunt you pulled there. I can tell I'm going to have to keep a close eye on you,” She said, glaring up at me from the book. I grinned.

“I told you already. I'm going to get my body back,” I said. “You are not going to win this fight. The fact that I'm still here must mean you're not in total control.” Spark snarled.

“So... is that what you think? You think I couldn't get rid of you like that? Is that what she told you?” The alicorn said. I stared at her. A stirring behind us alerted Spark to the sound of Violet waking up. She quietly made her way across the room, stepping through me and placing a hoof on Spark's shoulder.

“Star? Come on, you need to get some rest. This isn't healthy,” She said. Spark glared at her.

“Violet. I'm kind of busy. This is really important,” She said, trying to do her best to sound normal, instead coming off kind of bitchy. Violet frowned.

“Fine. I see how it is,” She said curtly, turning about and heading back over to Steeljack and Patch. I looked back at the spirit of Magic.

“She's gonna figure you out, you know that right?” I said. “She's already suspicious.”

“Let her. By the time she does I'll have complete control,” She started to say. I smiled as she realized what she had said.

“I knew it. You aren't in total control,” I said. Spark glared at me and stood, placing the book back into her saddlebags. She trotted back over to the group, lying down next to Violet.

“I'm sorry,” I heard her say softly. “You're right. I need the rest. Good night Violet.” Violet sighed.

“I'm sorry too. Things have just been a little too crazy lately,” She replied. “Good night.” I groaned and sat down next to Lucky.

“How am I supposed to talk to Violet? I can't even get close enough to Spark to look at that book,” I said. “It'd be so much easier if I could just dive into her dreams like I did into Spark.” My eyes lit up as I remembered what Twilight had said. “Wait. That's it. Twilight told me that I could use the same

spell to access her dreams.”

“You sure? Would that even work?” Lucky asked curiously.

“Twilight said it would work. It's worth a shot,” I replied, standing and moving over next to Violet, who was now sleeping. I smiled and tried to focus hard on her, hoping that she was dreaming. I reached down and tried to force myself into that dream. I felt resistance, but maintained my focus and powered through... Finally, I felt myself fall away into the nothingness of Violet's dream.

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I was looking down at my love, a broad grin across her face as she nuzzled my neck sweetly. I sighed and leaned into the gentle embrace.

“Ohh... Star, how I've missed you,” She murmured. I nickered and kissed her on the cheek. I looked around, examining the area. Within the mercurial nature of dreams, this could change at any moment, but for now we were in a fancy bed in a nondescript hotel room. Violet was lying next to me in a position that suggested a heavy amount of sexy time was going to happen soon. *Dirty littly filly. So this is what she dreams about?* I thought as I kissed her deeply again, doing my best to make this look like the dream was still continuing.

“I love you...” I breathed, nuzzling my green love. Violet grinned and sighed, bringing her forehoof up to rub along my neck.

“I love you too. It's really you isn't it?” She asked softly. I looked at her with wide eyes.

“Always the smart one weren't you?” I replied, earning a nod from my marefriend.

“The other one, she's not you is she?” Violet said, her eyes filling with tears. I shook my head in response.

“Spark,” I said simply. “She's taken over. Since the Ministry of Image.” A soft 'No...' echoed from Violet's lips. “She forced me out of my body, but she doesn't have total control. She can be expelled, but I need your help to do it Violet. Only you can do it.”

“W-W-what do you need me to do?” She said.

“There's a memory orb in my saddlebags. It was one of the ones that we found in Tenpony. The one with Twilight's cutie mark on it. You need to get Spark to activate it,” I said. Violet sighed and nuzzled my neck again.

“Isn't she going to be suspicious when I try to get her to view a memory orb? You know as well as I do how much I hate it when you look at those things,” She replied.

“I know, but I'm sure a clever, sexy, intelligent pony like you can figure out a way. It's the only chance that we have to get her out of my body and under control,” I pleaded with her.

“I... I'll try. What is she planning to do Star?” She said.

“I'm not completely certain, my love. I know she's trying to maintain control of my body,” I said, nuzzling my face into the crook of Violet's neck.

“The bitch,” Violet grumbled, and I choked back a snort of laughter.

“I know, right? Anyway, I know she's after Pride, probably to kill her. I'm not even certain about that, she's been spending so much time in the black book... There's a good chance we haven't seen what she's really up to, yet, and I don't care.”

“What?” Violet said, surprise evident in the tension of her neck. I kissed her gently, then continued.

“Whatever she wants, I don’t. If we can get her into the Twilight orb, we should be able to lock her away or destroy her or... Or something! And I don’t care what she’s up to once she’s gone.”

“What happens now?” Violet said softly. I shrugged and pulled her into a sweet embrace.

“I need to go and try and speak with somepony. Find some more answers. Keep going on to Colter Field. I have a feeling we’ll need to speak with Wrath anyways. You’ll know when the time is right,” I said, grinning. Violet kissed me again. I pulled out of it and embraced her one more.

“Can’t you stay a little longer?” She asked, giving me the saucy bedroom eyes. I sighed and rolled my eyes.

“You dirty little filly,” I said aloud as I leaned in, kissing her on the neck and taking in her sweet scent and a hint of chocolate. “I guess it couldn’t hurt to stay a little while...”

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I reappeared next to Violet, who was still sleeping. She had a goofy expression on her face, which made me giggle. Even in my noncorporeal state, I felt warm and flushed. *Don't worry Violet. Everything will work out*, I thought, recalling the events of her dream. I stood, looking over at Lucky as I felt my blush intensify.

“It worked,” I said, the smile on my face passing into grin territory. Lucky grinned back, an almost predatory sparkle in her eyes.

“So what now?” She asked.

“Now... we wait, and I try to talk to Generosity and Laughter. There’s still a few things I need to fill in about Spark, and I think they’ll be the ones to know them,” I replied. With the sudden change characteristic of the city, the sun rose above the buildings, filling the room with warm light and awakening the ponies within. Before long, and with a few bouts of glaring between Spark and I, we were following behind the group in their trek through the ruined city of Chicacolt. Everypony was quiet as we walked. Violet kept shifting her gaze over to Spark every few seconds, the purple alicorn seemingly in her own world.

Patch and Steeljack were extremely subdued, having not been able to talk to Violet, but knowing something was going on. Violet was almost absurdly affectionate, rubbing up against Spark and nuzzling her. I couldn’t figure out what my mare was up to, until I saw her literally knock the black book aside to plant a kiss on Spark’s muzzle. The devious and clever trick brought a smile to my face.

What are you up to Spark? I thought several times throughout the journey. I knew that Spark didn’t have total control yet, but why was she not trying to take it? The most likely possibility, I mused, was that she couldn’t, or didn’t know how. Which made Violet’s book-blocking almost impossibly helpful.

The journey through the city was also very quiet in terms of action, which was surprising. I would have assumed with the huge bounty on my head, more ponies would be after me. I figured that was due to Envy, whether she had warned off any others, or they had heard about how bad Spark had trounced the zebra. Bored, I started paying attention to the city itself while we walked. At first glance, you really couldn’t tell that Chicacolt had been hit by any sort of megaspell at all. Many of its tallest buildings, while in bad shape from the ravages of time, appeared to be relatively intact. I asked Lucky about this, hoping she might know something about it.

“What, you mean you don’t know?” She said. I shook my head. “Ohh... that’s because Chicacolt wasn’t really hit by a traditional megaspell. It was destroyed from inside.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, cocking my head at her.

“Well. Chicacolt apparently had this tower defense system that was supposed to take down any conventional missiles, but it went haywire. Some ponies believe the zebras infiltrated the city and took control of it, but that it ended up killing them too,” Lucky explained. “Sure, the city got hit by neighboring radiation from the other cities that were hit. Everywhere got hit by that stuff, but that only ghoulished some ponies. Any other ponies that died were killed by the pulse from that thing.” She pointed at a building far in the distance. I realized after a few moments that she was pointing at Filly's Tower.

“You mean to tell me, the building that the Minotaur lives in houses the city's most powerful defense system and it was responsible for killing this whole city?” I asked, completely flabbergasted at such a thing. I made a mental note to definitely ask the Minotaur about this later on after I had gotten my body back.

“Crazy stuff huh?” Lucky said. I nodded.

“How do you know all about this?” I said, keeping a close eye on the rest of the group. They were continuing their walk in silence.

“Well. I did actually come from a Stable after all. One near the city. After it opened, we started putting together the pieces of what had happened. Comparing stories and putting knowledge together about Chicacolt,” Lucky replied.

“That explains so much,” I said, grinning and poking the green mare in the side. Lucky sighed. “Hey, I'm only kidding. I did the same sort of thing with the Followers. What made you leave your Stable to begin with?”

“These for the most part,” She said, flapping her wings to indicate them. “That and my horn. I was a freak, an ‘anomaly’ they only put up with because they didn't have a choice. I hated them for it.”

“I'm... I'm sorry. I... I know how you feel. We alicorns have always been shunned by the Wasteland as a whole,” I said, sighing and extending a wing over the spectral mare. She smiled.

“Thanks. How do you do it? How do you put up with it? I... All those years ago, everypony around me just treated me like I was a child. They all hated me, just for what I was,” She said.

“I... I guess it's because I have Violet maybe? She always sees the best in everything, and she always knows how to make me smile,” I said. “Even if everyone I met tried to shoot at me, she would still love me. It's that kind of love that keeps me going.”

“I see... Star?” She asked. I looked at her quizzically. “Do you ever think I'll be able to be real again?” I sighed. I had been sort of dreading this question from the green mare.

“Lucky. You are real. You've shown me that with every action you've taken. That's important,” I said confidently. “I made a promise to you, and I'm going to do it the right way this time. I will find a way to fix you.”

“I... I'm not sure Star. I'm not sure you can fix this. I don't want to see what happened at the Ministry of Image happen again,” She said. I grinned.

“No worries. Once that bitch is out of my body, we're going to get you back into yours,” I replied. I realized I had been paying little attention to the rest of the group as I almost walked through Violet. They had stopped. I looked forward and realized why.

Colter Field. We had arrived.

The ancient sports stadium stood tall over the dead terrain, guarded by an amazingly intact barbed wire fence. The stadium itself certainly had seen better years. One side of the stadium's box office had

caved in completely, and the ground surrounding the structure was pockmarked with numerous holes that indicated the presence of mines. The stadium had its rain cover up, not that it did any good as there was a large hole in the center of it. Despite its age however, the stadium was clearly being used still. Live spotlights dotted the sides of the building, moving back and forth and spraying their light into the darkening sky. Outside of the main entrance into the stadium stood two minotaur guards.

“What's the plan?” Violet piped up.

“For now, we rest and take a few watches on the place. I don't want to go in blind,” Spark said, saying something smart for the first time since I met her.

“Agreed,” Steeljack said. “There's an old trolley station just up the street. Saw it as we were walking here. We can hole out there for the time being.” Spark nodded and the group turned about, trotting along the street towards the station. I took one last look at Colter Field, and then followed behind Lucky. The station was indeed abandoned. It appeared that there had been ponies waiting for the trolley when the world ended. Several skeletons littered the station floor. My friends began setting up for the night, Spark stepping away for a moment. She pulled out the book once more and sat in the corner, studying it intently. Violet grimaced and moved quietly over to Steeljack and Patch. I stepped in closer to hear what they were saying.

“We have a problem,” Violet said softly.

“What do you mean?” Patch replied.

“Star. She's not who she says she is,” The green unicorn mare said. “She's been replaced by Spark.”

“Spark?” Steeljack inquired, casting a glance at the corner where Spark lay.

“Yeah. She's been inside of Star's head all of this time,” Violet said. “Star is... she's outside of her body somehow.”

“Okay, I'm sort of confused here,” Patch said, pointing over at the purple alicorn. “You mean that isn't Star over there?” Violet shook her head.

“We need to help Star now. She told me how to do it. But I'm going to need your help. It's going to be highly dangerous, but it's the only way to get Star back,” She replied.

“What do you need us to do?” Steeljack said. Violet grinned and gathered the two earth ponies into a hug.

“Knew I could count on you. There's a memory orb in her saddlebags. You remember the ones from Tenpony Tower?” She said. Steeljack nodded. “We need to get Spark to activate the one with Twilight's cutie mark on it.”

“How... how are we going to do that?” Patch asked. I smiled as I watched my friends plan. Pretty soon I was going to be back in my own body. I could hardly wait. I looked back at Lucky. I had promised that I would help get her back into her body, and I meant it. The spectral mare was lying down, looking at her hooves. I sighed as I stepped over to her.

“Lucky?” I said. She looked up for a moment. “I'm going to be gone for a bit. I need to try to speak to Generosity. Will you be alright?”

“Yeah. I'll be fine,” The unicorn/pegasus replied. I grinned and turned towards the corner where Spark sat, still engrossed in the black book. I focused hard on the purple alicorn, trying to find that place in my mind that took me to the Virtues. I felt a familiar tug on my spectral self as I dove into Spark's body and the world fell away into darkness.

I looked around, grinning at my triumph. I was standing in the circular room once more, surrounded by the six doors emblazoned with the cutie marks of the Ministry Mares. I sat and waited for the next door to open. The torch doused itself, sending its fiery package towards the door marked with three balloons. *Okay... not the one I really wanted to talk to, but it will have to do*, I thought as I trotted to the door and stepped inside. The doorway opened up into a large bakery. The sweet sticky smell of sugar assaulted my nostrils as I made my way into the main kitchen. The happy sound of a mare humming a joyful tune filled the room. A bouncy pink earth pony was zipping about the kitchen, tending to the various cakes and cupcakes she was baking.

“Hello?” I asked. The pink pony stopped what she was doing immediately, pouncing upon with me with wild abandon.

“Ohmygosh I've been waiting for you for so long and now you're here I can hardly believe it and do you like cupcakes ohmygosh I'm not done with them yet I hope you don't mind I'll get them done quickly!” The pink mare exploded with joy. I could barely keep up with the earth pony's exuberant behavior.

“Oomph. I'm fine, trust me. I don't need any cupcakes,” I said, trying to keep the mare from attacking me with hugs.

“Oh. You're probably a pie pony then do you like pies I like pies I like cherry pie do you like cherry pie?” The mare continued. I had no idea how the pink pony could even say things that fast.

“No really, it's okay. Are... you Laughter?” I asked. The earth pony nodded animatedly.

“Yup that's me! Laughter is my name, making ponies smile is my game!” She said, bouncing about the kitchen once more. She stopped for a moment and stared at me. “And you're Radiant Star. The Ministry Mare! The mare who buried Pinkie Pie!”

“You saw that?” I said. The mare nodded again excitedly, before lunging forward and hugging me tight enough that I feared for my ribs.

“Yeppers! That was a really nice thing for you to do. I've never met a nicer alicorn, I mean Princess Celestia was pretty nice but she never really had the opportunity to do something like that and you did and you DID and it was just wonderful!” Laughter exclaimed, squeezing me even tighter before releasing the embrace.

“I... I just felt so bad for her,” I replied. “She tried so hard to reunite with Twilight. I couldn't just leave her there.”

“And for that, I thank you. Pinkie was the only bearer of Harmony that truly understood the nature of Laughter. I loved her so much,” The pink mare said sadly.

“Look. I came here to ask you about Spark,” I said, catching Laughter's attention.

“Spark? What about her?” She replied. The pink mare's curly hair instantly deflated at the mention of the Element of Magic. I felt as if I was speaking to a distinctly different pony now.

“You were as close to her as Pinkie was to Twilight. She's in control of my body now, Laughter. I need to know why she's doing this. What happened to her?” I said, trying to keep some measure of control over myself. To be fair, I was angry at these Virtues. They had worked their ways into my life and I was pissed.

“Spark... she was my bestest friend, even before Twilight ignited the Elements of Harmony,” The mare said. “After all, Laughter is the best kind of Magic. But there was something... wrong with her.”

“Wrong?” I asked. Laughter nodded solemnly.

"She was... wrong. Corrupted. She had these grand ideas for the six of us to live on. It was almost like she saw the end coming," She replied. "She... she knew these strange things."

"What kind of things?" I said.

"She knew all sorts of things about zebra and changeling magic, as well as how to use them. Things that she never should have known," Laughter said. I sighed.

"I saw this memory where Spark convinced Twilight to take possession of the spell that put her into my head. I could sense that something was completely wrong about her," I explained. Laughter nodded.

"Twilight wanted to save her brother so badly. She would have done anything, including give in to Spark's delusions of grandeur," The pink mare said.

"Spark is definitely deluded. Thank you so much Laughter. I know things have been bad, but I promise I will try to fix it," I said quietly. The normally bouncy earth pony reached in and pulled me into another tight embrace.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," She said, beginning to cry into my shoulder. I smiled and hugged the poor pink mare back. Her hair instantly erupted into an explosion of curls and the widest smile I'd ever seen graced her tear-stricken face.

"Now then, how about those cupcakes? I don't want to leave you hungry after all. I made them just for you!" She exclaimed, releasing me from her hug and bouncing over to the stove. In a flash she had pulled a fresh batch of beautiful cupcakes out of the oven and frosted them. She bounded over to me and set them down.

"Oh. Alright then, I might as well," I said, picking up one of the confectioneries with my magic and popping it into my mouth. The taste was overwhelmingly sugary. I could feel my dream teeth rotting from the intensely sugary confection. I put down the half-eaten pastry and smiled.

"It's quite good. Thank you," I said, smiling. "I really should get going though. There's things I need to do, and I'm going to need to speak to Generosity before all this is through." The pink mare nodded.

"Just remember. When the time comes, if you need us let us know," She said. I grinned.

"Thank you again," I said as the world around me went into darkness and the pink mare disappeared with it.

I looked up as I reappeared. I was in darkness, my spectral body giving off a soft glow that only I could see. Spark and the others appeared to be sleeping soundly. Lucky stood in the corner, standing a solemn guard over a group of ponies who couldn't even see her. I waved, smiling as I stood up and trotted over to her.

"How'd it go?" The green mare asked.

"Pretty well. I miss anything?" I replied.

"Nothing major. They went to sleep a few hours ago. There's been a lot of activity though, down at the stadium," Lucky said. I cocked my head.

"How so?" I asked. She motioned for me to follow her, and we walked outside and up to the hilltop overlooking Colter Field. A throng of creatures, from ponies to griffins, were moving into the main doors of the coliseum. "Hmm... I wonder what's going on." That was when I saw them. A crew of minotaurs clad in power armor were sneaking their way up the street, headed right towards where my friends and Spark were holed up in the trolley station. My gaze narrowed as I realized they didn't look

too friendly.

“We'd better get back there. Hopefully this doesn't turn out like I think it will,” I said, turning away from Lucky and galloping as fast as I could towards the trolley station. Lucky followed behind as the group of minotaurs crept closer to the abandoned building. We didn't make it in time. The minotaur team beat us to the trolley station, and pounced, startling my friends awake. Within moments, the battle was over. The minotaurs held my friends and Spark within tightly wound bonds of iron. I sneered at them even though they couldn't see me. Why wasn't Spark doing anything? With her magic power, she could certainly turn the tide of the battle, even now. I began to wonder if her control was beginning to slip on its own, or if she had figured out Violet's plans and let them get captured to thwart her. I grinned as the lead minotaur stepped up to my friends.

“Welcome friends,” He said, his brusque voice commanding and powerful. “Today is your lucky day. You have been selected to compete.”

“Compete? Compete where?” Patch said angrily, struggling against her bonds. The minotaur sneered.

“Why, compete in the games of course! Especially you Ministry Mare. The Overlord wishes to see you fight. He wishes to see if you're worth turning over to the Lotus Triad or not,” He replied. Spark simply glared at the minotaur, saying nothing. Violet remained silent as well.

“What kind of games are we talking about here?” Steeljack said. The minotaur holding him chuckled.

“The kind where the strong survive, and the losers... die,” He said, grinning. I stared at Spark, catching her eye. She looked... angry. I grinned at her, mouthing the words Soon I'll be back in my body as the group of the minotaurs hoisted my friends up and began carrying them from the trolley station. I looked to Lucky and shrugged. There wasn't much I could really do about anything at this point, so I had no choice but to follow and see where this headed. I certainly hoped that Violet had a plan to get out of this. I couldn't care less about what Spark had planned.

We followed the group as they started their trek down the hill towards the stadium. I grimaced as I realized that these minotaur were most likely working for the Cult of Iron Will and the Overlord that the one had mentioned was probably Wrath. The minotaurs carried my friends around the back of the stadium, where a set of massive double doors led into the backstage area. The doors opened, revealing several minotaur guards wearing blood red cloaks. They motioned the group towards an area marked with the sign Slave Cages. I sneered at this. Of course the Cult were slavers. If I was correct about the sort of games the minotaurs had talked about, they were gladiatorial fights with slaves as the fighters. The lead minotaur chuckled as he barged his way into the slave pens, tossing my friends to the ground below. Their saddlebags and weapons were stripped from them and taken into a nearby set of secured lockers. I cringed as I watched Stargazer get locked away. When this was all over and I was back into my body, I promised I would kill every last fucking minotaur I had to in order to get my gun back. A glimmer of purple caught my eye and I turned towards it. Violet opened her mouth slightly to show Steeljack and Patch that she had managed to catch the Twilight memory orb in her teeth without being seen. I smiled. *Way to go Violet!* I thought, trying not to let Spark see my grin. She deserved what she was going to get when Violet sprung her trap.

I looked about the slave area. Several horribly underweight ponies huddled in various cages, looking deathly sick as they tried to keep warm. Another cage held several griffons, looking even worse than the ponies had. What caught my eye however, was a metal enclosure with a window. I looked inside and gasped in awe. The beast inside was dark grey, its yellow eyes glowing in the blackness. Wicked claws tipped its fingers and it was hunched over. Its hands, feet, and even its neck were bound so that it could not move at all. I realized with shock that the beast was a hellhound. I shuddered, hoping that none of my friends would have to face this horror in the arena. I trotted back over to the cage that held

my friends, noticing that each cage was electrified and that several minotaur guards patrolled the area, each of them equipped with deadly looking energy rifles. There would be no escaping this area by force, and any use of magic would be dealt with lethality.

I stopped by the cage, looking over at Lucky and sighing. It looked like we were going to have to wait after all. A thundering noise rumbled throughout the main hall as an extremely large minotaur encased in power armor stomped through the slave pen doors. He snarled and simply pointed at the cage my friends were in. *Alright then. No waiting after all*, I thought grimacing as I watched my friends get dragged out of the cage. I followed along behind as they were shoved forward into the hall.

“Walk,” The large minotaur said. With no other choice but to comply, my friends marched ahead down the long hallway. Lucky trotted beside me, an expression of worry written all over her already pained face. The hall was adorned with old war propaganda along with posters for the Chicacolt Bears, a hoofball team that apparently used to play at this old stadium. One of the posters held the sparkling face of Fluttershy, the Ministry Mare of Kindness. I chuckled at the image of the timid mare promoting such a violent sport as hoofball. The long hall ended in another large set of double doors. The minotaur in the lead pushed through the doors and the rest of the group was ushered in.

My jaw dropped at the sight of stadium's field. The field itself was long gone, having sunken deep into the earth below, leaving nothing more than a black pit. A massive circular platform of iron and steel had been built above the darkness in the center of the crevasse. Two more iron platforms stood on each side of the main platform, suspended by iron cabling. Large monitors adorned the sides of the stadium, currently displaying prewar advertisements. Sparkle Cola changed over to Fancy Buck Cakes as I watched. In the center of the stadium directly above the main platform was another platform. Hooked up to it was a forest of microphones and equipment. It appeared to be some form of announcer's booth. What was truly shocking however was the crowd. Raiders, slavers, and generally nasty ponies alike filled in every spare inch of the dilapidated stadium's seating areas.

Mixed among the ponies of the crowd were everything from griffons to minotaurs. Also sitting in various sections of the stadium were representatives from what I figured must have been every damn gang in the entire city. I sneered as I saw Lotus Petal and her Triad cronies in one section. A large group of Mexicolts sat in another. Further back, I saw the familiar brahmin and earth pony mix of the Cowpones. Finally, front and center were the bakery boys of the MMMM. My heart jumped when I saw a familiar cream colored unicorn sitting with his gang. I felt even more elated when I noticed that Danish had a cross look on his face. He did not appear to be enjoying himself in the slightest as he saw Spark and my friends ushered out of the pens. The rest of his gang shared in his silence. I supposed we had friends in the MMMM after all.

The crowd was loud and raucous, waiting for something big to happen. I was able to spot more of those red robed minotaurs lining the sides of the stadium seating. They appeared to be keeping the peace amongst the unruly bunch. My friends were pushed forward down the long set of stairs that led down to the stadium's ground level where a grouping of cages indicated that they were used for slaves. As they arrived at the bottom, the minotaur in power armor leading them sneered.

“Just the Ministry Mare and the unicorn. The other two... sit,” He said forcefully. Two of his guards grabbed Steeljack and Patch and unceremoniously deposited them in the slave pen seating. Spark growled at the minotaur in power armor as she stepped up onto the makeshift bridge, crossing over onto the main platform. Violet followed behind, a smile quirking her lips as she carefully walked across the bridge after the purple alicorn. The majority of the crowd roared in delight as it watched the two step into view. I could hear Lotus Petal screaming for blood. I nodded to Lucky and headed for the platform, which in this state was basically just walking. Spark stepped forward with a glare for me as I walked onto the edge of her platform.

“What's wrong sweetheart? Cat got your tongue?” I chided the purple mare. “You know I've been wondering why you haven't been doing anything to get yourself out of this mess. I mean, you want to be the Goddess right? Why not just subjugate them to your will?”

“Eventually, you foal,” Spark replied. “I planned for this. How else would I not get to meet this Wrath character that Envy told us about?” I sneered.

“Of course. Always planning, always waiting. Well, I've got news for you bitch. Your end game is coming soon,” I said, grinning. She growled.

“We'll see who's end-game is coming, you-,” She said, her reply cut short by a loud rumbling noise from above. I looked up, seeing a dark form land on the suspended platform to the right of the main platform. The figure was clad in another one of those blood red cloaks, but the form revealed that it was definitely a minotaur. I shuddered as the figure tossed off its cloak. The figure was definitely a male. His bulging muscles were scarred beyond belief. One of his horns was broken off, the end of it frayed and splintered. His eyes were red and bloodshot. He wore no armor, but I was fairly certain he didn't need any. What was striking about the creature were the devices attached to his arms. Iron circular bands wrapped his upper arms from his shoulders to his elbows. Injector devices lined each band, poised to strike deep into the beast's flesh. Massive gauntlets with clawed fingers sat at the end of each hand. He snarled, revealing vicious white teeth in a grin that would make anyone cringe in fear. I didn't even need to hear the roar of the crowd to know who this was. This was Wrath.

The minotaur raised his hand, silencing the crowd instantly. He turned a complete circle, his hot stare covering the entire population in the arena, before he spoke. When he did, his voice was powerful and brooding.

“My... brethren,” He said, still holding one clawed hand in the air. “Tonight! I invite you all to join us for a most... unexpected occasion.” He turned to face the crowd, which was hushed, giving the minotaur their utmost attention. “We of the Cult of Iron Will have a special present for the dregs of Chicacolt. But first, ohh before we arrive at the main event, I wish to address you all. My friends, my brothers, we are all the lost children of this great city that was burned to the ground. From its ashes we arose, taking what we needed, what we wanted. We took what we were owed my brothers!” The minotaur spun around, facing the other side of the stadium now. “And out of the senseless violence we forged a new path, one given to us by the late and great Iron Will. His teachings have shown us the path to enlightenment!”

The crowd was still, waiting for what Wrath would say next. The acolytes of the Cult stood ready, as if waiting for something to happen.

“Now, I know what you are all here to see. I promised a fight, and by Iron Will I am going to give you a fight!” Wrath shouted, inciting the roar of the crowd once more. They died down as the minotaur continued on. “But know this. The teachings of Iron Will aren't just for anyone. No. They are for the strong! There is no room for the weak in this world! We are the stronger! We are the victors! They will not block us from becoming the rulers of this forgotten city! No! When somepony tries to block ---”

“WE SMASH THEIR HEADS WITH A FUCKING ROCK!” The blood-red robed acolytes of the Cult shouted in unison. In any other place, the robed minotaurs pretending at religious ceremony would have been comical. Here, surrounded by the rusty evidence of their savagery, they were terrifying. Spark and Violet stood in the center platform and I thought that maybe for a moment that Spark actually looked afraid. Wrath chuckled with insane laughter, his grating voice echoing across the crowd.

“Yes, that's right my brethren! Smash their heads! That is what we are here tonight to see! So without

further ado, my honored guests of the evening... I give to you all the Ministry Mare!" Wrath shouted. The crowd roared once more. Screams of profanity and hatred could be heard, cursing the Ministry Mare's name. *Wow. I'm real popular*, I thought. "That's right. The Ministry Mare and her friends are with us, and not only are they our guests, but they are going to compete in the games for your entertainment." My eyes widened at this. *Oh no*, I thought as I looked down at Violet and Spark again. He wouldn't.

"And we're going to start right now! The Ministry Mare and her little green friend down there... well, should I say... her little green enemy?" Wrath said with a hint of mystery in his voice. Violet glared at Spark. I shouted, not caring that she couldn't hear me. This wasn't fair! There was no way Violet would survive in a one-on-one fight against Spark, not after the alicorn took down Envy as easily as she did. "Place your bets and take your places competitors! It's time for the event you've all been waiting for!" Two of the acolytes leaped across the crevasse and landed next to Spark and Violet. They escorted each one to the opposite ends of the platform.

"Now then, I suppose I should let you little ponies know the rules of the games! The number one rule is: FUCK the rules. Do what you have to in order to survive! The first one to kill the other is the winner. Any questions?" Wrath yelled. Spark shook her head, her eyes intent on Violet. Violet somberly shook her head as well. She stared hard at Spark, saying nothing. I noticed that she was keeping her lips tightly together, which meant she was still carrying the memory orb in her teeth. The brazen clang of a gong echoed through the arena, and the fight was on. Violet put her head down for a moment and then opened her eyes, a fury unlike what I had ever seen before from the green filly held there. She snorted and began to charge at Spark, who seemed to be surprised by the first attack.

"Violet? What are you doing sweetie?" Spark said, still trying to keep up the appearance that she was me. Violet ignored her and kept charging forward. Spark's eyes widened as she cast a teleportation spell, reappearing on the other side of the platform. Violet stopped and turned about, glaring at Spark with murder in her eyes. She stayed deathly silent. I knew it was because she'd drop the orb if she talked.

"Sweetheart? What's wrong? Why are you doing this?" Spark said, trying to sound like she was crying at the sudden betrayal from my love. Violet growled and finally opened her mouth, pulling the memory orb out with her hoof.

"Stop calling me that!" She shouted at the purple alicorn. "I know who you are, **Spark**. I want my mare back, now!" Spark's expression slipped from her smarmy pout to honest shock, before hardening into a cold, calculating smirk.

"Ah, so we finally get to the heart of the matter," She said, her voice turning silky smooth as she cackled maniacally. "I own your little Star, you pathetic wretch! Her body is mine to do with as I damn well please. The purple alicorn shrieked, before breaking out into an honest-to-Celestia peal of mad laughter. Even the minotaurs were disturbed by her insane cackling.

"Then I'm gonna make you pay for what you've done to her," Violet simply said as she charged forward. I watched with elation. *You go filly!* I thought as she got closer to the purple alicorn, hoping that the memory orb she was holding would turn the tide in this battle. Without it... I seriously worried for my lover. She never was any good at hoof-to-hoof combat and Spark clearly had an edge magically. Spark smiled, and I knew Violet was in trouble. Her horn ignited and she grabbed at my marefriend's leg, tripping her mid-charge and tossing her to the ground. Violet hit hard, groaning as she pushed herself up. She channeled her own magic into a large blast that missed cleanly, soaring past Spark's head. The alicorn laughed as she stepped to the side, not even dodging, just moving out of the way.

"Give up little Violet. You're never going to win," She said. Violet grimaced. She was worn out from the magic blast and in pain from her earlier fall.

"I don't need to win," She panted. "I just need to make you do this!" She tossed the memory orb from her right hoof right at Spark. I surmised that she hoped that the alicorn would think it was a grenade and try to lob it back with her magic. Spark snickered and put up a hoof, batting the orb to the ground.

"Oh, what do we have here?" She said, looking at the orb rolling on the ground in a circle. "I guess little Star's been in contact with you. Interfering insignificant little bitch ---" Spark never got the rest of the sentence out before Violet was upon her. Ignoring her magic, my beautiful green unicorn brought her hoof across Spark's face like a hammer on an anvil. The crowd roared in delight as blood sprayed from Spark's smashed lip, splattering on the platform. Violet roared with fury as she gathered herself, her horn lightning and even manifesting a layer of overglow.

"YOU WILL NOT TALK ABOUT MY MARE LIKE THAT!" She shouted angrily, pushing all of her magic into a single form in front of her. A makeshift blade made of magic materialized before her, the feat fueled by my love's rage and hate of the spirit that had made my life a living hell. Spark reeled back from Violet's strike, snarling. The crowd continued to scream for blood. I could hear Wrath above, laughing wildly at the spectacle. Spark grinned, forming her own blade of magic in mid-air.

"So, the gloves are off, so to speak," She said. "So be it then." She surged forward, slashing with wild abandon at the green unicorn. Violet raised her own magical blade, blocking each strike but having an increasing amount of trouble keeping up the act. By the third or fourth attack, she was running visibly ragged. Her breathing coming harsher and faster as she pitifully tried to block Spark's slash. The green blade of energy shattered beneath Spark's magical sword, knocking the unicorn mare down.

"Now then. Let's end this little game, shall we? I'm growing oh so tired of you," Spark said, grinning. Violet coughed, streams of blood spewing forth from her mouth as she glared up at the purple alicorn.

"Fuck you. It's not over yet, even if you kill me. Steeljack and Patch still know who you are," She managed to say. Spark laughed.

"Those foals are even less of a match for me than you are," She crowed. "I'm so disappointed in you, Violet. I thought you would be tougher than this. But now, it's time to finish this." Her energy blade came up, and a sadistic smile crossed her face. I shouted, tears streaming from my eyes, knowing that Violet couldn't hear me but I didn't care. The blade came across as Violet pushed herself back to try and avoid it. The energy sword struck home, catching Violet in her right foreleg just below her knee. I didn't even need to hear the slick wet cutting noise it made to know what had happened. Violet howled in pain as the green lump of flesh that was the bottom of her leg went flying. The crowd roared loudly with glee while I shouted and cried until my voice was hoarse. Spark spared me a glance, grinning wickedly at my distress, malice in her lavender eyes. Violet continued to howl as she tried to get away from the purple alicorn, drawing her attention once more.

"Oh, trying to escape are we? I'm not done with you yet filly. I'm going to make you suffer," She said, stomping after my injured lover. Violet shuffled across the platform on her stomach, her blood pulsing out her stump into a sickeningly shiny red trail. She stopped a short couple of feet away, flipping onto her back as Spark stood over her triumphantly. The lavender mare leaned in close to Violet's fear-stricken face. She whispered lightly, just loud enough for me to hear.

"Just think of it this way Violet. You'll get to see her after all... when you're dead," She said, bringing up her energy blade once more. Violet's expression turned from pain to a sly grin as she spat blood into Spark's eyes, blinding her temporarily.

“Fuck you,” She said, her blood smearing her face. Her remaining hoof came up and across, and I saw something released from it fly into the air. I realized that it was the memory orb as I saw the purplish gleam streak upwards towards Spark's horn. The orb connected and activated.

Violet had told me, in the past, that memory orbs didn't do anything when activated. The user just sat there with the orb stuck to their horn. This was different. Purple lightning arced out of the orb, wracking the alicorn's body (my body!) with agonizing shocks. Spark howled in pain as the magic from the memory device took on a life of its own, tugging and pulling a spectral form out of my body. As the thrashing spirit-form of Spark was ripped from my flesh, my original coat color returned in flashes and sweeps. The purple lightning intensified as the mare pulled free, incinerating her in a cloud of foul smoke. I felt drained myself as the purple lightning died away.

“Star!!” Violet shouted, crawling over to my prone form. “Star!!!”

“An unexpected upset my friends! The Ministry Mare is out and so is her friend!” Wrath shouted. The crowd screamed and hollered, a near-riot contained by the red robed enforcers. I moved towards my body, hoping to get back into it so I could help Violet. She was curled up next to me, howling in pain and misery as she lay clutching the stump of her leg, next to my lifeless form. Before I could get close though, a spectral hoof shot out, stopping me dead.

“Don't even think about it, foal. You still have me to deal with,” A cold voice said. I looked from Violet to the voice, seeing a dark ghostly alicorn standing between me and my body. She was a deep royal purple, with a flat black mane. She was clad in regal vestments, befitting a Goddess, with a dull tiara on her brow.

“Spark.” I said flatly. “I thought the orb was supposed to contain you. How did you get out?”

“Pitiful foal. Twilight told you about that didn't she? I suppose I should have expected it. That mare never did truly know the power she held,” The purple alicorn spat. “I was more than capable of breaking free.”

“I'm going to make you pay, for what you did to Violet,” I said, anger rising in my voice.

“Oh? I'd like to see you try,” Spark replied. “But neither of us are in any shape to fight at the moment. We're both a product of the condition of your body, which at the moment is in too much pain to let either of us fight.” I glared at the purple alicorn, but I realized she was right. Ever since the memory orb forced her out, my strength had waned considerably.

“Fine then. So you won't mind if I take my body back then,” I said.

“No dice, sweetie. As soon as my strength comes back, I'm hopping right back in. I have things to do and ponies to see,” She replied.

“Why are you doing this? Why, Magic? What happened to you?” I asked. Spark snorted angrily.

“Don't call me that name. I'm Spark. Magic died a long time ago,” She said. Beyond her, I could see several medical guards of the Cult carrying Violet away. “As for what happened to me. I saw the truth. She showed it to me. She showed me the potential I always had.”

“Who...?” I asked. Spark grinned wickedly.

“Nightmare of course. She was my true teacher. While Twilight studied under Princess Celestia, Nightmare herself was my mentor. She taught me how to access real magic, true power,” She said.

“Nightmare? You mean Nightmare Moon? But I thought you and the rest of the Elements defeated her?” I asked.

“Nightmare was always there, always waiting. She was inside of Princess Luna of course. The war

gave her the perfect opportunity to make me her protégé,” Spark said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back into my body and find Pride so I can give myself to her.” My eyes widened at this revelation. *Give herself to Pride?* I thought.

“What?!” I shouted at hearing this. “What do you mean give yourself to her? I thought you wanted to kill her?!” Spark groaned.

“You really are very dense aren't you?” She said. “It was never about you! You were the sacrificial lamb I needed to find the one who would carry me to greatness! I had hoped you would turn out like your other sisters, but no... Twilight somehow had her hoof in that. I needed somepony better than you. Stronger. More... willing.”

“And you think that's Pride?” I asked, glaring at her.

“Pride is powerful, and I will gladly share myself with her to become the true Goddess of the Wasteland,” Spark said, growling as she turned to go back into my body. I charged forward, spinning around and bucking into the shady alicorn's side. She went flying, grunting as she struck the metal of the platform.

“Enough!” I shouted. “You're not getting back into my body.”

“Even if it meant I was going to leave you for her?” She said. “Even if it meant that you would finally be free of me?” I nodded.

“I can't let that happen. You are too dangerous,” I replied, growling myself as the other alicorn pushed herself up from the ground and made a break for my body. I moved to intercept her. I collided with the other mare, both of us falling to the ground. Spark snarled and tried to clamber along the ground towards my body. “Oh no you don't,” I shouted, reaching over the top of her. My hooves pushed off of her back and I flapped my spectral wings, hopping into the air before slamming into the lifeless body. Spark's roar of anger blended with a rushing noise as a warm glow suffused my entire being, and I felt myself being pulled back in. My entire world went pitch black and everything fell away into nothingness.

I awoke in the circular room with the six doors. *How did I get here?* I thought. I looked at the six doors, all of them were dark and grey, somehow dead feeling, save for the center door. It bore Twilight's cutie mark. I sighed. *I guess I'm not going to get to talk to Generosity before I ---* I jumped, my train of thought completely derailed, as a door opened without the torch indicating it. A demure white mare trotted out of the door bearing Rarity's cutie mark. She was smiling brightly, and wore a simple gown that looked marvelous against her alabaster hide.

“You were thinking about me darling?” Generosity said. She looked at the door with Twilight's cutie mark. “Be careful in there. She's not pleasant to be around.” I nodded.

“What do I do then?” I asked. The white mare sighed.

“I'm very sorry for all of this, Radiant Star. This is all of my fault. If I hadn't pushed on Rarity to explore the zebra necromancy this might have turned out much differently,” She said.

“And Nightmare? How does she factor into all of this?” I asked.

“You must understand, we were all responsible for that. We had no idea what any of us were getting ourselves into when the Ministries were created. We didn't even know what war was. We were six scared little fillies imbued with ancient power. How easy it was for her to corrupt us,” She said, shaking her head. I smiled and stepped towards the mare, pulling her into a hug.

"It's not your fault, yours or Rarity's," I said. "It's not even really Spark's fault. She's as much a victim as you are. I see that now." Generosity nodded, as the flame shot out and hit the door with Twilight's cutie mark. The door opened slowly. I looked down at the white mare I was embracing. She smiled up at me with sad eyes.

"Good luck," She said. I nodded, extracting myself from the hug and making my way towards the door, pausing just inside the entrance. I walked right into a very familiar library. Twilight's library. Standing the center of the floor was a dark purple alicorn surrounded by iron bars. I walked up, catching her attention.

"Hello Spark," I said. "Here we are again." The other alicorn glared at me.

"Yes, it would seem that you beat me. For now," She said. "You got your body back. Why must you torture me so?"

"Because... because despite how much I hate you and how much I want you dead... I want to try to understand you," I said. "I want to understand why you let things get this way."

"You want to know how I became Spark?" The mare said. I nodded. "Fine. If you must know, when Luna formed the Ministries I was scared. The war had already gotten too far for any of us to truly comprehend. I had no idea what was expected of me or Twilight."

"And that's when she came," I said, more of a statement than a question.

"Indeed. Nightmare offered me a chance. Power, unlimited power. All I had to do was become her student, and learn the ways of darkness. Over time, it corrupted me and the other Elements by proxy. Then, it happened," She said.

"What?" I asked, cocking my head. Spark sneered.

"They tried to kill me. They couldn't of course, by that time I was far too powerful. I stood fast, even against all of the rest of them," She said, noting my horrified face. "What? They didn't tell you that? Of course they didn't. Their big secret. How they tried to murder their closest friend. I had to come up with some plan to save myself. And here we are, two hundred years later."

"Why me?" I asked. Spark shook her head.

"I don't know why it was you. I only know that you were the right pick. As soon as I saw you through Twilight inside the Goddess, I knew you were the one. Unfortunately, I was trapped inside her. When the Goddess died however, I was let loose," She replied.

"But you weren't exactly free," I stated. The deep purple mare nodded.

"I floated from one valley to the next, seeking a host to take on my power. Eventually I found a unicorn who became a slave to me. That unicorn is the one who left the spell for the Twilight Society to cast. But something else happened when they cast it," She said.

"Twilight came too. Out of the ether. Her spirit was too strong to give in, knowing you were still out there," I said.

"Yes..." She replied, sneering viciously. I sighed and moved to the bars.

"Spark, it doesn't have to be like this. You're not at fault here. You were... misled. Corrupted. This isn't you, can't you just see that?" I asked. The mare snorted.

"Unfortunately, my course is set. And now that I am free of you, I can find another more willing to accept me, like Pride," She said. My eyes widened. *Free of me?* I thought.

"What do you mean?" I asked cautiously. The other mare grinned wickedly.

"I always have a trick up my sleeve, this one just so happened to be a side effect of Twilight's memory orb. It expelled me from your body and mind literally. I'm no longer inside of you," She said, motioning to the bars. They began to glow as they dissipated. "I'm free. Free to do what I want. And I didn't even need to find the other one to do it either." She began to fade from sight. I shouted at her.

"Wait! Spark!" I cried out. The spectral mare let out a giddy laugh.

"Be seeing you, Radiant Star. The next time we meet might not be so pleasant," She cooed as she disappeared. The last thing to fade away was her triumphant smirk.

I awoke with a start, smelling the rank stench of bile as I pushed myself up from the makeshift bed. I groaned. *Where am I?* I thought. I realized after a moment that I had been laying on a bed. I looked down at myself, seeing the familiar purple coat I had been used to for so long. I was back in my body! I sighed, my mind replaying the events that had transpired. I searched the back of my mind for the familiar weight of my unwelcome passenger, and felt... Nothing. She wasn't there. Memory returned, and my eyes widened.

"Violet!" I shouted. A groan came from beside me. The gloomy darkness parted enough for me to make sense of my surroundings, and I was in a dirty room, tired medical equipment racked against filthy walls. I looked over, seeing my lover laying in a bed much like my own. She was alive! I nearly jumped for joy, but then I saw her condition. Her injured leg appeared to have been repaired, but not with flesh. A metal prosthetic leg extended down from her knee, ending in a metal hoof. *Who did this?* I thought as I moved over to the bed and nuzzled my marefriend closely. She appeared to be in and out of consciousness as she wrapped a leg around my neck.

"You're awake. This is good," A voice echoed in the darkness. I looked up, seeing the imposing form of Wrath standing in the dark entryway. His red bloodshot eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"W-W-why?" I asked. "Why save her?"

"Because I said so," The minotaur brusquely replied. "My word here is law. And I don't need dead slaves." I glared at him. *Figures*, I thought.

"And me? Why save me? Why not just kill me? I'm pretty sure that the Lotus Triad would like that, and you'd be rich," I said. Wrath laughed dryly.

"The Lotus Triad won't trouble you anymore. Their caps belong to me now. I saved you because then I would not get the chance to fight you myself, Ministry Mare," Wrath said. "I was very pleased with your performance the other night, especially after the green one used the orb to knock the invader out of your body. I was quite surprised that you survived combat at that level."

"So that's it. You saved me just so you could kill me yourself," I said. Wrath nodded. "What about my other friends?"

"They shall be brought to you. As will your weapons and saddlebags," He said. "To ensure your cooperation in my challenge."

"Really? And what if I refuse?" I said. Wrath laughed.

"If you refuse, I'll just kill you all of course," He said. "But if you accept my challenge and live to tell the tale, I will help you as best I can against Pride. I will not face her in battle myself, but all my knowledge of her will be yours." My ears perked up at this.

"Pride? Why? Isn't she like you?" I asked. I felt Violet shift next to me, groaning in pain. I looked down at her for a moment and smiled. She quieted as I stroked her fevered brow. It felt so good to be

able to be near her again.

“Yes, but I hold no love for my wayward sister. I would see her driven to her knees and slaughtered like the dog she is,” Wrath said. “Iron Will provides, and I believe if you can beat me, you can beat her. Now, I have duties to attend. I must take my leave.” The door closed and the minotaur was gone. I heard another groan below me. I looked back to Violet and pulled her close into a hug. She grunted in response, her eyes finally opening as she looked up at me. For a few moments we stayed there silently looking at each other.

“Is... it really you?” She said softly. I nodded. Tears filled her eyes. I cooed softly, holding her close.

“Shh... it's okay. It's all okay now. She's gone. You did it,” I said, feeling my own tears stream down my face. “You did it, you amazing little mare you.” Violet cried hard, sobbing into my neck. I sighed. “Violet, it's okay. Please. Talk to me.”

“It... it hurts, but I just... I missed you so much. I knew... I knew something was wrong with you, but I ignored it. Why did I do that?” She said, tears flowing freely from her lovely green eyes.

“You couldn't have known. She was very good at keeping up appearances, but in the end... she didn't have complete control. And now she's gone, but not for good,” I said. Violet's eyes widened.

“If she's gone... where did she go?” She asked.

“Pride,” I said simply. “She went to go to Pride. And we let her out to get there.”

“Which means that we need to find Pride before something really bad happens?” She said. I smiled at her and nodded.

“You always were my smart little filly weren't you?” I replied. Violet grinned through her teary expression. She looked down at her hoof, her grin changing to a grimace almost instantly. “Hey, it'll be alright. You're not out of this yet Violet. You'll be back on your hooves in no time.”

“I know... it's just... it feels weird. Almost unnatural,” She said, waving the metal foreleg around. “I believe it's some form of cybernetic. I have no idea how the Cult got ahold of this kind of tech.” I nodded and listened as Violet began to poke and prod at her new leg, and while I sat there my mind turned to the future. I thought about Spark, and how a single choice had corrupted her so much. I felt bad for her, I realized. I wanted very much to save her, to show her that she wasn't just evil.

I thought about Pride and Wrath. I knew what needed to be done now. I would need to fight Wrath, and survive. Easier said than done, but it was necessary in order for me to finally track down Pride and Spark... and end this once and for all. I was also going to have to try to find a way to speak to Twilight at some point. She was going to have some explaining to do about why her spell couldn't contain the corrupted spirit of Magic.

I thought of all the things I had done, and all the things to come and I sighed. At that moment, none of them mattered more in the world than the green little mare sitting next to me.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Quest Perk! Virtues of Friendship: Your experiences with the Virtues have made you stronger in the end. Your magic is now 20% cooler.

Spark Level: ERROR GETTING LEVEL. Spark is no longer present in your body.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Six Million Cap Mare: We have rebuilt you, we have made you stronger. Your Strength is

increased by 1 and your run speed is increased by 10%.

New Spell! Energy Blade: You can now form a blade of energy to fight for you. However, this taxes you greatly and cannot be used all the time.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 17: Deadly Games

All of those ponies look so posh. And with the Grand Galloping Gala coming up, I bet you could totally get some of them to buy your dresses. Very smart!

Silence. It's a strange feeling. How does it feel when there's nothing there? When the silence weighs so heavy, the tiny chime of a pin dropping would be a relief?

As I reflected on my life up until Spark's removal from my body, I felt silence. Where there had once been a sneaky, sarcastic, and conniving bitch... there was silence. And yet... I missed it. I desperately wanted to understand Spark... to understand why she chose the path of darkness. In the end, it wasn't entirely her fault. The same darkness that corrupted Princess Luna seduced her. Corrupted, and forced servitude, she was a victim of Nightmare.

Nightmare. The name itself sends chills down my spine. I knew the legend of course, of how the six friends stood before the Nightmare itself, and forced it to its knees. But in the end, Nightmare lived on. Not only that, she thrived in the war that tore our very world asunder. At the very end however, did Nightmare survive? Did she manage to escape the horror that was the balefire? I think so. Nightmare wasn't just an evil figure in our world's bloody history. She was an idea. The personification of seductive evil, strong and wily enough to corrupt the purest force in all of Equestria.

The past revealing nothing, I look ahead. What does my own future hold for me? What nightmare, or Nightmare, is in store for me? Will I hold against its seduction, or will I fall? Fall like Spark herself, and the Princess before her.

A clawed fist slammed into my side knocking me to the ground with a spike of pain. I screamed wordlessly as my body hit the cold metal of the platform. Wrath's eyes gleamed with hatred, his sneer widening as he moved forward with a speed that defied all natural logic. His reaching claws jerked me into the air by my neck. I struggled defiantly as I rose into the air, my wings flapping hard as I tried to pull away.

"What's the matter Ministry Mare? Cat got your tongue?" Wrath snarled above the roaring crowd. I tossed and turned in his grip, trying to escape. The minotaur chortled as he turned about, holding me in the air like I was already a trophy to display. *Shit!* I thought. *Why did I agree to this again? Oh right, because I'd be dead regardless.* Blood began to trickle from my neck where the minotaur held me, his claws digging into my skin. Pain shot through my entire upper body as I tried anything and everything to get him away from me. If I couldn't get out of this, I would most certainly die. I did the only thing I could think of. I laughed. I laughed at how silly all of this seemed, to be here fighting an insane Stampede freak like Wrath. Wrath's eyes narrowed in fury.

"You laugh at me? Well I Wrath at you!" He shouted, loosening his grip as he whipped me sideways, slamming my head into the unmoving steel. I groaned in intense agony as I tried to shield myself from the blow. My horn flared, the telekinetic magic pushing Wrath's claws off my neck just enough for me to twist free. I rolled to the side and righted myself just in time to see Wrath charging towards me. I managed to dodge the furious minotaur's rush, but he whirled with surprising speed. I wasn't able to dodge his lunge completely, and four lines of blood marred my side where his claws struck. I leaped away, glaring at my opponent as I tried to catch my breath.

"You're getting good at dodging me Ministry Mare, but when are you going to take the initiative? Iron Will says we must seize the day after all," Wrath yelled. I growled under my breath.

"You want me to come at you? Then I will," I replied, anger rising in my voice as I ignited my horn. Taking a cue from Violet's fight with Spark, I focused my magic into a singular form, creating a magical blade of

energy in mid-air before me. Wrath grinned, bringing a claw up to his left arm. He pressed a button on one of his arm bands, the injectors attached to it stabbing into his skin. The reaction was instantaneous. Wrath's blood shot eyes flared open widely, and his entire body shook with the effect of the drugs. *What the hell is he using?* I thought as I prepared myself for my assault. I rushed forward, floating the magical blade along. I shifted it left and right, keeping the blade fluid in the air as I came upon the minotaur. I brought the blade down for a powerful downward slash.

Wrath was completely silent as he shot a hand forward to meet my strike. With nothing more than a sizzle, he grabbed my blade, halting it completely. My eyes widened, my blade dissipating with a sigh as I realized that whatever he had taken had allowed him to beat my magic with sheer strength. Wrath snarled and lashed out with both claws, latching onto my wings before I could get away in time. Pain shot across my entire back, and I howled with agony. Wrath lifted me into the air like I was nothing more than a mannequin and tossed me across the metal platform. I tried to slow my descent, but my wings felt like they were on fire. I hit with a ***thud***, sliding across the ground. I groaned, trying to push myself up. Wrath was on me in a flash, moving faster than even his previous unreal speed. His eyes were red with fury and his breathing was labored. He roared and brought down a claw, slashing my neck. Blood spurted forth from the wound as I tried to push him off of me. The crowd screamed as blood covered Wrath's power claws. He reached down, lifting my head so that I was face to face with him.

"I am greatly disappointed in you Ministry Mare. I had thought you would be stronger than this, but I can see now that you are weak. And the weak... always lose to the strong," He said, bringing down his power claw towards my face. *So this is it*, I thought as I watched the claw descend. Time seemed to slow down, and I thought of the events that led up to this moment. The moment... That I was going to die.

Two Days Earlier...

Two days had passed since Spark had been forced out of my body. It felt weird, not having her hateful voice in my head. I couldn't feel relieved about it either, knowing that she was out there searching for Pride. The very thought of the two merging and becoming an ultimate power in the Wasteland terrified me. But with Wrath keeping us imprisoned a Colter Field, I was powerless. I wouldn't be able to do anything about the looming problem of Pride and Spark until I faced the enigmatic cult leader in combat. Every second of waiting was a fresh misery. Knowing what I knew about the others like him, he would most likely be damn near impossible to kill. To take my mind off of Wrath and Pride, I focused on Violet instead. My love had been back up and about since her fight with Spark. Even with three natural legs left to her, she was recovering swiftly.

"So... how's the leg doing today?" I asked as Steeljack and Patch entered our room. They had been escorted to the small dirty medical room by the guards, along with our weapons and saddlebags. Thankfully, the guards had also managed to recover Twilight's memory orb from the central arena. We weren't allowed to carry any of our gear outside of the room we had been confined to, but at least I had Stargazer back. It was better than some slaver having their grubby little mitts on it. I had looked about for Lucky after everything was said and done, but the spectral mare had not returned yet. I hoped she was... Whatever passed for alright, in her state.

"Better. I can move around a lot better on it," She said, trotting about the room with her new cybernetic leg. It turned out that the Cult of Iron Will had captured a group of Stable scientists that handled all of their 'slave repair' operations. Whenever one of the fighting slaves got an appropriate injury, which was fairly often, the Cult's captive scientists would fit them with cybernetics. The Cult was a strange outfit, and they made Colter Field a strange place. Everyone here was a dangerous fighter, steeped in the Iron Will nonsense

that Wrath had talked so much about, but there was almost no day to day violence. Fighting was reserved for the Arena, and was almost never to the death. I giggled at Violet as she missed a turn, her new metal leg sliding out from under her and putting her on her butt. She pushed herself up and glared at me.

“Not funny,” She said, sitting back down next to me with a huff.

“Was too,” I replied, sticking my tongue out at her. Patch giggled at us, but Steeljack merely rolled his eyes at our childish antics. I smiled at the dour earth pony, who had been much happier since his armor was returned to him. His bond with Patch had grown nothing but stronger through the trials we had faced. “How are you two holding up?” I asked the two earth ponies.

“We’re fine. I’m actually sort of surprised at how well we’re being treated here,” Patch said. “Most slavers don’t let their slaves have their weapons back.” I nodded. It was part and parcel of the bizarre nature of Colter Field. Even though we were captive here, we were treated more like guests than prisoners. It made sense, in a crooked sort of way. Even without the threat of armed minotaurs, Wrath’s knowledge of Pride was effective as any shackles.

“How are you doing Star?” Steeljack said, smiling at me.

“I... I’m alright. It’s a little weird to be back in my own body. And now that Spark is gone... I’m a little frightened to be honest,” I said, putting my heart out into my friend’s hooves. Violet nuzzled my neck, leaning into me as she put her metal hoof around my neck. It was cool to the touch as it brushed my coat. Since the fight with the corrupted spirit of Magic, she had been an amazing source of strength to help me through what I was going through. Steeljack and Patch’s return had helped as well, the two earth ponies having been greatly understanding of Spark’s deception of them.

“So what’s the plan now?” Patch chimed in. I shrugged.

“For right now, we can only hope that none of you are dragged into any arena fights. I sincerely doubt that, so we need to be prepared for anything to happen,” I said. “Wrath has officially challenged the Ministry Mare to a fight, and he’s going to get one. He’s promised all the information he has on Pride if I win.”

“Have you considered the possibility that he doesn’t know anything ? Or that he might not even tell you what he does know?” Steeljack replied, skepticism rising in his voice. “He could be just trying to draw you in for a fight.”

“I... I think he’s telling the truth. I just can’t see the leader of the Cult of Iron Will going back on his word like that, you know? Besides, if he really wanted me dead, he would have just killed me while I was unconscious,” I said. “Also, I get the distinct impression that he is not a big fan of Pride at all.”

“Speaking of Pride, do you think she’ll do it? Accept Spark, I mean...” Violet asked. I shrugged.

“Will she even have a choice? We all saw the lengths that Spark was willing to go in order to get her hooves on my body. I can’t see Pride turning her down completely, but she’s not stupid. I don’t think she’ll give Spark complete control, not at first” I said. The door creaked open and I looked past my friends. A lanky minotaur wearing leather barding entered the room. This minotaur, while smaller than the others, held a position high within the Cult. In the two days we had been here we had come to know him as Haakor. He was also the regular announcer and scheduler of the ‘games’ in the Arena. The thin minotaur looked nothing like his brethren, his muscles sagging and coat patchy and ragged, telltale signs of long term drug abuse. His yellow eyes were clear and eloquent though, they spoke volumes about the disdain he held for us.

“Ministry Mare,” Haakor began to say. I was startled again, like always. When he wasn’t announcing, his voice was snakelike, sly and oily. “The Overlord sends his regards. He has wished for me to tell you that your match has been scheduled for tomorrow evening.”

“It’s about time,” I said, trying to sound confident. In truth, I was scared out of my mind. Haakor grinned.

“He also wishes to inform you that there are two matches scheduled that you may wish to attend. In fact, I’ve come to collect their participants now,” He said, pointing a clawed hand at Steeljack and Patch. I growled.

“Why them?” I asked angrily. “Am I not enough for Wrath’s sick games?”

"I do not question the commands of the Overlord. He speaks the word of Iron Will, and I listen," Haakor said. "And he wishes to see the two earth ponies fight." Steeljack put a hoof on my shoulder.

"It'll be fine," He said softly. "Don't worry about us. We'll be alright." I sighed, and nodded. Haakor chuckled.

"Right then. Follow me," He said, motioning for the two minotaur guards in power armor to flank us as he led us out of the room and down towards the arena. The roar of the crowd met our ears before we even drew near the metal monstrosity that was the main arena. I caught a glimpse again of a familiar cream colored unicorn as we were led to the slave pen section of the seating. Danish caught my eye for a moment and nodded solemnly. I smiled, and he turned away with a nod of his head at the main platform. I followed his gaze, looking down at the main platform. A metal container had been placed on the far end of the circular surface. Something was inside of it. I took a moment to glare at Haakor. The minotaur met my look with a tiny smirk and stood, motioning for Steeljack to move over the bridge. The gray earth pony nodded and made his way over onto the platform, but not before stretching his neck to give Patch a kiss on the cheek. The green mare rubbed at where he had kissed her and smiled.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeelllllcoooooome!" Haakor's 'working' voice rang out across the entire arena as he climbed into the announcer's booth. "Dregs of Chicacolt, it is good to have you with us again today for another fine round of matches! Bet early and bet often, and you could walk away swimming in caps! Now then, we've got a bit of a treat for you all today. In the far corner, we've got the earth pony Steeljack! Watch out folks, he's one of the Ministry Mare's companions!" The crowd booed loudly. They were either unhappy about the choice in competitors or they were really against Steeljack. I looked up for a moment, locking eyes with Wrath. The cult leader sat on a throne high above the crowd. He grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the gloom that shrouded him in his covered throne. I looked away, sighing, hoping the minotaur hadn't sensed my nervousness.

"In the other corner... you all know him, and you all love... well okay you might like him somewhat. He's never lost a match, ever! Slavers and raiders alike, say hello to Nixis!" Haakor shouted. The metal container at the end of the platform hissed and expelled steam as it opened. The creature that emerged from it was the same one I had seen in the cages earlier. I growled under my breath at the prospect of Steeljack having to face down a hellhound. The beast looked about the arena. I was surprised to note that it looked... scared. It stepped forward, shrugging off the bonds that held it. It looked around for a moment and opened its mouth to speak.

"Ponies and other creatures of Chicacolt, please listen to me," The hellhound began to say. His voice (as it was clearly masculine) was cultured and eloquent, not like the rough and gravelly tone that the rest of his race had. From the moment the hellhound began to speak though, the boos of the crowd overrode anything he had to say to begin with. I quickly realized why the crowd didn't like this competitor.

"Please listen!" The hellhound shouted. "This cycle of hatred and violence can stop, if we all work together! The Lightbringer, she showed us the path we all should follow!" I snorted. Even as a member of the Followers, I could see that what the hellhound was talking about was impossible. Maybe someday the Wasteland would heal and ponies would trust in each other again. But that day was not today. The crowd roared with anger. I could hear cries of 'Start the fight already!' and 'Stupid dog, just fight!' echoing from beyond the platform. Steeljack stepped forward to the center of the ring.

"Look, I don't know who are, but I'm guessin' you're not much fer fightin'," He said. The hellhound took notice of him and nodded. Despite the roar of the crowd, I could hear the two speaking. Alicorn hearing is freaky like that.

"Usually they poke and prod me enough with their energy batons to make me fight," The creature replied. "I'm Nixis. Pleasure to meet you."

"Steeljack," My earth pony friend said. "You're a little... different for a hellhound."

"Yes, well. I am the previous mayor of the town of Ponyville. I'm expected to be civilized," Nixis replied. "And you, you're a friend of the Ministry Mare?" Steeljack nodded. I smiled. I knew that the hellhounds

that lived in the small town were relatively peaceful, but I never expected one to be so... cultured.

“Yes, well. I suppose there's no way we could just not fight each other?” Steeljack said. Nixis chuckled.

“I'm sorry. I wish that were the case. You seem like a nice pony. I hate to kill you,” The hellhound said.

“And you seem like a very nice hellhound. I hate to die,” Steeljack replied, chuckling. Nixis smiled a toothy grin, and placed a clawed hand out. Steeljack took it and shook it. A snarl came from the guards near the two fighters.

“Start the fight already!” One of the minotaurs growled. “There's bets on you fuckers!” Another guard stepped forward with a shock stick, prodding the hellhound in the side. A cry of pain came from the beast as he jerked back from the attack. Nixis slashed at the shock stick in anger, the weapon coming apart in pieces from the hellhound's claws. I blinked. I knew that hellhounds had razor sharp talons, but this was unbelievable. Nixis snarled as another shock stick struck him, howling in rage.

“Stop! Can't you see you're hurting him?” Steeljack shouted. The earth pony himself was knocked back by a guard. The crowd roared loudly as the guards struck the hellhound repeatedly with the shock sticks. I cringed. There was only so much a beast like that could take before instinct took over. All the eloquence in the world couldn't prevent such a raw and natural force. Eventually, the guards pulled back as the hellhound unleashed a howl unlike anything I had ever heard. Nixis stood, his yellow eyes fierce and determined.

Steeljack dodged to the left as the hellhound barrelled forward, nearly catching my friend on the leg with those deadly claws. The creature snarled as it wheeled about, reaching out and slashing my friend on the shoulder. Blood gushed from the wound and I heard metal screech from where the claws had struck his power armor. I grimaced, looking over at Patch. She was on the edge of her seat, growling as she cheered her colt friend on.

“Get him!” She shouted. Steeljack's normally stern expression seemed even more grim as he moved away from the hellhound's furious attacks. Nixis snarled, leaping at the earth pony and slashing wildly. Steeljack turned about and bucked the hellhound in the face, knocking him back. Even with just the single wound, I could tell that my friend wasn't doing so well. He staggered back and forth, trying to move out of the way of the enraged hellhound. Nixis was furious, angered beyond reason as he rushed at the grey stallion. Steeljack strafed about the platform, keeping his distance. I surmised that he was hoping to wait out the hellhound's attacks. I somehow doubted that the hellhound would tire that easily. The creatures were well known for their stamina and intensity in battle. Even one as intellectual as Nixis would not prove to be an easy beast to outlast.

Steeljack continued to evade, keeping as far away from the hellhound as much as possible. Nixis growled and furiously chased after the earth pony, clawing and scraping at the metal platform in his attempt to dismember my friend.

“Nixis! Stop this! You're better than this!” Steeljack shouted. The hellhound snarled in response as he barreled into the earth pony, knocking him to the unmoving platform. Steeljack pushed himself up quickly, moving out of the way just barely as the creature's claws stuck the metal next to him, tearing and ripping the floor up as it struggled to follow my friend's movement.

Steeljack stopped running and whirled, turning on a dime and levelling a hoof into Nixis' midsection. The swift attack caught the raging beast off guard and knocked him to the ground. Steeljack took the opportunity presented and leaped forward, bringing both forehooves down into a ground pound that slammed into the hellhound's side. Nixis howled in pain as he tried to crawl away from the power-armor clad stallion. Steeljack stepped back, breathing hard as blood flowed from his shoulder blade. Nixis stood, his stamina finally waning as he began to pant and cough.

“Give... Give up yet?” Steeljack shouted. Nixis snarled loudly.

“No... I... I can't...” The hellhound responded. “If I do... they'll kill me. I'm supposed to... supposed to win all my matches.” Steeljack shook his head solemnly.

“I can't lose either. You see that dark green mare up there?” He said, motioning behind him at Patch. The earth pony mare was cheering loudly amidst the roar of the already intense crowd. Nixis nodded, his eyes

flicking back and forth between the guards and Steeljack. "She's my marefriend. I need to win this for her. I can't let her down. I love her too much."

"I... I can respect that. Like I said though, I hate to have to kill you. I desperately would like to meet your Ministry Mare friend on better terms," Nixis said. He growled, lunging forward at Steeljack once more. The earth pony jumped back as Nixis leaped into the air. The hellhound reached out with his claws and landed, latching onto Steeljack's sides. Steeljack growled as he struggled against the beast's grasp. Nixis closed his claws, digging the tips through the earth pony's armor. Blood spurted from all directions, and Steeljack howled. I shouted in anger as the hellhound went to press in further with his claws. Steeljack kicked out with his front hooves, catching the beast off guard with a vicious blow to the chest. Nixis dropped the earth pony as he stumbled backwards. Still bleeding from his wounds, my friend rushed forward and slammed into the hellhound, pushing him to the ground.

Steeljack reared, bringing his hooves down onto the creature's chest hard. I heard an audible ***crack*** come from the hellhound's body. Nixis lay there unmoving as Steeljack pulled away. The crowd shouted and squealed at my friend's victory. The guards moved onto the platform and began to chain up the hellhound. I breathed a sigh of relief as I realized that Nixis was still alive. Haakor's voice sang out over the crowd.

"And that's all folks! The earth pony Steeljack is the winner!!!" He called out. Steeljack wavered for a moment, and I could see that his armor was going to definitely need to be repaired before all of this was through. Blood streamed out of the holes in the steel armor as Steeljack's eyes glazed over. He fell to the ground in a heap of steel and blood. I jumped to my hooves and looked up at Wrath. He sneered at me. The guards on the platform picked up both my friend and Nixis, carrying them away from the arena and towards the medical areas. Our own guards barely noticed as we barreled past them, heading into the back of the stadium. Our journey ended in the long medical room that had been our home for the past two days.

Steeljack and Nixis were laid out in two beds at the far end of the room. Patch zipped past me, stopping just short of the doctors that were hovering over her love.

"We've got to get this armor off of him, now!" One of the doctors, a brown unicorn stallion, said. He wore a Stable jumpsuit and a bomb collar. I assumed this was one of the scientist slaves that the Cult employed. His horn glowed as the pieces of Steeljack's armor began to strip themselves away. Healing potions and Med-X floated out and were applied to the earth pony, who slowly began to wake up. He looked over at Patch and smiled. The green mare grinned widely as the doctors moved onto Nixis. I stepped over to them, noticing that the hellhound was strapped down to the table. Heavy chains held him down, as if he were some sort of animal.

"Is he going to be alright?" I asked. The brown unicorn with the Stable jumpsuit nodded.

"He's got a few cracked ribs and a lot of internal damage, but I believe I can fix it," He replied.

"Does he... does he need to be strapped down like that?" I said. The doctor nodded.

"It's a hellhound, what do you expect?" He said, finishing up with a sigh. "Alright, let's get him moved back to the slave pens."

"Wait," I said, putting a hoof out. "Leave him here. I'll make sure that he stays in line."

"Are you kidding? He's a fucking hellhound for Luna's sake!" The doctor said. "He's dangerous."

"Please, I saw him out there. It took several guards just to prod him enough to get him to fight," I said.

"Leave him here. And tell Wrath if he has a problem with it, he can answer to me." The doctor glared at me and stormed past me. The guards left us alone for the time being, standing just outside of the door to our 'cell.' I turned back to where my friends were, standing around Steeljack. He looked up and grinned.

"Well, that certainly was a show," I said, snorting. "We're gonna have to get somepony to work on your armor after that."

"Yeah... that hurt like a bitch, I gotta say," Steeljack replied. "Is he... is he alright?" I nodded.

"The doctor says he's going to be just fine. He was a bit... apprehensive over leaving him here, but I can be pretty convincing when I want to be," I said.

“Good... he was... nice. Never met a nice hellhound before,” My earth pony friend said. He looked up at Patch, who was still grinning widely. I looked over at Violet.

“I think we better give these two some time. Who knows how long before Haakor schedules her match,” I said quietly. Violet nodded and we trotted to the far end of the room where Nixis lay. The hellhound was still breathing, but it was definitely going to be some time before he was back among the living. We sat there for what felt like hours, watching over the creature. Eventually, the day gave way to night as Patch returned to tend to her coltfriend. Violet had joined the two, using her healing spell to help Steeljack to recover.

While my love worked, Patch began to pound at Steeljack’s power armor. Her skill with weaponry and electrical devices extended well to the plate armor as she began to repair it piece by piece. I sat at the far end of the room, watching the pale hellhound stir in his bed as his yellow eyes fluttered open. He lay there in silence for a few moments, as if he was processing his current situation.

“Hello Nixis,” I said calmly. “Do not worry, you are in great care.”

“I... Your friend, is he alright?” The hellhound said quietly. I nodded, a smile on my face. Nixis sighed heavily. “Praise the Goddess. I feared that I might have seriously hurt him.”

“Well, you certainly did some work on his armor, but Patch can fix it up no problem,” I replied, my eyes narrowing on the canine. “You are unlike any hellhound I have met before.”

“And you are unlike any alicorn I have ever met,” The hellhound said. “You prevented the doctors from returning me to the steel cage. Why?”

“Because I believe that you are better than the savage animal inside,” I said. “I do not see the beast, but the gentle soul beneath it.”

“Well said, Ministry Mare. I have heard of your exploits on the radio. You are quite famous, you know.” I blushed. “It is unfortunate that we meet under such terrible circumstances.”

“Indeed. I’m sorry that you were imprisoned so harshly,” I said. “Come to think of it, you were the first one I’d seen in such condition.”

“The Cult recognizes how dangerous my race is, and to be fair... I did not exactly cooperate when I was first brought here,” He said, winking at me. He pushed himself up into a sitting position, grunting in pain as he did.

“Easy there, you’re still recovering. You were injured pretty seriously in the fight,” I said, placing a hoof on his shoulder to help steady him. He smiled and allowed me to sit next to him. I reached out with my magic, pulling his pillow up so that he could sit up properly.

“Thank you, for everything. I’m pleased that there are ponies like you who care for others,” Nixis said. “I am forever reminded of the Lightbringer, and the example she showed for us. We can be better than this, I just know it.”

“Well, I’m just glad to help,” I said, ignoring the comment about the Destroyer. “Besides, you can always count on a friend to help in times of need.”

“Is... that what we are? Friends?” The hellhound said. I nodded, smiling.

“Yes, I think we are friends. I’m sure my friends would agree. You were forced to fight Steeljack after all,” I said. Nixis sighed once more.

“I... I don’t know what to say. Back in Ponyville, hellhounds didn’t commonly make friends even with each other. It’s not exactly a familiar concept to us,” He replied.

“Well, stick with us and I’ll definitely show you the ropes,” I said, grinning. “However, I think perhaps it might be time for you to get some sleep. We’re all going to need to be well rested for what Wrath has in store for us tomorrow.” Nixis nodded and turned over in his bed. I started to stand, but was interrupted by a hoof on my shoulder. I looked up, seeing Steeljack standing next to me. The stallion looked naked and strange without his armor, but he was upright and on his hooves.

“Can I... Can I speak with him?” He said. I nodded and stood, allowing the grey earth pony to sit in my place. I paused for a moment before I trotted back over to Violet and Patch. *Better give those two some much needed privacy. They have a lot to talk about*, I thought. Still, I smiled. Out of the hell that was the Arena, the earth pony and the hellhound had a chance to forge something powerful and true. Friendship. It was a glorious thing to witness. Somehow, I began to maybe think that the hellhound wasn’t wrong after all. Would a return to the ideals of Harmony make it possible for the Wasteland to heal, or would the Wasteland need to be healed to allow a return to Harmony? I wasn’t totally sure, but I found myself looking forward to the opportunity to talk about it with the former Mayor of Ponyville.

I plopped down next to Violet at the far side of the room. My green love was lying on our bedroll, allowing Patch to inspect her metal leg. The earth pony mare had completely finished repairing Steeljack’s armor. It looked almost brand new.

“Everything alright?” Violet looked up and asked. I gave a sly grin.

“Yeah. I think everything is going to be just fine,” I said. “I think we should get some sleep, though. I’ve got to prepare to face Wrath tomorrow. Besides, I doubt Haakor is done with you three yet. Something tells me he’s going to have another one of you fight.”

“Let him come. I’ve been looking forward to getting my hooves a little dirty,” Patch said, and I was treated to the bizarre sigh of a one-eyed pony winking. I blinked at her. “What? How comes Steely gets to have all the fun?” The earth pony lowered Violet’s leg gently back to the ground. “Alright, I’ve looked it over and everything appears to be in working order. Even tuned it up a bit for you. I have to admit, those Stable doctors are pretty good.”

“Thanks Patch. I really appreciate it,” Violet replied. Patch grinned and bounced along towards her coltfriend, interrupting his conversation with Nixis as politely as she could: by tackling him to the ground. I heard the hellhound chuckle as Steeljack introduced his bubbly mare. I turned away, looking over at Violet. I nuzzled her neck and kissed her sweetly on the cheek. She was so beautiful, I couldn’t help myself.

“Good night Violet,” I said, resting my head next to her body. Her warmth was radiant. Her smile was calm and caring as she looked down at me.

“Good night Star.”

I awoke to still air. I had gotten so used to the crazy dreams that Spark’s presence had prompted that I had forgotten what it had felt like to simply sleep. Thankfully, my dreams were filled with visions of my marefriend, who was sleeping soundly next to me. I looked over across the room. Patch and Steeljack had fallen asleep together near Nixis’ bed. The green mare had her forelegs wrapped around the other earth pony much like a filly with a stuffed toy. It was... adorable to say the least. Nixis himself was sleeping, but I could tell it wasn’t as deep as the others were.

The door to the medical wing slammed opened, instantly awaking the rest of my friends. Haakor stood at the entrance, a grin on his face.

“The Overlord was quite pleased with your friend's fight, Ministry Mare. He wishes to see how the other fares now,” He said, motioning to Patch, who rubbed her eyes as she pushed herself up to face Haakor. I glared, standing tall before the thin minotaur.

“Tell Wrath that he can go fuck himself. I'm not letting another of my friends get hurt because of him. If he wants to fight me, he can fight me now,” I shouted. Haakor chuckled.

“In due time, Ministry Mare,” The frail beast replied. “For now though, your friend will join us in the arena. We have a very special match prepared for her.” The power-armor clad guards entered, pointing their energy rifles at us. Steeljack moved from his spot next to Patch. He stood woozily, but had a determined look on his face that prevented anyone else from telling him he wasn't going to be attending this fight. Very soon we were moved out of the medical wing and on our way back to the arena. Patch was silent the entire way

down, sticking close to the still injured Steeljack. After witnessing the spectacle of her lover's fight, I'm sure she was wondering what sort of creature she would be facing. Nixis was with us, keeping up easily even with occasional twinges of pain showing through his stoic expression. The hellhound's recovery was amazing, even by the standards of the robust earth ponies. He stepped in time with Violet and me as we followed the guards.

Haakor disappeared again as his lithe form moved back up to the announcer's booth. The guards behind us shoved us along, forcing us into the slave pens. Patch was pushed onto the makeshift bridge as we sat down. I prayed to Luna for her safety, fretting as she entered the Arena. The green mare trotted along confidently, leaping the last several lengths to land on the platform with power and poise. The crowd roared in delight at her showmaanship as she twirled about the side of the metal platform.

"Welcome again my friends!" Haakor called out over the speaker system. His voice was fully in working mode, powerful and rich as he whipped the audience into a frenzy. I caught another glimpse of Danish in the crowd. The cream-colored unicorn was sitting in the far back of the stadium, intent on a whispered conversation with one of his underlings. *What are you up to?* I thought as I studied him. He stood shortly, and disappeared into the crowd of ponies flooding into the stadium. Haakor's voice rang out once more from the speakers.

"We've got another exciting match lined up for you all," He began to say. "In our first corner, we've got another companion of the Ministry Mare. Watch out guys, she's a spitfire. Let's give it up for Patch!" I could hear catcalls from the crowd for the young mare. Haakor's chuckle erupted across the entire arena.

"Our second competitor for the evening needs no introduction. In fact, she's a bit of a surprise." I looked about the other end of the platform, trying to locate this mystery fighter, but there was no one there at all.

"Do you see anyone?" I asked Violet, who shook her head. That's when I heard the flapping of wings. I craned my neck around looking for the source of the sound. A dark form flew down towards the platform, slamming into the roughly painted circle on the far end. My eyes widened as the figure revealed herself, stepping out of the shadows.

"No... no... not her, no," I said quietly as the pony stepped into the harsh lights of Colter Field, revealing herself in all of her glory. Her glossy coat gleamed in the light of the arena. Her wings were shiny as well, adorned with silvery wingblades. I realized I had only seen the mare outside of her normal armor once, and that had been in Glyphmark. She stepped forward, a sneer on her face as she stared down at Patch.

"Lust..."

"Hello, sweetie." Lust's svelte voice echoed from across the platform, crushed velvet over a knife's edge. Patch stared down the black pegasus intently. The crowd had gone mostly silent as they waited for the first move to be made. Lust stepped forward, flaring out her wings.

"Lust," Patch said angrily. "What are you doing here? Last we saw you, we'd chased your loose ass out of Glyphmark." Lust giggled.

"Oh, you are adorable when you're flustered darling," She replied, grinning widely. "Why shouldn't I be here? This is my home, after all. My brother Wrath runs this establishment after all."

"Your brother?" Patch asked as she stepped further towards the black mare. Soon, the two were circling each other on the platform.

"Yes. Ask your Ministry Mare about that. Oh before I forget..." She said, flaring out her wings and literally disappearing into thin air. A flash of black appeared in front of my face and I felt a pair of lips press against my own before dissipating just as quickly. Lust emerged out of the shadows behind Patch, grinning widely as she looked back at me. She winked, licking her lips lasciviously. *"You taste better than our last time, Ministry Mare"* She mouthed. I blinked, not even sure what the hell had just happened. I put my hoof up to my lips, feeling the stinging taste of Lust on them. I glared back at her angrily. Lust rolled her eyes and

returned her focus to the battle at hand, sidestepping Patch as the green mare attempted to level a forward hoofstrike at her face. The pegasus dodged lazily, fluttering aside to return to the far edge of the platform.

"Nice try, sweetie, but I wasn't ready yet. You're gonna get me all hot and bothered before the main event," Lust said, licking her lips.

"Well, seeing as how this is a fight and not a show, I don't think I'm going to give you any chances," Patch declared, rushing forward at the black mare. Lust flapped her wings, pushing off in a flash, causing Patch to run underneath her. Lust spun about in mid-air, landing on the earth pony's back and forcing her to the ground. A black hoof ran its way down the pinned mare's face as Lust reached forward.

"Mmmm... you look like you might taste rather delectable yourself my dear," She said as she lowered her lips to Patch's struggling mouth. A few moments later she broke the kiss, grinning. "Mmmm... yes. Quite lovely." Patch growled, trying to push the black mare off of her. I looked over at Steeljack, who was fuming at the sight of his mare being violated so by Lust.

"Ooh doggy. If you grab this bull by the horns, you better be ready for a ride!" Patch cried out, pushing up with a spectacular buck that knocked the pegasus back into the air. Patch spun about and leaped upwards, throwing a hoof out in an attempt to knock Lust out of her airborne position. Lust simply flew upwards, causing the green mare to miss and fall back to the platform. "Come down here so I can hurt you!" She shouted.

"I told you before sweetie, I wasn't ready. Now I am," Lust replied as she hovered above my friend. "I think... you had better get ready now." Her wings flapped and she disappeared once more. *Shit, she is really fast!* I thought as a silver flash soared past Patch. Lust reappeared on the far end of the platform. Patch spun about, a thin cut on her side dribbling blood. The earth pony sniper panted as blood splattered on the metal below. Lust grinned and lowered one of her wings to her mouth, licking the blood off the blades. She shuddered with delight at the taste of the earth pony's life force.

Patch shrugged off the injury and charged forward again, strafing from left to right as she came closer to the black mare. Lust twirled about, slashing out with her wings and catching Patch in the shoulder. The green mare grunted through the pain as she launched her hoof out, landing a solid forehoof strike on Lust's neck. The pegasus reeled back from the strike and reached out, grabbing the other mare in a deadly hoof-hold. Patch struggled, wriggling back and forth as Lust tightened her grip.

"Fucking bitch. I think it's safe to say, you aren't much of a match for me," The black pegasus said, grinning.

"And like I said, if you think you can take me on, you've got another thing coming," Patch replied as she surged backwards, forcing Lust onto the platform with a ***crash***. The earth pony pulled away as Lust's grip slackened. Patch sprang into the air herself, twirling about as she came down upon the pegasus. Lust howled in pain as Patch's hooves connected soundly against her chest. The earth pony leaped back, huffing and panting. She looked as if she was going to fall over at any moment.

"Get her!" I heard Steeljack shout from beside me. The grey stallion had an intense look on his face. I narrowed my gaze at the two ponies on the metal platform. Lust wasn't this much of a pushover. *What's your angle Lust?* I thought. I nodded knowingly as the black pegasus disappeared from the platform. *There it is, you were goading her into using up all her energy. But you don't know Patch too well, do you?* Lust reappeared above Patch, putting all of her speed into a dive-bomb at the green mare. Patch looked up, her eye widening at the blurry form above her. I almost couldn't watch, but I was unable to tear my eyes away from the two fighters.

Patch grinned as she leaped to the side, quickly removing herself from the black pegasi's path. Lust struck the platform hard, spraying metal and stone everywhere. The crowd roared and screamed as the mare pulled herself out of the small crater that she had made. She didn't even look fazed at what had to be a painful landing. Grinning, she stepped forward towards Patch, who was breathing even harder.

"That was ambitious, sweetie. But it's going to take a lot more than that to kill me," She said, buzzing her wings as she rushed at Patch. I cringed as I watched. The green mare barely had enough strength left to move as Lust struck her, knocking her to the ground. Lust snarled with primal fury as she lifted her wings,

bringing the blades in for the final kill. Patch screamed and howled beneath the black pegasus as she struggled to get away.

“No!!!” I cried out, screaming loudly for my friend. A dark form plummeted in from above, blasting Lust out of her killing strike and slamming into the platform next to Patch. The figure hit hard enough that the massive platform, steel and stone and incredibly heavy, bounced on its chains. The colossal links jingled and rattled as the platform swayed. Lust screamed in fury and recovered in mid air, streaking in a quick loop before arrowing in towards the massive cloaked form. A clawed gauntlet shot out from that concealing shadow of the hooded cloak, smashing Lust out of the air and sending her sliding across the platform. The crowd’s shouting died down, and I realized who was standing over my friend's body.

“Mind your place, sister.” The voice of Wrath echoed throughout the arena. The minotaur leader stepped forward, throwing his cloak off of him in a flare of cloth. “You were to humiliate, not mutilate.” Lust pouted angrily.

“She's mine, Wrath. I'm owed her death,” She snarled. Wrath laughed.

“And you would do well to remember which of us is the stronger,” He said, growling back. Lust flared her wings out. Wrath grinned, and made a motion with his claw. Two robed minotaurs appeared behind him.

“Yes, Lord?” One of them said.

“Remove the young mare to her pen. I have a lesson to teach,” He replied. The guards nodded as they pulled the shaky Patch to her hooves. They disappeared, taking her with them. I looked over at Violet and Steeljack.

“Go to her. I need to watch this,” I said. They nodded and stood up, motioning to the guards. Several minotaurs stepped forward and escorted my friends away. I shot a glance at Nixis, who was focused intently on the action on the platform. I returned my attention there myself, where Wrath was looming over the Lust’s furious form.

“So... you think you have what it takes to challenge me? You will remember your place, little one,” The cult leader said, snarling. Lust was silent as she circled around the minotaur.

“Look, I'm sorry Wrath sweetie, but I am just like you. And you interrupted my playtime,” She said. Wrath erupted into terrifying laughter as he stepped forward.

“Your playtime? You are a foal Lust. Scheming and manipulative to the last, just like sister Pride. The Arena is not for play, not for revenge or foal’s games of jealousy. There is no honor, no glory in what you do here today. But Iron Will himself provided a path to repentance, sister. Take your best shot, and remember: You apologize, I **penalize**.” The minotaur said. Lust growled, flaring out her wings once more as she rushed at Wrath. The fanatical cult leader merely stood there as the black mare launched her bladed wings at his head. Wrath grinned as he lifted one of his claws, batting away the pegasus with a single lazy strike. Lust went flying backwards, flapping her wings hard to regain her focus.

It was already over. As soon as Lust had managed to get control back, Wrath was upon her. The minotaur grabbed the black pegasus by her steel wings. My eyes widened when I realized what he had planned.

Wrath exploded with laughter as he began to pull on the mare.

“Let's see how good you are when your wings are clipped, little bird!” He shouted maniacally. *This is what I have to fight later? He didn't even waste any time to wear her down. He just went in for the kill,* I thought. I didn't know if I even wanted to watch this. I didn't particularly like Lust, but she had saved my life once from Pride. I owed her. My horn flared, throwing up a shield around me as I extended my magic to the black pegasus in Wrath's grip. The minotaur's eyes widened as Lust disappeared in a flash of light, reappearing next to me. The black pegasus looked confused as she looked up at me.

“Wha –?” She started to say. I turned my attention back to Wrath, grinning widely as I magically amplified my voice. The crowd was roaring and screaming by now.

“**Wrath. Do not forget who your real challenger is,**” I said. “**Leave the pegasus be. Fight me instead.**” Wrath grinned as he lifted a claw, motioning for me to join him. My horn flared again and I appeared on the

platform before the maniacal cult leader. As I emerged, I noticed that the guards had returned to the slave pens and that my friends were with them. Patch looked like hell, but I knew she was tougher than nails. It surprised me that Lust was still sitting there, looking deathly confused as my friends were sat down next to her.

“Very well,” Wrath said as he turned to the crowd. “Brothers! Dregs of the Forgotten City! See before you, the paragon of virtue! The Ministry Mare! Prepare to see her driven before me, begging for her pathetic and useless life!” He looked back at me, grinning. “Are you ready Ministry Mare?” I sighed. *As ready as I’ll ever be*, I thought as I glared at the minotaur. I nodded grimly, preparing to enter into the fight of my life.

I ignited my horn and stepped forward, pushing against my opponent with a simple telekinetic strike to test the waters of his strength. Wrath... just stood there, laughing no less.

“Your magic will not work well against me. Iron Will has given me the strength to resist such power,” He said, snarling as he rushed at me, leveling a clawed fist right at my side, beginning the fight in earnest. I dodged out of the way, flapping my wings hard as I brought my hoof across Wrath’s face. The blow barely fazed the minotaur as he struck again, knocking me across the platform and to the hard metal below. I grunted in pain, forcing myself to stand and dodge another slam from the cult leader.

Wrath growled as I dodged another claw strike. I put all of the concentration I could spare into a teleportation spell, ending up at the far end of the platform far away from the minotaur. I looked around for anything I could use as a weapon. Flaring my horn, I grabbed some of the metal rubble surrounding me and began tossing it at Wrath. The cult leader merely shrugged off the blows as he charged forward. Wrath leaped next to me, launching his clawed fist at my side once more.

The claw descended, and I closed my eyes, waiting for the inevitable pain that would result in my untimely death.

It never came. My eyes cracked open and I saw Wrath’s fist, held in the air above my face in a cream-colored glow. The minotaur’s face was angry as he tried to force his way through the magic holding it. I shuffled away just in time before the fist came down, slamming into the ground. I looked up, seeing a friendly face. Danish grinned as he stepped forward, a large revolver held in the air with his magic.

“Howdy darlin’. Happy to see me?” He said, leveling the revolver at Wrath and pulling the trigger. The bullet struck the insane cult leader, tearing through his shoulder and out the other side. The minotaur howled in pain as chaos erupted in the arena. Everywhere in the stadium the crowd began to riot, and suddenly it was as if an all-out war had been started. The familiar pinstripe bakery suits of the MMMM flooded the seating as Danish’s boys began to hold back the raiders and slavers in the audience. The cream-colored unicorn extended a hoof to me, helping me to my feet.

“D-D-Danish?” I said shakily. He nodded. “What are you doing here?”

“Duh, saving your life. Now come on, we’ve gotta get out of here,” He replied, floating his revolver out and taking aim once more at Wrath, who was charging at us both. I grinned as Danish fired again, striking the minotaur dead center in the chest. The blow only fazed Wrath slightly as he continued to charge. I flared my horn and activated a teleportation spell on both myself and Danish. We reappeared in pure chaos. The stadium seats were being turned over, and there were even fires starting around the arena. I quickly located the slave pens, and noticed my friends were busy freeing themselves. Nixis slashed the cage doors completely off their hinges, ignoring the lock altogether. My friends were stuck together in a tight group, Patch and Lust working surprisingly well together to defend the still wobbly Steeljack.

“Nixis!” I shouted as we made our way through the chaotic fighting to my friends. The hellhound turned about, staring at me. “We need an exit!”

“It would be my pleasure, Ministry Mare,” He replied eloquently, adding a small bow for extra flair. The hellhound jumped to the side and literally dove into the pit. He hit the side of the wall, claws extended as he

began to dig in deep. Within moments, a large hole appeared where the hellhound had been. I looked to Violet, who nodded as I grabbed Lust with my magic.

"You're coming with us," I declared, prompting confusion from the black mare. She sputtered, trying to make sense of what was going on.

"But-but-but..." She started to say. I shook my head.

"Do you want to stay here with him? Because I can arrange that," I said, pointing across the way at Wrath. The minotaur leader was in full rage mode, tearing attackers limb from limb as he slogged his way across the metal platform towards us. Lust's eyes shot wide, and she nodded once. "Good. Get in the hole everypony and follow Nixis!" I stopped for a moment, realizing I was forgetting something.

"Danish, our stuff is still inside our medical room," I said. "You follow the rest, I'll be right behind you."

"You're tha' boss sweetheart. Just don't stay here too long," He replied. I nodded and flared my horn, focusing my energy into a teleport. I reappeared in the familiar confines of the medical wing that had served as our prison for the past two days. Giggling with the release of tension, I ripped open the locks on the cabinets holding our bags. Festooning myself with our entire party's belongings, I laughed as I took up Thunder Flash, Para Bellum, and Stargazer. The other weapons were faintly familiar, but the weight and heft of my weapon was like an old friend. The door crashed open as several minotaurs in red robes burst through. I turned and fired with all three weapons at once, not even bothering to enter E.S.A.T.S. I grinned as the silver fire of Thunder Flash tore through several of the guards, reducing them to nothing but silver goop on the floor below.

"Sorry boys, time to go!" I shouted, charging my horn again. I reappeared once more in the center of the arena, high above on the announcer's platform. A mighty explosion of a roar erupted from the platform below as Wrath saw me reappear in the air above his fighting ground. The insane cult leader was now literally tossing raiders and slavers at the bakery gang members. His eyes were blood red, and he panted hard as he saw me.

"Ministry Mare!!!" He shouted. "We are not done yet, you and I. Ours is a conflict for the ages, written in stone by the great Iron Will himself. I will find you, and when I do... I will end you. Not in front of a crowd like this, but in the dark of the cold night... where nopony will find you!"

"Come and get me you fucker," I said, flaring my wings out and speeding towards the hole that Nixis had made. Wrath snarled loudly as I disappeared from view into the darkness of the hole. I hesitated for a moment, wanting to go back and ask the minotaur about Pride, but I got the distinct impression that Wrath would not tell me no matter how nicely I asked him. Moving through the tunnel that Nixis had made, I found that it was moving upward towards the surface.

I broke free of the stuffy air of the makeshift exit and into the stagnant atmosphere surrounding Colter Field. My friends were huddled next to the wall of the massive stadium. Violet stepped up as soon as she saw me, grabbing onto our bags with her magic. I groaned as she helped relieve the burden of the weapons I was carrying as well.

"Thanks. I wasn't sure how much longer I would have lasted magic-wise," I said. She smiled and gave me a quick nuzzle. "What's the situation?"

"Pretty bad," Danish said, interjecting. "Colter Field is going up in flames and the Cult of Iron Will is in full religious fanatic mode. We need to get moving before they find us, darlin'."

"Danish, I don't... I don't even know how to thank you for this," I said. The cream-colored unicorn shrugged.

"Don't then, we call it even Steven and we're good," He replied. "Now let's go already. This place is going down faster than Celestia on a fillyfooler!" I blinked at the uh... colorful euphemism. I giggled and realized I missed the stallion's unique sense of humor. I nodded and moved over to Lust, who was still shaking.

"Lust. Come on, let's go. We're going to get you out of here," I said, prompting a cry of surprise from my friends.

“We're helping her?” Patch said angrily. “After what she did to me?” I nodded. “Why?”

“Because Wrath was going to kill her, and I owe her one. Remember Glyphmark? I wouldn't have survived if not for her,” I said. “Besides, if she puts one hoof out of line...” I glared at the pegasus, who merely nodded. The odd one out of the group, Nixis, stepped forward. The hellhound had a wide smile on his face.

“Nixis is with you as well Ministry Mare,” He said. I grinned, nodding. I would have to sit down later and have a nice long talk with the cultured beast. An explosion split the air above us, and I looked around.

Minotaurs in power armor began to stream out of the stadium itself, and I realized we had been spotted.

“Let's go!” I shouted as we began to run away from the stadium. All around us, the world exploded. Gunfire filled the air, coming dangerously close to us as I tried to keep a shield spell up. Shining Armor's spell was excellent for deterring just about anything, but it definitely was wearing on me. The beginnings of magical burnout began to stir within me, causing a spike of pain to shoot out of my horn. I grimaced through the pain. I couldn't let it go. I had to keep going. I had to keep my friends safe.

The desolate city of Chicacolt loomed to our right, while in the distance ahead of us lay a large ruined building. *That'll have to do - we HAVE to lose these guys!*, I thought, trying to figure out the best place for us to hunker down. Violet and Steeljack were firing wildly behind us, hitting the occasional minotaur and slowing down the ones behind it. There was no way we could stand and fight. Between the enraged minotaurs and the presence of Wrath himself, we would be overrun and destroyed in moments.

Without much of a choice, we pressed forward towards the massive building in the distance. The effects of the shield spell were now wearing on me heavily. I didn't have long before the spell failed... or worse. We crossed the space of Wasteland between Colter Field and this new building, moving as one. The details of the building began to reveal themselves the closer we came to it. A massive sign lay across the front steps of the structure, revealing the word **MUSEUM** on it. The building was unfenced, but an area cleared of rubble showed the edge of the territory controlled by the museum. As we neared the building, the incoming fire slackened, then ceased. I spared moment to shoot a look behind me, seeing the minotaurs simply stop as we crossed the curious border onto the grounds of the ancient museum.

“Why are they stopping?” Violet asked as she pulled up next to me. Her expression was a mixture of elation and confusion. I shook my head.

“I don't know! Keep going!” I said as we pressed forth, arriving finally at the steps. Now the front steps of the massive museum were fully visible, I gasped in shock. The bodies of ponies, griffons, and minotaur littered the courtyard, each one missing various body parts. These were not your typical two hundred year old preserved corpses either. These were fresh bodies, bloody and messy.

“What?” I said aloud, taking in the gory scenery and stopping cold in my tracks. I looked around, expecting to be attacked by raiders. It certainly seemed to be their normal choice of décor. I looked back again, noticing that we were completely alone now. The minotaur guards that had pursued us were gone. “What happened to the guards following us?”

“They're... gone?” Nixis said, scratching his head. “But how?”

“I... I don't know. Everyone keep an eye out, we may be in some form of raider territory,” I said, bringing up my E.F.S. It was empty, showing absolutely nothing other than the yellow blips of my friends. Even Lust showed up as a friendly. I dropped the shield spell, feeling a wave of relief roll over me from the cessation of effort. The headache persisted, however. Cautiously I stepped forward onto the steps, heading up towards the front doors to the museum. A cold chill blew over my coat, the cold caress of a breeze without the air movement. I stopped at the top of the steps, Violet moving to join me. The disturbed look in her eyes showed that she felt the same not-wind too.

“What is this place?” She said, igniting her horn into a light spell. The doors to the museum were practically falling off of their hinges. It looked like nopony had been here in ages. So what was up with the fresh bodies in the courtyard then? I looked back and gasped softly.

“Violet...?” I said, catching her attention. I pointed back at the courtyard. All of the bodies that had previously lay around the front steps were now mysteriously gone. Clean white steps lay in their place.

“What happened to all the bodies?”

“I... I'm not sure,” Violet replied. Patch and Steeljack stepped up next to us, helping the shell-shocked Lust onto the step. The black mare had a blank look on her face, almost as if she had seen a ghost.

“Well, I don't want to take any chances here. We should get inside, find someplace safe to hunker down and recover,” I said, motioning to the doors. My friends nodded and I stepped up to the entrance. I kicked outwards, knocking the doors to the ground. A pile of dust filled the air, another sign of this place's antiquity. After rechecking my E.F.S. for what felt like the fortieth time, I stepped inside.

Surprisingly, the museum lobby was quite clean. There was no rubble to speak of, and the ticket booths appeared to be intact. A thick layer of dust lay over everything, including the floor. I trotted forward, hearing the echo of my hooves on the thick marble flooring. More sounds followed behind me as my friends came into the museum.

“Wow...” I heard Patch say as I looked upwards. A massive mural of the two regal sisters Celestia and Luna adorned the ceiling of the museum's main hall. The main hall extended upwards, showing different floors on each side of the building. I could barely count the number of floors that there appeared to be. *This was a museum?* I thought as I tried to take it all in. *It's so... large.* I turned to my friends.

“I think we should be okay to set up here in the lobby. We'll take shifts to keep watch,” I said. Steeljack nodded, helping Lust along to a seat on the side wall. He moved to help Patch and Violet set up our temporary camp as I sat down next to the black mare. She looked up at me, her face completely devoid of emotion.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you alright?”

“I... I don't know,” She said, looking away for a moment. Her voice had lost the confidence I had come to know the brash pegasus by. “I feel... strange. This place... it's... weird.” I nodded.

“I'm getting that feeling too. Listen... Lust. I know we're not on the same side, but you helped me before against Pride. That must mean something,” I said. “Things have gotten... worse since we last met. I need to find Pride. I need to prevent something really bad from happening.”

“Let me guess. You want to know about Stable 180,” Lust said, sighing. I nodded. “I... I can only tell you where it is. What it is, and why it's important... I don't know. I don't remember.”

“You don't remember?” I asked. The black mare shook her head.

“Pride is a master of mind magic,” She said. “She took away our memories of the place. The only ones that knew were her, Sloth, and Wrath.”

“But I thought Wrath only cared about himself?” I said. Lust chuckled.

“He does. That doesn't mean that he's stupid though. His mind was far too powerful for Pride to attack. All that wishy-washy Iron Will shit, I guess,” She replied. “He works for Pride only when it suits him and the Cult.”

“I'm guessing that my capture wasn't happenstance then,” I said aloud.

“Wrath had planned to deliver you to her after he defeated you in the arena. He claimed his right as leader of the Cult to tell Pride that you belonged to him before she could ever have her hooves on you,” Lust said. “I guess we know how that one turned out.” She motioned to the scene before her. Danish and Steeljack had managed to use the fallen front doors to fortify the entrance, while Patch and Nixis assisted Violet with setting up camp.

“Never underestimate the power of friendship, Lust. It can do some pretty amazing things,” I said. Lust nodded.

“Well, I wouldn't count on Wrath leaving you alone. You're on his radar now. He won't give up,” She said. “Now... you wanted to know about Stable 180 correct? I believe I do owe you for saving my life, sweetie.” She grinned widely as some of her trademark confidence emerged.

"I... I would consider that we were even on that. After all, you saved me from Pride in Glyphmark," I said.

"Well, then consider this one a freebie," Lust said. "All things considering, I think Pride is pretty much done with me now."

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"Wrath is probably just as pissed off at me as he is at you. I... If you would be okay with it, I'd like to stick around you," The black mare replied. My eyes widened.

"You mean you don't want to capture me?" I said. Lust shook her head.

"Wrath promised me that he would pay a lot of money for one fight. I didn't know who it would be. I may have gotten a teensy bit carried away in that one fight," She said, motioning across the way at Patch. "I don't think she'd forgive me, though." I grinned.

"You'd be surprised," I said. "Now, what about Stable 180?"

"Down to business as always, sweetie," Lust said. "But yes, I'm getting off-topic aren't I? Stable 180 is located in the most obvious place. It's underneath Filly's Tower." I looked at the mare incredulously. *Filly's Tower?* I thought.

"You mean... where the Minotaur is?" I said, blinking. "You mean, I was fucking there and didn't know it?!" Lust cocked her head at me.

"Huh?" She said, looking clearly confused. I shook my head.

"Long story, but I teleported there once and met the Minotaur. Well, not so much met as spoke to," I replied, telling the mare about the incident with the Pink Cloud megaspell. "But there's a Stable underneath it?" The mare nodded.

"I... I don't know much more than that, but that's where it is," She said, looking around the dark lobby. "You know... even being here for this long is starting to give me the creeps."

"Yeah. I think we had better stick close together and get some rest," I said as I helped the pegasus up. We made our way back over to the others, where Violet had managed to salvage some of our food out of our bags and was making some semblance of a dinner. It was meager, but it filled my stomach well enough. After eating, I stepped over to Danish, smiling at the cream unicorn as he was helping Steeljack roll out extra bedrolls.

"Darlin'," He said, nodding as I walked up.

"Danish, I can't thank you enough for helping us," I said. Danish shrugged.

"Ah, let's just say I owe you one, sweetheart. You did save my life after all," He replied. "You certainly made an impression on the MMMM."

"Well, I really appreciate it. But umm... will the rest of your boys be alright?" I asked. The cream-colored unicorn grinned.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll be alright. After all, the big guy was really after you. Should have given my boys plenty time to get out," He said, motioning for me to follow him to the far side of the lobby. "Speakin' of the MMMM, I wanted to ask you somethin'."

"Oh? What's that?" I asked.

"I know that you're prob'ly busy and all, but I have a job for you. Something only you could do," He said.

"Y'see, our big boss is in a real ripe state. He's... well let's just say he's kinda big. You know the MMMM has a lot of bakers and sweet makers in it right?" I nodded. "Well we could use some help. Things have gotten... bad for our bakers. All of our caps are going to feeding... well... him."

"What?" I asked. "You mean... literally?" The unicorn nodded again. "Holy shit... he's gotta be... how big?"

"Really, really big," The pudgy unicorn replied. "I'm at a loss, here. It's starting to cause a lot of fighting amongst the bakers and the various factions inside the MMMM. The Buttercream Boys and the Whipped

Cream Royalists have almost come to blows recently...”

“What do you expect me to do?” I asked.

“I just want you to talk to tha' boss is all. See if you can convince him to stop what he's been doing. I've seen what you can do,” He said. I sighed.

“Listen, thank you for holding me in such high esteem,” I said. “I'm hardly worth that sort of reverence.”

“Ain't reverence sweetheart. It's respect. Just... think about it would ya? It'd sure mean a lot to this old baker's heart,” He said. I smiled and nodded.

“Sure, I'll think about it,” I said as we rejoined the others. Patch kept glaring at me the entire time I had been talking with Lust and Danish. I decided to try and find out why. *Might as well get everything out of the way now*, I thought.

“Patch?” I said, startling the mare. “Can we... talk?” She nodded and I took her aside. “Look, Patch... I know you don't like, don't trust Lust...”

“You think? That bitch... first she kissed me, and then she tried to kill me,” Patch replied angrily. She snorted. “And you expect that I'd be okay with you saving her life? For bringing her along?”

“I know. And I'm not expecting anything, but please understand... she knows where to find Pride and she's willing to help us,” I said, sighing. “But I need to know that you can at least shelve your grudge against her until we can get out of here.”

“I'll... I'll try Star. I really will. But I can't make any promises. If she starts something with me...” She said, trailing off. “I won't hold back. You know that.”

“I know, and I appreciate your honesty, my friend,” I said. Patch smiled.

“I'm gonna go see if Danish and Steeljack need any help,” The green mare said. I nodded as she trotted off towards the unicorn and the earth pony. I looked over at Violet, who grinned and motioned for me to join her on our bedroll. I moved over and lay next to my love, smiling. Danish had volunteered to take the first watch while the rest of us tried to get some rest. I let my gaze drift aimlessly around me at the ruined museum lobby, feeling that cold chill down my spine once again. It was like we were being... watched by something. I shrugged it off and opened my bags, pulling out the cases of memory orbs I had collected. I blinked when I saw the amount of them. I really had too many of these things. I pulled the case containing the orbs from the Fort Knowledge library and set them aside.

“Violet?” I said quietly, drawing my love's attention. “Despite the fact that Spark is gone... I still look the same. I can't help but think this won't be over until I face her again. But... I'm scared. Scared I won't have the strength to face her.”

“Oh Star, we'll be there with you to help you face her. You won't be alone. Never again,” She said, nuzzling my neck. I smiled, leaning into her caress.

“Thank you my love. However, if I'm going to be ready for this... I need to know about Shining Armor. One of these other two orbs belonged to him,” I said. “I need to see what drove Twilight to accept Spark's offers.” Violet grimaced, but finally nodded.

“Alright. But you have to take watch at some point,” She said, grinning. “Besides. It gives me the perfect opportunity to... you know.” She winked, causing a furious blush to emerge on my face.

“You wouldn't,” I said, sticking my tongue out. Her grin only widened. I knew in the back of my mind that she probably would not do anything, but I also knew to never put anything past my marefriend. I looked down at the memory orbs before me, selecting the second silvery one in the middle of the case. I latched out with my magic, and felt the world fall away.

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This was a new feeling. I was inside a very powerfully built unicorn stallion. Shining Armor! Twilight's brother's body radiated confidence and power. Beneath it all however, was a searing pain that flowed not only through my host's body, but inside his mind as well. My host looked up, and my vision refocused. I was in a bedroom in what appeared to be a palace. A stream of sunlight filtered in through the curtains. My host was lying on the bed. A golden door at the far end of the room opened, revealing a light pink alicorn mare. She stepped into the room, followed behind by Twilight Sparkle and an older dark navy blue alicorn mare.

"General Armor," The dark blue mare said. My host raised his hoof in a salute.

"Princess Luna. You honor me with your presence," He said. Twilight averted her eyes from her brother. The purple mare looked as if she would burst into tears at any moment. The pink alicorn sat down on the bed next to Armor. Twilight kept her place behind Princess Luna, who smiled.

"As do you, our general. When we first heard of thine injury, we feared for the worst," The princess of the night replied. "The Littlehorn Agent is one of the most foul things that the zebras have created."

"I would have been claimed by it too, had it not been for my shield spell," My host said, clearing his throat. Twilight continued to look at the ground. "It's keeping the Littlehorn Agent contained, but just barely. I was forced to cast it on my own organs to keep myself alive. I'm not certain how long I will be able to maintain it either."

"We understand your predicament Shining Armor," Princess Luna said. "We fear that there may be no cure for you."

"No..." Twilight uttered softly. Luna shot a glance at her, before turning back to Shining Armor. "No!" Twilight repeated, punctuating her statement with a hoofstomp like a hammerblow on the floor. "There WILL be a cure. I will find one, or MAKE one."

"Twilight, dear, we talked about this. You are a Ministry Mare, and your Ministry is the best chance we have of ending this conflict." Princess Luna said, sadness and resignation coloring her words.

"I agree with Princess Luna. I love my husband very much, but the only way to save him is to put an end to this senseless conflict." The pink alicorn interjected. "As much as I would like a cure to be found, I know he understands the needs of the many outweigh the needs of a single pony." Twilight glared at her.

"And as Ministry Mare of Arcane Science, I hereby declare that a portion of our research shall go into finding a way to neutralize the Littlehorn Agent," She said angrily. "So that I might save your husband, my brother." The pink alicorn glared back at Twilight, until my host placed a hoof on her shoulder.

"If you all would excuse me, but shouldn't I have a say in this?" He said. Both mares looked down at the floor as my host continued. "Now, while I appreciate your concerns Twilight... Cadance and Luna are correct. I'm just one pony. Equestria needs you to save it, not me. I will perform my duty until the day I either retire or expire, whichever comes first." Twilight sighed.

"I just... I don't want you to die..." She said after a few moments of silence. Cadance stood and moved over to the lavender unicorn, wrapping her in a firm and simple hug.

"And my dear sister, I do not wish for my husband to die either, but if that is to happen then it is to happen. We cannot question fate," She said. Twilight nodded.

"Thank you Cadance. Can... can I have a moment alone with my brother?" She asked. Cadance smiled.

"I think that is allowed," She said, looking up at Princess Luna. The dark alicorn nodded.

"We shall take our leave of you General Armor. We shall visit thee soon however, to discuss your return to duty," The Princess said. My host nodded.

"I look forward to it, my Princess," He replied. The two alicorns left the room, leaving just my host and his sister. Twilight stepped forward and sat on the bed next to Shining Armor. Several moments of pure silence followed.

“Shiny?” Twilight said, drawing my host's attention.

“Yes?” He said, shifting himself in the bed to sit upright next to his sister.

“I know you don't want me to, but I meant what I said. I'm going to find a cure for you. I will find a way to save you,” She said, a look of pure determination crossing her face.

“Twily, I told you. I'm just one pony. What difference can I make? You're in control of one of the most vital Ministries in the Equestrian government,” My host said. “Please don't make such a big deal about this. I'm fine for now. Plenty of time left in me.”

“But...” Twilight said. My host smiled and extended a hoof around his sister, pulling her into a hug.

“Hey, don't worry. You're still my L.S.B.F.F.,” He said. Twilight looked up and smiled.

“Thanks, B.B.B.F.F.,” She said, returning the hug and standing. “I feel a little bit better now, but don't think you've convinced me to stop. I will find a cure.” She stood and strode out of the bedroom without saying anything further. My host remained silent until she left. A shadowy figure appeared in the room next to Shining Armor.

“So... you convinced her to do it,” A smooth voice said from above the white unicorn. My host looked up as an alicorn as dark as night stepped forward, emerging from a fold of shadow. Cold blue steel armor gleamed on her midnight coat. My host nodded.

“Yes Empress. She is sure to approach the Element of Magic for assistance,” He said. The alicorn grinned wickedly.

“Excellent, Shining Armor. Your assistance in this endeavor has been greatly appreciated. Soon this war shall escalate to the point of no return, and I shall reign supreme,” She said proudly. “With the Elements of Harmony corrupted, nothing shall be left to stop me from ruling this sad and pathetic little world.”

“Yes, Nightmare Moon. Or should I say, Princess Luna?” My host said, a grin cracking on his face. The alicorn's horn glowed brightly and she transformed into the Princess of the Night.

“You are most effective Shining Armor. We are quite pleased with your service,” The Lunar Princess said. My host nodded.

“And I am pleased to serve you Empress. But won't Twilight figure out what's going on?” He asked.

“That is where you will continue to serve us. Your mission General Armor, is to ensure that Twilight continues on the path that we have set for her. The Elements of Harmony will be mine to control once more, and with them I shall end this war. For far too long the Ministries have squandered their resources in this bloody conflict,” The Princess replied. “If harmony is dead in Equestria, the zebras will have no choice but to serve me. After all... I am the Nightmare.”

“Of course my queen. I am ever in your service,” My host said, bowing his head before the alicorn as the memory faded to nothing.

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I came to in darkness. I lay quietly, a headache settling into my skull just behind my horn. I sighed and got up, stretching my legs and back out. Looking around, I couldn't find Violet. In fact, I was completely alone... and not in the same part of the museum that I had started in. In fact, I wasn't totally sure where I was. The room I was in was part of a large exhibit on what appeared to be the paleo-pony period. I stood and looked around. My bags, weapons, and most importantly... my friends were gone.

“Hello?” I called out. Nothing answered. I sighed, and started walking. There was just enough light coming in from the skylight above to illuminate my path. *Skylight? But we were on the ground floor before*, I thought as I stopped and looked up. The moon poured along the ground from above. A cold chill flowed across my body. Something wasn't right about this place. What was going on here? I decided that I should press on, and try and locate Violet and the others. I brought up my E.F.S., seeing nothing that indicated any

hostile or friendly presences nearby. I silently wished Lucky was still around. I really missed the green mare's company in times such as this.

A screeching noise from all around me broke the silence. I spun about, trying to find the source of the infernal sound. A red light flashed in the darkness behind me, coalescing into a silvery orb floating in the air. Protruding from its sides were two spindly arms.

“INTRUDER... INTRUDER... INTRUDER...” A robotic voice emanated from the orb as a blast of magical energy soared past my ears. *Shit!* I thought as I ducked to avoid the orb's blasts. The robot guardian flew towards me, continuing its monotone chant and death-ray fire. I ignited my horn, throwing a nearby skeleton of a prehistoric pony at the thing. The orb merely blasted through the bones, disintegrating them as it continued its mission to end me. I turned tail and ran, dodging blasts from the flying robot as I made my way into the next exhibit hall. The next hall was filled with marble pillars. I ducked behind a close one, just barely missing another blast of energy from the robotic orb. I grunted in pain as spatters of molten marble singed my hide. The silvery orb flew past the pillar and spun around, its red eye zooming in on my location. I growled and reached out with my magic, raising my shield as the orb fired another stream of energy my way. It bounced off harmlessly into the hall, disintegrating a crater from one of the nearby pillars. My horn seared in agony from the use of Shining Armor's shield spell, but I pushed through the pain and extended the shield out towards the robot. The shield pressed upon the silvery orb, forcing it back into the pillar behind it and crushing it to pieces.

With the orb down, I dropped the shield and breathed a sigh of relief. I walked over to the strange device and picked it up in my magic. The device appeared to be of Ministry of Arcane Science design. *Where did it even come from? There was no indication that any of this place's security systems were still intact,* I thought as I removed the spark battery from the device's crushed casing. Realizing that I didn't have any saddlebags to put the battery in, I tossed it aside and looked around. The hall was filled with a mist that covered the entire floor. I felt cold again. I looked up and realized the skylight was now gone. I stepped back and looked behind me, into the paleo-pony exhibit I had awoken in. A completely different hall stood in its place.

“The fuck...? What is going on here?” I said aloud as I returned my attention to the pillar hall. The mist covering the ground felt... unnatural. It was as if it were alive. I cast about, mentally. There was no other option available, I had to press on. I stepped deeper into the hall, feeling that cold chill roll over me once more. This place was playing with me. I couldn't figure out how, but it was doing something. I wondered how my friends were faring, and how Violet was. The insanity of Colter Field seemed so far away. I sighed, hoping that everyone else was alright. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever. As I walked, began checking my E.F.S. As I neared what looked like an ending, a yellow blip came up. A flash of green appeared in the hall ahead of me.

“Who's there?” I shouted, not expecting any sort of reply. A meek voice called out in response.

“Hello?” It said. I moved towards the voice, heading into the next hall. The exhibit was one on the Elements of Harmony. A fake set of the fabled Elements themselves were set on a center dais in the center of the hall.

“Hello? Who's out there?” I said. A small green filly came into view as I rounded the dais, hunched over and crying. The yellow blip on my E.F.S. matched her. I smiled as I looked down at her. “Hi there. Are you lost dear?” The filly turned around and I gasped softly. Whatever... whatever it was, it wasn't equine. Its eyes were soulless orbs of milky black. It grinned widely, its teeth filed down to sharpened points. It opened its gaping maw, cackling wildly as it stepped towards me. The ghastly filly launched itself across the hall, growling as it slammed into me. I tried to dodge, but the creature had already managed to latch onto me and began biting ferociously at my neck. I reached out with my magic, grabbing ahold of the thing and tossing it across the hall. The beastly thing hit the wall with a sickening ***splat*** and fell to the ground. It shuddered on the floor for a moment and then righted itself. It howled with unearthly glee.

“Fuck!” I shouted, turning tail as the howling creature hopped towards me once more. I couldn't even begin to process what was happening to me. I was being chased through a strange museum by a psychotic little death filly. I couldn't even tell if it was a ghoul or not. I didn't even take a second glance to even see. I just

kept running. *What the fuck is wrong with this place?!* I thought as I passed into another long hall, this one opening into the central shaft of the museum. I was back at the center! I galloped ahead, launching over the railing and flapping hard to control my flight into the shaft beyond. I looked down, seeing darkness. A howling followed behind me as the insane filly-thing launched off of the railing after me, howling through the void on a collision course. I snarled and grabbed a hold of it with my magic, flinging it upwards with a grunt of effort. The 'thing' struck the skylight violently and splattered against the glass, turning into nothing but blood and bone.

I flew downwards into the darkness, heading towards the bottom of the museum. I flew for what felt like forever, finally touching the solid ground of the main floor of the museum lobby. I headed towards the front, looking for any traces of my friends. Nothing. There was nothing around the front lobby. No sign of our camp, or my friends' presence. I sighed. *Did they move on already?* I thought. *No. Something's not right. My friends wouldn't leave me behind.* A silvery light caught my glance as I searched the lobby. It appeared to be coming from behind one of the ticket booths. I trotted over, finding what appeared to be a memory orb just sitting there in the center of the booth. I looked around, wondering what the hell was going on. My eyes returned to the orb, and I started to reach out with my magic almost instinctively.

"No," I said, stopping myself. "I... I can't. I have to find Violet. The others." I sighed. *One teensy weensy peek won't hurt... right?* I groaned, deciding to throw caution to the wind as I picked up the memory orb with my telekinesis and letting the world fall away into nothingness once more.

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My eyes came into focus as I realized whose body I was in. Twilight's body was extremely comfortable to me by now. My host looked around for a few moments, and I recognized the familiar scenery of the palace halls. Twilight trotted along, making her way out of the palace and into the gardens beyond. Her journey led her to a small alcove where a large white statue stood. The statue was of a very familiar creature. It was the spirit of Chaos, Discord. My host stopped before the statue, regarding it with narrowed eyes. Memories flooded my thoughts of a time when Discord had escaped, and the six mares had used the Elements of Harmony to turn the spirit of Disharmony back into stone.

"*Twiliiiiight,*" A feminine voice said, cutting through my host's thoughts. My host spun around, looking for the source of the phantom voice.

"Hello?" My host called out. "Who's there?"

"*Twilight. It's me,*" The voice replied. "*I'm your friend.*" My host's eyes widened as she looked up at the statue.

"No, it's not... but you're trapped inside the stone," She said. A soft chuckle emanated in the back of my host's mind. A ghostly presence appeared from behind the stone statue. The soft light formed into that of a lavender unicorn. Her mane was not yet the dark black I was used to, instead it was a soft purple with a pink streak through it. She smiled brightly at my host.

"Hello Twilight. In case you're wondering, I'm not Discord," She said. "But I am somepony you know rather well."

"Who... who are you?" Twilight asked. The spectral mare twirled about the statue.

"Isn't it obvious, you silly filly? I'm the Element of Magic!" She said, grinning widely.

"That... How is that even possible? How are you...?" Twilight said nervously as she began to look the other mare up and down. The spectral unicorn chuckled.

"You're the first bearer in a long time I've ever revealed myself like this to Twilight. You're special," She replied. "And right now, you need my help."

"What... what do you mean?" My host said. "I mean... I know the war's gotten worse and all..."

"Trust me Twilight. I can help you with your Ministry. Being the Element of Magic, I know plenty of spells

to help you,” The other unicorn said. “I also come bearing a warning.”

“A warning?” My host asked, cocking her head to the side. The other mare nodded.

“There shall come a time when things will get really bad. The Elements of Harmony will be challenged again, and you shall have to be strong to get through it all,”

“What's going to happen?” My host said. The lavender mare on the other side of the statue grinned.

“Don't worry Twilight. In the end it will all work out,” She said. “Things always do. Now then, I have to get going. If you need me, just call on me.” She began to fade to nothingness.

“Wait! How do I get in touch with you?!” My host shouted. Soon the mare was nothing but a grin, floating in mid air.

“That part's easy, just call my name,” The floating mouth said. “You can call me Spark.”

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I came to, feeling a soft and warm body next to mine. I looked next to me, seeing Violet laying there. She was sleeping, a gentle snore coming from her muzzle every few seconds. I perked my ears up, taking in the surroundings. I was back in the main lobby. My friends were all asleep, save Nixis, who appeared to be on watch duty. *Was it all a dream?* I thought. The events I had witnessed still weighed heavy in my mind. *Did I imagine it all? Damage or leftovers from Spark? Something the Virtues did?* I couldn't tell. With all the creatures and things messing with my mind, I couldn't be certain of anything but Violet and my friends.

I pushed myself up away from Violet, carefully allowing her to continue sleeping. I stepped lightly towards the hellhound. He looked up at me, and smiled toothily.

“Hello Nixis,” I said quietly. “May I sit next to you?” The hellhound nodded.

“It... it is a pleasure to be in your presence, Ministry Mare,” He said. I giggled softly.

“Please. Call me Radiant Star. I have to admit that I am impressed at your... eloquence,” I replied.

“Yes, well. I learned from ponies. High Equestrian and all. It was how I earned my position in Ponyville,” Nixis said.

“How did you end up in Chicacolt, of all places?” I said.

“Our town was besieged by slavers. Many of us were taken, myself included,” He said.

“Must have been strong slavers to take hellhounds,” I said. Nixis chuckled.

“Hard to resist when they were using those Celestia-forsaken mind control collars. Kept us in line quite nicely,” He said, noting the surprised expression on my face. “Remnants of old Enclave technology. Even for a hellhound, I was a difficult slave. Ponies who would own a slave tend not to be able to deal with one who can not only explain to them why they are in the wrong, but what they should do about it.” Nixis and I shared a laugh, and he continued. “I managed to escape from the Lotus Triad, but the Cult of Iron Will recaptured me, and here I've remained.”

“And you've been there ever since? How long?” I asked.

“Years. Sometimes, it feels like forever,” He responded. “But not as long as I have studied the doctrine of the Goddesses and the words of the Lightbringer.”

“Ah yes, the Destroyer,” I said, scowling as I considered the unicorn who had been responsible for my pseudo-mother's demise. Nixis chuckled.

“I see that you refer to her much like most of your sisterhood does. I've met several of your kind in the past, and you're all the same. You do not see past your own sins,” He said solemnly.

“Oh? And your kind is much better?” I said, feeling up for a little challenging debate.

“My kind is long known for pain and suffering in the Wasteland. We do not ignore this fact, my friend. Instead, we embrace it. We know we caused pain, but we do our best to make this world a better place in the Lightbringer's wake,” Nixis said. “Alicorns on the other hand... are tragically misguided in their knowledge of their past. When your Goddess broke, she spread your minds across all your sisters. Many of your kind went insane from the multiple minds inhabiting their bodies. Even those few of you who have held onto sanity have nothing of the past but fractures and mystery. You are truly, a race with no past.”

“I think there's a lot of value there, but from a personal perspective...” I paused to think. “Ultimately, it's *I* that resents the Destroyer. Even if her actions gave me my freedom and individuality back. Even if we truly deserve to be in Harmony, not Unity,” I said. Nixis simply smiled.

“You make an interesting counterpoint my friend. However, without the Destroyer you would not even exist,” He said in return. Before I could respond, the hellhound continued to speak. “I am loathe to turn away from a debate, but I must express my concerns. I have been watching this place for some time since my watch began, and I am... unsure of it.” I looked around the dark lobby.

“I... I am too. I had this strange dream. I was... attacked and chased around several areas of this museum. It was... discomforting,” I said. “There's something here... watching us and waiting for the right time.”

“Indeed,” The hellhound said. “I've felt it too. It's unnerving to say the least.” A stirring behind us indicated that the others had awoken. I stood and turned to the group.

“I believe that there is something... wrong with this place,” I said, addressing my friends as we began to collect our belongings. “I think it's high time we moved on. The Cult of Iron Will is no longer following us, and we should use this opportunity wisely.” The others nodded in agreement. They all looked like they hadn't gotten any rest at all. In fact, they looked worse than when we had first entered the museum. I nuzzled Violet and helped pack up our bags. Attaching Stargazer to its harness, I moved towards the front door where we had entered. As I pushed open the doors with my magic, a soft gasp escaped my lips. Violet came up next to me.

“Star...? What's wrong?” She said, looking past me as she saw what I was now seeing. “Oh... oh my.”

The outside world was completely gone. Beyond the front doors, instead of stairs down to eerily clear ground, there was another lobby. Squinting, I could make out a large violet butt at the far end of the room.

The rest of the pony was invisible, hidden by the door she was looking through. With a start, I realized I was seeing myself.

“What the fuck?!” I shouted angrily. “What the fuck is going on here? This isn't right! Where's the outside?” I pounded my front hoof on the door frame. There *was* something wrong here. Something terribly, terribly wrong. Violet stepped closer and put a hoof on my shoulder.

“It'll be alright, Star. We'll find a way out of here,” She said. I sighed, looking out the door again at the other lobby. There was... something there that was watching us. I thought for a moment that I saw movement, but when I looked again there was nothing there. *Just my imagination*, I thought, turning back to the others.

“Alright then. Our only option then is to go up. Find a skylight and get out that way,” I said. “Does anyone here know anything at all about this place?” Everyone else shrugged.

“I know that the Cult never came here, but I don't know why,” Nixis said, sighing. I nodded at the hellhound.

“Okay, well. I'd prefer to not stay here much longer than we have to,” I said, stepping into the lobby and motioning to my friends. As one, we moved deeper into the darkened hall. I paid close attention to my E.F.S. but nothing appeared other than the yellow blips belonging to my friends. The hall ended in a large staircase, heading up to the next level. As we stepped near it, a clicking sound emanated from my PipBuck. I looked down at it, noting that there were rising levels of radiation here. It became obvious however, that there were no bodies anywhere. In fact, there wasn't even any skeletons. I looked up, seeing the skylight at the very top of the ceiling far above us. I thought about Spark and Twilight and how they first had met. How that cheery mare that Spark once had been had transformed into one of the most evil forces in the world. How Shining Armor had tricked Twilight down the path that led to Spark's continued survival. And now, as I stood in this strange museum the corrupted Element of Magic was on its way to Pride. There wasn't any

time to waste. We had to get out of this place, and fast.

A bolt of energy soared past my ears as I picked up Stargazer, unleashing a torrent of gunfire towards the turret jutting out of the ceiling. Several of the rounds struck, causing the turret to explode in a spectacular blaze of fire. Another series of energy beams came from a second turret. Violet hopped next to me, pulling up Thunder Flash. A blast of silver fire turned the second turret to melted goop on the side of the wall.

Since we had moved up to the first level of the museum, the ancient security systems in the place had suddenly become active. Every hall had several turrets that suddenly would pop up without warning and begin firing. To make matters worse, the museum itself seemed to be playing with us. We'd walk into the next hall and find ourselves in a hall we had already visited. These 'new' halls also had completely repaired security systems. We paused, taking a much needed rest break as I tried to convince my PipBuck's automap to make sense of the shifting layout of the place. Worse, we were still being watched. The feeling of eyes on the back of my neck intensified, and I wasn't the only one noticing the heavy atmosphere. I was starting to feel panicked, and seeing signs of it on my friends, when we finally came to a set of stairs... that went down.

"Down? Down?! The stairs are supposed to go up!" I shouted, pounding my hoof on the railing. "This place is just fucking with us!" I roared, pounding harder as I spat profanity at the world. I could hear my friends behind me talking amongst themselves.

"Is... is she gonna be alright?" I heard Lust say. "Or are we expecting her to go crazy and kill everyone she sees?" There was a short pause. "What? What'd I say?" I groaned and turned around, causing the black pegasus to nearly jump out of her skin.

"I'm sorry everyone. I'm fine, I really am. I'm just... I just wish we could get out of this place and go after Pride. The longer we take, the more time Spark has to find her. And if she does... it's really bad," I said.

Seeing no other option, we started walking down the stairs. As we trotted along, I felt that cold chill again as well as that watchful feeling. Violet stepped in time next to me, keeping me company as I brooded on the subject of Spark.

"I'm really just going nuts here aren't I?" I said quietly as we made our way to the next landing. The stairs seemed to go on forever. Violet chuckled.

"Nah, you're fine sweetheart,," Violet immediately said, reassuringly. She paused, apparently thinking over her next statement. "It's just been hard on all of us. And it keeps getting worse."

"I just... I can't rest until I confront her again Violet. She's... she's not bad. Not really. She was corrupted," I said, explaining the memories I had witnessed of Shining Armor and Twilight respectively. I then began to tell her about the Virtues, and the insight they had given me into Spark and who she was. It was the first time I had really opened up to anypony about the bizarre metaphysical experiences I had been through, and it felt almost absurdly good to do so. We soon arrived at what looked like a basement of some sorts. Immediately my PipBuck began to click wildly into the green.

"There's mild radiation down here," Steeljack said. The stallion had been rather quiet since we had moved deeper into the museum. I smiled as my earth pony friend passed out packets of Rad-Away to those of us who needed them. An alert on my E.F.S. came up, noting the presence of several hostile targets within the area. The basement was large and long, filled with large stone columns that lined the room. For the most part however, it was a completely open space. Darkness filled the room like a hungry beast, devouring any shred of light there was. Danish, Violet, and myself took point, using our horns to light the way as we walked cautiously along. I floated out Stargazer, wondering just what was down here. I heard them before I saw them. The faint sucking and gurgling sound that could only belong to ghouls. I indicated this silently to my friends as the first of the undead monstrosities came into view. Violet lifted Thunder Flash and fired, reducing the ghoul to a puddle of silvery goop on the floor. Three more of the creatures appeared on each side, moving to flank us. Nixis and Patch moved forward to engage the foul beasts, the hellhound slashing wildly with his sharp claws while my green earth pony friend brought up Para Bellum and fired deadly shots

that pierced through ghoulflesh like a knife through butter.

More ghouls spilled into the basement level. *Where in Celestia's sloppy plot are they all coming from?* I thought as Stargazer ripped apart two more of the undead beasts. The telltale ***crack*** of Steeljack's rifle echoed throughout the immediate area as my friend dived into a large group of ghouls, ripping them to shreds with his fast and frantic gunfire.

"Where the fuck are they all comin' from?" Danish shouted above the roar of the assault as he levitated his carbine up and unloaded it into a particularly nasty looking ghoul's rotting face. Lust soared above us, using her bladed wings to rip apart the masses of the undead. She growled as she landed next to me.

"You know, if I'd have known I was going to be following your fat ass into battle, I'd have had you teleport out my power armor. I feel naked without it," She said angrily, before a sly grin crept along her face. "Not that you'd mind staring at my flank." I glared at her.

"I'm not fat," I snapped. My thoughts crept back to when I was able to see myself earlier. *I am not that fat*, I thought. "And I've already got a marefriend, for your information." Lust chuckled, and motioned to Violet, who was currently blasting apart a ghoul with her beam rifle.

"Oh, her? I know all about that. Well, hey if you ever want a real hot piece of flank I'd be more than ---" She said, before I put my hoof up to her mouth. Her eyes widened as I floated Stargazer to her face.

"Duck," I shouted. The black pegasus did as I instructed and Stargazer's fire ripped through the space above her, destroying the ghoul that had been creeping up on her. Lust lifted herself up from the ground, smiling.

"Thanks, sweetie. Didn't know you cared so much about me," She said. Any trace of the mare's fear was replaced by her normal brash confidence.

"I don't. But you're a fighting body, and right now we need you," I replied as she nodded and brought her wings up, slashing brutally into a nearby ghoul. Soon the battle was rejoined by myself as well, as Stargazer spat hot fiery death upon the ferals that came even remotely close to me. My horn flared angrily.

These monsters were just one more delay in my journey, one more obstacle that I had to push out of my way in order to get to Spark. I wouldn't let them slow me down for one minute.

Of course, when we had finished cleaning up the smaller ghouls is when the big one appeared. A throaty roar sounded from the end of the hall. A large door sat behind the massive beast, which appeared to be some form of earth pony ghoul. The creature stood easily three times the size of myself, which is saying a lot. Rows of sharp teeth gleamed in the darkness as the undead monstrosity roared again.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Steeljack said, echoing the thoughts of everypony present. I couldn't even react as the thing began to charge right at us.

"Everypony spread out!" Nixis shouted. I could hear my friends fanning out on all sides of me as they launched a full-on assault against the massive creature. Nothing seemed to faze the ghoul as it continued to charge. I stood straight before the beast, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. and queuing up shot after shot at the ghoul's legs. Time fell away and Stargazer fired, spitting its hot payload of death into the monster. Ichor and flesh exploded, but the ghoul continued onward, slamming into me and knocking me to the ground. It roared as it lifted its hooves, rearing into a killing position above me. Before it could strike, the beast's head exploded in a gory mess, covering me liberally in rotting ghoulflesh. The massive ghoul fell over next to me and I looked up, seeing Danish standing there.

"Y'alright darlin'?" He said. I nodded mutely, standing up and shrugging the gore off of my body.

"Yeah... I'm fine. Just... messy," I said, chuckling. I looked down at the bleeding body of the monstrous ghoul. "What in the hell was that thing? Some sort of super ghoul?"

"Who knows. If it t'were that big in life there had to have been something seriously wrong with it," Danish replied. "It's a mystery, for sure. Prewar ponies, so fucked up." I chuckled, latching Stargazer onto its harness as we rejoined the others. The door at the far end of the basement hall was locked. A large terminal sat to its side, blinking idly as it waited for some form of input. I stepped up to it and tapped one of the keys. A prompt appeared asking for a password. I connected my PipBuck to it and began tapping through the

code, looking for anything that resembled the passcode to access the door. Nothing stood out, however. I groaned, reaching out for the terminal itself with my magic, ignoring the keyboard. It was almost instinctive, but it had an immediate effect. The door began to rumble and shudder as it slid open.

“What did you do?” Violet asked, looking at the terminal. I shook my head.

“I... I don't know. I just touched it with magic, and it opened,” I said. I looked up at the door and stepped forward into the darkness beyond. My friends stepped cautiously behind me as we made our way into the next hall. The room was aglow in a soft light, provided by various candles that lined the walls. What was strange about the room was the... figures. Figures made of clay filled the room, all shapes and sizes. They were figures of ponies. Some of them were finished while others stared with blank eyes into the soft glow of the hall.

“What...?” I said as we walked through the maze of clay ponies. *What is this place?* I thought as we pressed deeper. The room was massive. Beneath the clay statues, I could see that this room used to be some sort of research facility. *What were they researching? The effects of little clay statues on the war?* I thought, moving past another set of the statues. Something moved out of the corner of my eye. I turned, lifting Stargazer.

“Star? What's wrong?” Violet asked. I looked past my love, seeing nothing but the sea of clay ponies. I sighed, holstering my weapon once more.

“I'm... not sure. Thought I saw something,” I replied. “What do you think they used these for?” I motioned to one of the clay statues.

“I'm not sure, but this place is eerie as fuck,” Patch said. “Something... feels off here.”

“I agree with greenie,” Lust said, earning herself a glare from the green mare. Lust snorted. “What? You're green.”

“And you're a bitch,” Patch replied angrily. I glared at her. *Patch, you told me you were going to shelve this grudge against her,* I thought.

“Well, takes one to know one I suppose,” The black mare said. I growled, putting a halt to things before they could get worse.

“Enough. We need to stick together. Find out what's ---” I started to say before I saw it. A puddle of purple goo was moving through the room. It hesitated for a moment and then seeped into a crack in the ground.

“Did... anypony just see that?” My friends looked at me in confusion. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it again. And then again on the right. It was... everywhere! My eyes widened as the purplish sludge surrounded us. My friends saw it too now. As the sludge arose around us, I wondered just what this museum had in store for us next. Between the fucked up dreams, the crazy halls filled with insane security systems, and the psychotic ghouls inhabiting this place... what else was there?

“Everypony run!” I shouted as I turned tail and ran towards the only space of floor not covered by the purplish substance. Loud hoof steps on the marble flooring echoed behind me as my friends followed closely behind. We galloped across the hall, ducking and weaving through the clay statues and trying to stay out of the purple goo. I looked back for a moment, noticing that the sludge was actively moving around us, trying to cut us off. I spotted an alcove set back into the wall high above the hall. It appeared to be a window leading into an overlooking office. I growled and charged my horn, preparing to ignite it in a massive teleportation spell. The spell released and we suddenly appeared inside the office. My horn burned as I caught my breath. I looked out the window, noticing the purple sludge had completely covered the floor below.

“What the fuck is this shit?!” Steeljack said. “It's like it's chasing us!”

“It's like some sort of ooze.” Patch replied.

“Slime,” Lust said. Patch glared at her.

“No, it's an ooze. See how sludgy it is?” The green mare said.

“No no. You're definitely wrong. See how slimy it is? It's slime for sure,” Lust said defiantly.

“Ooze!”

“Slime!”

“Ooze!”

“Slime!”

“Slime!”

“Ooze!”

“Okay you win, it's an ooze!” Patch said, smiling widely.

“Thank you – hey wait a minute!” Lust said angrily. I stepped between the earth pony and pegasus, growling.

“Stop it you two! We can't be fighting like this! Besides... it looks like both a slime and an ooze... like a... smooze!” I said. Patch and Lust huffed and looked away from each other. I looked back out of the window, no longer seeing the smooze substance in the room. “Alright, look. It's gone now. We should probably get out of here and try and backtrack out of this place. I'm sick and tired of this.” I flew out of the window and down to the floor, looking about the clay statues. One of the statues behind me fell over suddenly as I spun about, seeing the purplish smooze goo bubble up from the cracks in the marble. It sped towards me and arose in a wave of goo. I barely had any time to scream as it poured over me, drowning me in darkness.

Where... where am I? I thought as I looked around. I groaned and realized that I was standing in a hallway. One that I almost forgot existed. One that I hadn't seen in quite a while. Many of its doors were boarded up and locked. Comically large padlocks hung from them. I stalked down the hallway, trying to figure out in my head what was happening. *How did I get here?* I thought. I thought that this place had disappeared along with Spark, but I was obviously wrong. Was Twilight still here in my head then? Even with Spark gone? The ***fwoosh*** of the torch and ***creak*** of an opening door came from the hallway. I found the door that had opened and stepped inside.

The room was long and bright. Sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows lining the chamber. At the far end of the hall was a large door. I realized I had been here before. It was the chamber that contained the Elements of Harmony. Standing in front of the door was a lavender unicorn. She turned, smiling at me wryly.

“Welcome Radiant Star,” She said. I trotted up to her.

“Who... who are you?” I asked. The lavender mare chuckled.

“It's been some time since you've spoken to us,” She said. “My name is Faith. I'm a collection of several of Twilight's emotions.”

“Faith? Really? And why are you here now?” I said. “I thought you all were gone after Spark left me.”

“Spark's exodus let us out fully. Twilight's emotions are still here inside your mind Star. And we want to help you,” Faith said.

“Oh? Really? Fat lot of good it did when Spark was fucking with my mind,” I said angrily. “Where were you then? Huh?”

“Forgive us, Star. Spark was fully in control of us. She kept us from helping you,” She said. Her eyes were filled with sadness. “You have to have faith my dear. Faith in us. Faith in yourself and in your friends.”

“How can I? How can I have faith in something I don't even understand?!” I shouted. “All I want is for you to get out of my head, and to get out of here so that I can chase after Spark! She's dangerous, and I cannot let her get to Pride.” Faith nodded.

"Sometimes... faith means believing in the impossible," She said.

"I don't even know what the fuck that means?!" I said, shaking my head. "Why won't somepony give me a straight answer for once in my life?"

"I'm sorry, Star. But I cannot be up front with you. My commitment to Twilight prevents me from doing so. All I can say is that your journey to find Spark will bring you to the answers you seek," She said. "And then... you will have to choose."

"Choose what?" I asked, cocking my head. Faith smiled.

"You'll know when the time comes, Star. I'm sorry, but I can't say much more than that," She replied.

"Know that when you are faced with this choice... we will be there to help you." I sighed.

"What about Twilight's power? Is it still locked away?" I said. Faith nodded.

"Twilight's power is inaccessible to us at the moment. Spark's presence was enough to let some of it leak through, but now that she is gone... Nothing. Twilight's power is dormant or locked away, and we are unsure if that is going to change." The purple mare said.

"I see. If Spark is gone now... why do I still look like her?" I said.

"That is because the spell is still quite active, despite Spark's absence. The Twilight Society really had no idea what they were doing when they cast the spell," Faith said. "It's unfortunate too. It brought Spark into this world, and that cannot be good for any of us."

"Why did it bring her here? What's she planning?" I said. My mind was abuzz with questions. Faith's eyes met my own. Her eyes were deadly serious.

"Spark planned this from the beginning. From the first moment she revealed herself to Twilight, she was already planning on taking immortality for herself," Faith said. "She wants to rule this world. Perhaps it was a bit of the Nightmare taking hold of her, but she seeks ultimate control over all of the Wasteland."

"Is there any way that she can be stopped?" I said. "I can't let her do that. There's no way that Equestria would ever heal if she were to take control."

"I... I don't know. All I know is that you must face her. When you do, when you face that choice, you will do so in full knowledge of the consequences," Faith said. "Now then, I must bid you goodbye. You need to wake up now Star. There is still so much for you to do."

I coughed and sputtered awake, clearing some of the purplish goo out of my mane as I tried to stand. *Where am I?* I thought as I looked around. The room was similar to the clay statue hall, with more of the clay ponies lining the walls. A pale light came from the candles hanging in the corners of the room. I couldn't see any exit past the darkness. The purple smooze goo covered every inch of the floor, and I nearly slipped in it as I stepped forward towards the center of the room. As I made my way, I swore that I heard... humming?

What is that noise? I thought. I sighed, thinking of my conversation with Faith. I knew from my collective experience that Spark had been planning her ascension to Goddess for a long time, but from the very beginning? How long had Spark gone before Nightmare had corrupted her? When had she become the Spark of Magic that I knew? And what of this choice that I was supposed to make? What choice? What would happen if I made the wrong choice? My mind was filled with scrambled thoughts and questions. I knew that the only right answer at the moment was to find Spark and end this once and for all.

"Hello?" I called out. The humming stopped for a moment, and then continued. A large mass of the smooze had collected in the center of the room. It was... moving. Two appendages that appeared to be arms had extended from its sides. It was hunched over some sort of pedestal in the middle of the room. The humming appeared to be coming from it. "Hello?" I said again. The thing stopped what it was doing and shifted, its arms turning about as it faced me. The creature... if one could call it that had two dark holes where its eyes

should be, along with a large open mouth. I cringed, stepping back a few feet away from the thing.

"Hello. Don't be afraid," The thing said suddenly. I stepped back a few more steps. "No, please don't. It's alright. I won't hurt you."

"What... what are you?" I asked, cautiously. "What do you want with me?"

"I'm... I don't remember... I don't know," The thing said. I sensed a sad tone in its voice. "I don't want to hurt you. I was hoping you could help me, since you're *her*!"

"What do you mean?" I said. The thing shifted around me.

"Her! The one I was told to expect!" It said. "I've been here so very, very long that you could only be her."

"I'm Radiant Star. Otherwise known as the Ministry Mare," I said confidently. This strange creature was almost childish in its reactions, its simple honesty. "Where are my friends?"

"The others are fine. I didn't hurt them, if that's what you are asking. I'm talking to them right now also. They know you're OK, and they are OK as well. The green one says that she still thinks ooze." The smooze creature said, a muddy rendition of a smile on its face. "It's so nice to have visitors, I've been stuck here for... well, forever. Long enough that all I've ever known is this place and my work, these." It motioned with one of its arms at the clay statues lining the walls.

"You... made these?" I said. The thing nodded. Well, at least it looked like it nodded.

"It's all I ever do. I can't leave here. The security system keeps trapped," It said. "I'm confined to this room and a couple of the ones that are next to it."

"What... what happened here?" I asked. The creature sighed.

"I know that the security system here has been locked down since the bombs fell. I found a terminal that told me that." The creature said. "Since then, I think, I've been here. The Ministry of Image made the first statues, in the before. I've been making them ever since."

"Ministry of Image? Rarity's ministry?" I said. A pit formed in my stomach as I considered just what sort of project Rarity was doing here. Something related to the Black Book and necromancy no doubt. "You said before that I was her. What did you mean?"

"You'll have to forgive me. I get so few visitors here. You see, I was visited recently by another mare. She had told me you would be coming," The creature said. My eyes widened.

"Me? Who... who was she?" I said, my mind going wild with speculation. Was it Spark? Pride?

"She told me she was a friend of yours, and gave me a message to give to you. She said... she said you would know what to do," The smooze creature replied. "But, I'll only give it to you on one condition."

"And that is?" I asked.

"Help me get out of this place. I've been here so long and I wish to see the world beyond it. I'm stuck here, Radiant Star, and I want to be free," The thing said. I could feel the calmness radiating from the creature. No matter what, I knew it held no ill will towards me or my friends. Its wish to be free was genuine.

"I... Yes. I can help you," I finally said after a moment's pause. The thing turned around quickly and grabbed something off of the pedestal. It lifted the item before my face. The clay figurine was of a mare that had both wings and a horn. Her green coat was instantly recognizable to me. Her mane was purple, and a cutie mark of a four leaf clover emblazoned her flank. I let out a soft gasp at the image of the mare that I had let expire in front of my eyes. Of a friend, one that I had let down on more than one occasion. I bit back the tears forming in my eyes as I took the figurine from the smooze creature's hand. I held it there for a brief moment before dropping to my haunches as I began to sob.

"No..." I uttered. "No...!"

I let my eyes drift to the base of the figurine. A phrase had been etched into the plate adorning it.

Have Faith.

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Spell: Blade of the Goddess (Rank 1) – You can now form a blade of powerful magic to fight for you, but it only lasts for a short time, so make it count!

New Perk: Crouching Dragon, Hidden Alicorn – You are a powerful melee fighter, using your magical strength to augment your movement and finesse in battle. Skill in Unarmed is increased by +10% and your movement speed is increased by 20% in combat when you are unarmed.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Perk: Power Strike - Your skill in unarmed combat has increased greatly, giving you access to more powerful attacks. Your Unarmed skill is now increased by 15% and you can now make a destructive hoof strike attack that temporarily stuns your opponent.

Patch: Level Up!

New Perk: Earth Pony Ingenuity - You always were a smart pony. Your Intelligence is increased by 2 and your skill in Repair and Small Guns is increased by +10%.

Temporary Companions:

Nixis, Hellhound

Lust, Sin

Danish, MMMM

Chapter 18: Faith Unbroken

I am happy to report that I now realize there are wonderful things in this world you just can't explain, but that doesn't necessarily make them any less true. It just means you have to choose to believe in them, and sometimes it takes a friend to show you the way.

Faith. What's it like to lose faith? Faith is a fleeting concept in the Wasteland. Sometimes, things get so bad that faith alone cannot sustain a pony through dark times. A wise pony once told me that sometimes faith means believing in the impossible, but how am I supposed to do that? How am I supposed to believe in something I know to be false? Faith built on lies is no way to live one's life.

I had thought myself past this... lack of faith. But seeing the statue of Lucky brought back so many feelings of failure and heartache that it was simply unbearable. I had failed the green mare, a failure that had resulted in her death and eventual continued existence as a creature of pure metaphysical impossibility. To be honest, I felt like my life was one massive failure. I was a dreg. An outcast. Unwanted by even the Element of Magic herself.

I thought on the life that Twilight led, and the choices she made that brought her to this end. Her own faith was misplaced. She had put all of her faith into Princess Luna's war, and it resulted in a chain of events that sent shockwaves echoing across the entire history of the Equestrian Wasteland.

I broke down, sobbing on the floor in front of the smooze creature as I stared at the statue of Lucky. The green mare had a brilliant smile on her face, and her mane was more vibrant than I had ever seen it - too purple. My eyes drifted to the base of the figurine. *Have Faith?* I thought. *Is that some sort of joke?* I let my thoughts go back to my time with Twilight's emotions. How was I supposed to have faith when I had failed so much? I looked up at the roiling purple lump currently watching me with a concerned expression on its rough-hewn face.

"Where... where did you get this?" I said finally. The thing's mouth turned into a semblance of a smile.

"I made it. I made it for you. She told me to. She told me that you would know what it meant," It said.

"Now we escape, yes?" I blinked for a moment. Was Lucky here? If so, where did she go?

"But... was she here? If she was here, why didn't she wait for me?" I said frantically. "Why didn't she wait?!" The smooze being looked at me expectantly. "Why?!" The thing's smile disappeared, literally sinking into its face, leaving flat purple behind.

"I... I don't know. I'm... I'm sorry," It said, looking away from me sadly. I sighed as I realized that I had yelled at the creature. It was almost child-like in nature, and it clearly hadn't understood my outburst. I put my hoof out, touching the thing on the shoulder... at least what I thought was its shoulder.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you," I said. The creature smiled, and nodded. "It's just... things have been so frustrating for me lately."

"It's okay," It replied, patting my hoof with a goopy tendril. I looked down at the statue of Lucky again. I tucked it carefully into my saddlebags next to the statues of the Ministry Mares. To me, it was just as important as they were. It represented my promise to save Lucky, to find her once more and to help her return to her flesh and blood pony body. I looked back up to the Smooze.

"Now, then. If you want to get out of this place, you're going to have to show me where my friends are," I said, smiling. The creature nodded animatedly and pointed at a door in the far corner of the room, past another row of clay statues. I trotted behind him to the locked door.

"I can get out underneath, but I don't think that will work for you," It said. I looked at the steel door, noting that the lock was electronic and not a traditional lock. I brought up my E.F.S., hoping to get something on it that showed where my friends were, but there was nothing. Apparently, whatever was interfering with my

PipBuck was still in force. *Fine then, time for a little old fashioned lock picking*, I thought, latching onto the door with my magic. The steel surface began to glow with the telltale purple of my telekinesis as it started buckling under the force I was exerting upon it. Finally the steel relented and crumpled outward, falling to the floor in the room beyond. I looked over at the Smooze.

“Not a problem,” I said, the glow on my horn dimming. I stepped into the next room, which was another long hall filled with clay ponies. In fact, it was the room we had first seen the Smooze substance in. In the center of it were my friends. I grinned as they looked up, seeing me. A green blur shot past the others as Violet leaped into my hooves. She was blubbering like a little filly.

“Star!” She shouted. “You’re alright!” She latched onto my neck in a tight embrace. I smiled softly.

“Yes, my dear. I’m just fine,” I said, looking up at the others. “I know you all have already met him, but our new friend here is willing to help us escape this crazy place. We just have to disable the security system to get out.”

“Yes, Yes. We escape, and then I be free,” The Smooze said happily. Patch chuckled as she bounced around the ooze-like creature.

“I knew we could believe you,” She said. “I just knew you wouldn’t have done anything to Star.”

“He told us flat out that he didn’t do anything to her, greenie,” Lust cut in, grinning. Patch shot a glare back at the black mare, blowing a wet raspberry in her general direction. I couldn’t help but smile. They weren’t fast friends by any stretch of the term, but they were at least getting along somewhat.

“Yes, well. He has been stuck here a long time, and we’re going to help him get out,” I said. “First things first. We need to find the central computer core that is driving the security system.” Without my PipBuck working normally, I couldn’t begin to figure out where in this crazy place that was. “So. Does anypony have any ideas?” I looked back at Danish and Nixis. The unicorn and the hellhound had been poring over some sort of crudely drawn map. Nixis let his eyes meet mine as he grinned widely.

“Star. I believe we may have some sort of idea about this place. Danish and I have mapped out our progress so far, and we believe the key to true progression is to stop going forward.” The hellhound said with a broad toothy grin. I blinked, completely confused. “If we can find a maintenance level access, we should be able to bypass the security spell that is blocking our travel.” I looked back at the Smooze.

“Are there any maintenance stairwells around here that we can use?” I asked. The creature’s face contorted for a moment as it thought on my question. It grinned widely.

“There is. It’s in the back of the next room over. It’s locked though,” The Smooze replied. “I’ve never been able to get through it.”

“Well, I think we should give it a shot then. I’m pretty good with locks,” I said. Violet rolled her eyes.

“You mean you’re good at *breaking* locks,” She teased, poking me in the side as we followed the Smooze into the next room. It was another room filled with rows upon rows of clay statues. At the far end however, was a terminal and a metal door. Violet sat down at the terminal and plugged in her PipBuck. The terminal lit up and asked for a password. Tapping around a bit, my love motioned with her hoof to me. I stepped over as she pointed out something on the screen.

“It looks like the section of the museum we’re in now is actually far below the ground level. These rooms must not be affected by whatever spell is enforcing the security above at all,” She said. “The central core is located even farther down. Shit, this place is huge. It’s like they built it downward instead of outward.”

“Does it say how to get there?” I asked. Violet shook her head.

“No, but I think... I think I can at least open this door,” She replied, pressing another button on the terminal’s keyboard. The door in front of us slid open silently, revealing a gaping darkness beyond. I stepped inside the doorway, looking out into the dark stairwell. The stairs were massive metal monstrosities, extending up and down with no end in sight. The stairs were situated next to some sort of ancient elevator shaft. I looked over at the Smooze.

"I think perhaps you better stay here," I said, smiling. "We will return for you once we have disabled the security system." The creature looked... sad.

"You won't leave me?" It asked. I shook my head.

"No, we won't leave you. You have to trust me. That's what friends do, they trust each other," I replied.

"We'll be back before you know it, and we'll get you out of here." The creature nodded and began to slump its goopy way back to the statues. Violet stepped up next to me.

"You sure it'll be okay? It didn't seem that pleased that we're leaving it behind," She said quietly.

"It'll be fine. We're going to come back for it. But it's so... I guess child-like? I don't think it would be able to handle itself in a fight, and you know it's going to come to that one way or another," I said. Violet nodded and turned towards the open door.

We moved out onto the landing and began to descend the stairwell. Every so often we would hear some sort of screeching noises coming from above us. I looked up, seeing nothing but metal. I took a moment to glance at my friends. Lust was fidgeting. I could tell she was uncomfortable being in such an enclosed space. I shot her a smile, letting her know everything was alright before turning back to my PipBuck. Another screech erupted in the air above us.

"What is that?" Steeljack said, looking up as the screeching began to get louder. I brought up my E.F.S., the security enchantments inside the museum still messing with the detection spell. I shut it down again, scowling. Even if it was working, I didn't think it would matter. We were going to find out what the noise was soon enough. The screeching continued until it was reverberating off of the walls around us. Then I saw it. A large leathery creature with deep red eyes was zipping down the shaft next to us. Far above it, thousands of red orbs followed behind it.

"Fuck, bloodwings!" I shouted, levitating out Stargazer and taking aim. I tried to trigger E.S.A.T.S., feeling time freeze as I silently cheered the fact that the targeting system at least hadn't been overridden by the museum's crazy ass security system. I lined up a shot on the head creature and let loose. Stargazer aimed and tore the thing's head clean off. "Everypony keep going! Don't let them catch up with us!" I vaulted out into the open shaft, flapping my wings and pulling my gun to bear on the swarm. Gunfire erupted from my faithful minigun, spitting hot lead into the swarm of mutated bat things. Despite my best efforts however, the bloodwings continued to surge forth. My only hope was that I was enough distraction to keep my friends safe. "Come and get me you fucking pieces of shit!" I shouted as I locked my wings, dropping down the center shaft like a rock.

The bloodwings took the bait, completely ignoring the shouts of my friends as the swarm poured down the shaft after me. Silver fire filled the air above as Thunder Flash melted several of the swarm's number into silvery goop that fell past me with a sizzle. I took a moment and looked down. The shaft stretched out below me, with no end in sight. I brought up Stargazer and fired off several more rounds at the oncoming beasts. Bullets struck flesh, knocking several of the mutant bats into the sides of the shaft. *How fucking deep is this place?!* I thought as I fell, firing round after round. I heard gunfire from above as my friends continued down the shaft. I feared at some point the swarm would no longer consider me to be prime target number one and start heading towards Violet and the others. I had to come up with something. I considered casting a shield spell, but I was sure I wouldn't be able to hold back the swarm for very long. I needed to come up with something drastic.

"Violet!" I shouted loud enough so that she could hear me. "I'm going to need you to trust me!"

"What?!" She shouted back. "What do you mean, trust you?!" I charged my horn into a massive teleportation spell. I released the magic and felt my friends appear in the air next to me. As expected, shrieks and shouts came from the non flying members of our group. "Star! I'm gonna kill you! I told you never to do this again!"

"Too late!" I shouted, grinning widely as I reached out with my magic and brought my friends into a telekinetic embrace. Lust cackled maniacally as she began swooping around in my telekinetic field, dropping behind and slicing the occasional bloodwing in half as we fell. The screeching of the bloodwings echoed

behind us, just barely covering the shouts and screams of my floating friends. Eventually a landing could be seen at the bottom of the shaft, a metal floor approaching at high speed. With a grunt of effort, I pushed a shield spell out. The walls of the shield bubble ground against the stairs and walls of the shaft with an unholy screech, drowning out even the infuriated cries of the bloodwing swam. I could feel each crumpling staircase and shredded bolt in my horn, but we slowed enough to land safely. Without time to think, I flung the nearest door open.

“Everypony up and out of here!” I shouted. The others followed into the room adjacent to the shaft and I slammed the door. Several moments later large thud sounds came from the other side as the bloodwings tried to slam into the steel door. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to my friends. Patch had a completely goofy look on her face as she was being helped up by Steeljack. Nixis, Lust, and Danish were panting hard. Violet was glaring at me with laser death eyes.

“Well, I don't think we're going back up that way,” I said casually, before turning to my angry little green mare. “Violet? Everything alright?” I knew she was angry, so I grinned for good measure.

“Star. We talked about this,” She fumed. “No more throwing me out of high places and nearly dropping me!” She turned away from me and began to trot into the hallway. My eyes went wide as I grabbed her with magic and yanked her back before she could step any further. “Hey! What are you doing?!” I put a hoof up to her mouth and pointed into the room.

It was a long hallway with the same typical steel walls that the majority of underground tunnels seemed to be made of. The floor of the room beyond the initial landing, however could hardly be called a floor. In fact, it was made of *clouds*. I smiled sheepishly at Violet and sighed.

“Sorry, love. But unicorns can't exactly walk on clouds,” I said, another of Twilight's memories floating up into my forethoughts. “Not without a little assistance at least.” I reached back into that memory, thinking about a spell that Twilight had used quite often in her dealings with her friends as well as any joint operations with the Ministry of Awesome. I set my horn to work and cast the spell, bathing Violet in a soft white light that disappeared almost instantly. Grinning widely, I nudged my love with a nuzzle to her neck. “Go on.” I said. She cautiously put a hoof out, setting it on the cushy cloud covering. She stepped forward onto the cloud with more confidence, bouncing around it and giggling like a little filly.

“I didn't know you knew how to cast a cloud walking spell,” She said, her eyes lighting up with awe. I shrugged.

“I didn't either,” I said. “I think it's one of those old Twilight memories kicking in.” I turned to my other friends and re-enacted the cloud walking spell on each of them except for Lust. Within moments we were in the hallway, trotting along the clouds. A sign at the end of the hallway caught my eye.

Ministry of Awesome Research and Development Center

“Huh?” Lust said. “You mean the Ministry of Awesome actually did research?”

“Well, apparently Dash's Ministry was involved in lots of things, but I agree. Research? Just doesn't seem like her,” I replied, pushing open the door that led into the center. The inside of the room appeared to be some sort of command center. Large cloud terminals lined the walls, all surrounding a massive metal door in the center of the room. This certainly didn't look anything like the security system of the museum. I stepped forward, looking at the various terminals. They were all disabled, and some of them had been partially destroyed.

“What do you think happened here?” Patch said aloud.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “But I bet it has something to do with whatever is behind that door.” I stepped up to the cloud terminal closest to my goal. It was still active, and waiting on some user action. I tapped on the keyboard, but the terminal still refused any sort of access. I groaned, unsure of what it was waiting for.

Considering my track record with these kinds of terminals, I decided to try and hit it with my magic. As I expected, there was an immediate response, but not the kind I had hoped for. A shimmering light appeared in front of the door as the visage of a familiar cyan pegasus came into view. The mare had strands of gray among her rainbow mane along with heavy bags under her eyes.

“Twilight? It's me Dash. I guess if you're watching this, then I'm not around to open this door for you am I? At the very least, I hope we took those striped bastards down good.”

Anyways, you're not here to listen to me ramble on about that. You're here for what's inside this room. I still remember when you had us build this place. You said it was the best hiding spot for the artifacts we repossessed from Daring Do. I'm still not sure that was a good thing for us to do, but you said it would help us win the war, and you know me... I trust you.

By the way, the elevator in this room will take you up to the central computer core for the entire complex. It was designed to be the most secure in all of Equestria. Only you and I are allowed to have physical access to it.

Anyways, I hope you know what you're doing here. If you need me, let me know. I sure as hay won't leave you hanging.”

The cyan mare dissipated as I stared blankly at where she had been. Was this another clue left by Twilight and her friends? I strained my thoughts, considering the memory orb of one Daring Do. Twilight and Rainbow Dash had taken a series of magical artifacts from the pegasus archaeologist, against her will no less. I glanced around at my friends. None of them had apparently witnessed the illusion. *That's odd*, I thought. I let my mind drift back to when I had seen both Rarity and Applejack's holograms. I couldn't quite place whether my friends had seen them either. *Is it just me? And if it is... why? Is it because of Twilight's memories?* The metal door hissed open, shaking me out of my stupor as it began to open. A pale blue glow came from within as we cautiously entered the room.

The room was circular in shape, with long shelves curving around the inside of the cylindrical walls. Sitting on the shelves were statuettes and totems of various shapes and sizes. The artifacts were glowing brightly. Terminals were placed every few feet, some dark, some showing fluctuating readings from the nearby artifacts. Magical shielding was in place in front of the shelves. Thankfully the floor was real flooring. Perhaps the cloud cover in the hallway and main center was just to deter anypony who wasn't a unicorn or a pegasus. *What did they have to hide here that was so important?* I thought.

In the center of the room was a large pedestal. Sitting on top of it was a large chunk of bluish metal surrounded by a clear shielding. My eyes widened as I realized what it was.

“Is that...?” Violet said softly. I nodded.

“Starmetal,” I replied. “This entire room is filled with the stuff.” I checked my PipBuck for any signs of radiation in the room. Nothing. Even though starmetal was highly poisonous, it apparently was not spreading any of its special radiation throughout the room. I supposed that the shielding surrounding the shelves had something to do with it. I stepped up to a nearby terminal, looking at its readouts. Sure enough, the shielding that was in place was containing any radiation coming from the artifact in question. Granted, most of the artifacts on the shelves had very low levels of the stuff in them. What caught my eye was the nature of the statuettes themselves. Various races of pony and non-pony made up the majority of each one of the statues. They looked very similar to the same type of statue we had found in the town of Far Hills.

“Star?” Patch said as she looked about the room. “These things look familiar.”

“Whaddya mean?” Danish said.

“Before we came to Chicacolt, we had to stop a raider named Greed. He had a statue that he stole from a town museum just like these,” Steeljack said. Danish cocked his head at the earth pony.

“Wait... Greed? You guys knew Greed?” He said.

“Yeah. I killed the fucker,” Violet said casually. Danish chuckled.

“So that was you guys? Holy Celestia's plathole, I never put those two and two together,” The cream colored unicorn said.

“How did you know Greed?” I asked. Lust chimed in before the unicorn could reply.

“Because Greed was from Chicacolt. Used to run a small gang of raiders around town. He left... after,” She said. I looked over at her with a curious expression.

“After what?” I asked. Lust sighed.

“After we became what we are today. I don't know any more than that. Pride wiped our memories of what we were before, and we don't remember that much about how we became what we are,” She said. She flared her wings out for a second. “Can you recall that I haven't taken these wing blades off the entire time I've been around you? That's because they're not wing blades. They're parts of my actual wings.”

“What?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I'm not normal,” The black mare said. “I'm not normal, and I never will be. Pride did something to me, to make me like this.” I nodded, thinking about what the pegasus had said. I had already considered the fact that the mare was not a normal pony, much like Cranky wasn't a normal donkey. As I pondered this, I looked over another shelf of artifacts. *What were these things used for?* I thought. *Who would create such beauty and infuse it with such deadly materials such as starmetal?* I ran my hoof over one of the shields. It was cool to the touch.

“I'm so confused,” I said aloud. “Why would Twilight want these things to study? What good were they? They're just little statues.” There had to be some form of audio log here or something. Something, anything that explained what types of research had been performed here. I moved over to the terminal next to the large chunk in the center. Tapping at it, I found out that the radiation being outputted from the pure starmetal rock was intense, but that the shielding was keeping it under control. A password prompt appeared when I tried to access the administrative functions. I connected my PipBuck to it, and lines of text began to scroll on the screen. After a few minutes of searching, I found that the password was *'loyalty'*. A window appeared on the screen, showing several options to unlock the magical shielding around the room. *Staying away from those*, I thought as I turned to the options for audio logs. There was only one. With nothing else providing any sort of information, I pressed the button to play it. A familiar voice tickled my ears as the audio filtered into the room. It sounded bright and eager.

“Hello? Is this thing on? It is? Okay, good. Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle reporting from the Ministry of Awesome Research and Development Center.”

A second, scratchier voice joined Twilight in the background of the recording.

“And this is Ministry Mare Rainbow Dash, overseeing all research performed here.”

“Thanks Dash. I really appreciate this. All these artifacts, in one place. It's so amazing. There's so much that we can learn from these things.”

“I don't get it Twilight. What is so important about these little statues?” I grinned widely, pondering the same thought as Twilight began to speak again.

“Dash, these artifacts are more than just statues. They're focal points for magic. Daring Do really didn't know what she had when she unearthed these things. The Princess said that they were extremely important.”

“But for what Twilight? Why was it so important that she had us build this underground center just to study these things?”

“Well Rainbow, like I said before... the artifacts are focal points for magic. If we can learn more about them, we might be able to use them to develop magical defenses to protect Equestria with.”

“Or weapons?”

“... That too, thank you very much for pointing that out Rainbow. Yes, that is one such application.”

“Awesome! Well, Twilight. I've gotta run, important things to do you know. I'll leave you to your research.”

“Thanks again Rainbow, I'll see you later. We're still getting together with the others later on for that play right?”

“You know it.” A door in the background of the message opened, and then closed. A sigh echoed across the room as we sat there and listened. Twilight began to speak once more, however, her tone was much darker than before. Gone was the brightness from her voice.

“Excellent, she's gone. Alright, since this audio log is keyed to me and only me... I have a confession to make.

I lied to Rainbow. These artifacts aren't focal points for magic. They are magic. Condensed starmetal forged into statues of pure, unadulterated magic. They're a lot more powerful than anypony could ever dream of. And they're going to help me. With them, I'm going to develop a way to bring my brother, Shining Armor, back from the abyss.

I don't know what's going to happen from here. But I do know this. That book that Rarity has will be mine. Once I can use it in conjunction with these artifacts, I'll know all the secrets it has to offer.

Then... and only then... will I find a way to bring you back.

End Report.”

I blinked as the message faded into nothingness. I looked around the room again, suddenly feeling very frightened of the items surrounding us. I felt a sudden heavy weight on my back, and a tickling on my neck as I pulled open my saddlebag.

The Book. It was still there. In the commotion of escaping Colter Field and this insane museum, I had completely forgotten that I had it. I levitated out the hateful thing, setting it before me on the desk in front of the terminal. I felt a hoof on my shoulder. I looked up, seeing Violet standing there.

“Star? What are you doing?” She asked softly, her eyes falling upon the Book that had been bound in zebra's flesh. “Star... Why do you have that thing out?”

“I... I don't know. I didn't even realize I still had this... thing,” I said, looking at the Book with utter disgust in my eyes. At the same time, I wondered still if I could use it to bring Lucky back to life. *No, stop thinking about that. You don't even know where Lucky is,* I thought. Still, the thought festered in the back of my mind. A whisper on the wind told me that I could do it. I could save her, and nopony would have to get hurt in the process of doing so. I shook my head fiercely as I pushed away the Book. “Violet, I don't know what to do,” I said quietly.

“I think we should get rid of it,” She said. “Just leave it here, where nopony will ever find it.” My eyes widened. *No! We can't do that!* I thought. *If we leave it, then I can't save her! I can't do it without it!*

“But...” I started to say before she cut me off.

“Star, look. I know what you're thinking. This thing might promise to have the answers you're looking for, but it doesn't. Don't forget it's this thing that let Spark take over your body in the first place,” She said.

“Leave it. We have more important things to worry about.” I sighed and looked back down at The Book. In a fit of anger I grabbed it with my magic and tossed it to the ground before looking back at Violet.

“You're right,” I said after a few moments of silence between us. “I'm sorry, you're right. I shouldn't be fussing over this horrible thing. Spark is what's important. Finding her is the key to all of this, I can just feel it.” Violet smiled and nuzzled my neck.

"That's my girl," She said softly, so that only I could hear her. I grinned.

"Thanks Violet. I don't know what I would do without you," I said in response. A coughing noise broke us from our embrace. I looked up to see Danish standing there.

"This is sweet and all, but I have good news and bad news," The cream-colored unicorn said.

"What's the good news?" I asked. Danish sighed.

"Good news, is I think we found the elevator that goes up to the central core," He said. I jumped for joy inside. Finally! We could get out of this place!

"And the bad?" I said hesitantly.

"Bad news... the damn door is locked up tighter than Lust's plothole," The unicorn replied. I heard Lust snort indignantly.

"I heard that," She said under her breath. "And, tight or not, you don't need to ever worry about my plothole, pastry boy." Danish merely chuckled. He motioned for me to follow him to the back of the room. There, flush amongst the wall, was the outline of a door. As I got closer, I began to see symbols forming on the metal. Stylized cutie marks belonging to Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash appeared on the door. I looked over at Danish for a second, wondering if he could see them too. After a few moments of careful observation, I realized that he couldn't. *Why am I the only one who can see them?* I thought. I pressed my hoof against the cold metal, tracing the glowing marks. I lit my horn and traced them again with a brush of magic, feeling a response from the door as it began to shift and dissipated into nothing, revealing a large elevator behind it.

"How did...?" Danish started to say. For once, he had no witty joke to explain how I was able to open the door. I smiled.

"Magic. Ain't gotta explain shit," I said, grinning wider as the stallion snorted.

"Magic, schmagic," He grumbled. "Can we just get on the elevator and get the hay out of this crazy place?" I rolled my eyes as we filed into the elevator. Surprisingly enough, we all fit. For an elevator only designed to take both Ministry Mares directly into the computer core it was quite large. I briefly wondered how much space each Mare must have decided she would have needed. I looked around the room and sighed.

"Where are the buttons?" I asked aloud. I was met with confused stares. There was no control panel at all inside the elevator. I groaned as I realized that Twilight would not have made it very easy on anypony who gained access to this elevator. Again, wondering if magic was the key to all of this, I reached out and swatted the side of the tube with a thrust of telekinesis. The effect was immediate as the entire thing shuddered to life. A cold mechanical voice sounded from above us.

"State destination," The voice said.

"Umm... computer core?" Violet said. There was no response. "I said, computer core dammit!"

"State your destination," The voice responded. I sighed. I knew what it was waiting for.

"Computer core," I said. The room around us began to shudder and light up. The influx of brightness began to overwhelm my senses. "Wait--!" I started to cry out as the spell activated. The next moment, we were somewhere... completely different. The room around us was massive. Terminals dotted the walls, separated by decorative arched panels. In the center of the room was a maneframe. Wires hung from the ceiling around the ancient computer. Three large monitors surrounded a console that looked like it hadn't been touched in ages. I heard a gasp from behind me.

"Is that a... No... it can't be..." Patch said. I looked back at her.

"What? What is it?" I said.

"It looks like... like a Crusader Maneframe. But there's something... wrong with it," The green mare said.

"A Crusader Maneframe?" I said, looking up at the metal computer core. It appeared to be... dormant.

"It was a giant supercomputer designed by Stable-Tec. But there was only supposed to be like... three of them in existence," Patch said. "They never made any more of them. They're like really super powerful computers. Designed to be like the smartest things in existence."

"Well. Let's see what this thing is, and if we need it to shut down the security systems," I said, stepping forward to the console in the center of the room. I tapped a button with a hoof, hoping to evoke some sort of response. Nothing. My friends meandered around me in the room, checking over the terminals around us. Patch stepped up next to me and began inspecting the console. "Anything?"

"I don't... I don't know. It's almost like it was supposed to be a Crusader, but hasn't quite figured out how to." Some of the cases of equipment were styled and colored differently than others. Patchwork cables ran like wire spiders had gone amok. Patch banged her hoof on the console a few times, but it was still unresponsive. I sighed. I was about to give up when suddenly the largest of the three monitors lit up brightly. A bright pink earth pony face appeared within its confines. By this time, I knew Pinkie Pie by sight alone. The mare had a insanely wide smile on her face.

"Surpriiiiiiiiise!" The mare in the screen shouted. "Awww... you're not Dashie or Twilight. Well phooey. Were you surprised?! Huh, were ya were ya were ya? I bet you were. I'm really good at surprises!" I blinked.

"What?" I said aloud. "What are you doing here?" The bouncy pink mare grinned widely as she hopped up in down within the confines of the screen.

"Well, you see. I wanted to play a super secret special prank on my friends, so I installed this special program on this here computer with the help of Apple Bloom. I was so hoping to see Twilight and Dashie and their faces when they realized what I had done," The pink pony replied. The rest of my friends had stepped up beside me.

"So... you're just a computer program?" Violet asked. The pink mare nodded excitedly.

"Yepperrooney! I was designed to override all systems in this maneframe. I'm in control now!" She chirped.

"So you're controlling the security systems?" I said.

"Oh, you saw those?! Weren't they just awesome?! It's one of my better pranks!" The computer Pinkie said.

"Wait... those repeating rooms... the ghostly images... they were just... a prank?" I said, blinking.

"Yup! I really hoped that Twilight would have seen those. I spent so much time having my robo ponies work on them, too!" The computer Pinkie replied. My patience was beginning to wear thin. We had to get out of here. I decided to chance asking the computer if she'd just drop the security protocols.

"Well... Pinkie. I don't think Twilight is coming. So can you maybe drop the prank? We'd like to get out of here," I said calmly. As soon as I finished, the mare in the monitor's hair instantly flattened.

"She's... she's not coming? But I spent so much time working on this prank just for her and Dashie," She said. I started to worry. Before, the programmed pink pony had been as bouncy and excitable as the Pinkie Pie I knew from Twilight's memories. Now her mane hung straight and limp. Her movements were stiff and angry as she pounded the 'inside' of the screen with her forehooves. "Why? Why isn't she coming? HUH? TELL ME!" Alarms began to sound around us as the decorative arches slid open. Security robots of all shapes and sizes began to pour into the room.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this," Patch said, pulling out Para Bellum. The robots began to converge on us, but they had yet to engage us. *What is she waiting for?* I thought. I realized that even as unbalanced as she was, the digital mare was waiting for an answer to her question.

"Hold on," I said, an idea forming in my mind. "Pinkie... Twilight told me to come here so you could pull your pranks on me instead. So... you got me!" I chuckled lightly, to show her I was laughing. I motioned at my friends. They too began to laugh. "See? So, you got us good. They were really good pranks."

"But you're not Twilight. I want to see Twilight," Pinkie replied. Her mane was still flat, and her eyes spoke volumes of malice. I narrowed my eyes at the mare.

“What are you? Really?” I said finally. Pinkie chuckled.

“I’m a computer program,” She said. “Pinkie designed me to be self-aware, so that I could pull the ultimate pranks. I was also designed to keep track of all the bad ponies, so that she could punish them.” *Uh oh*, I thought. *That isn’t good*.

“Did I just hear her say self-aware?” Lust said.

“I believe that is what she said,” Nixis cut in. “I would suggest that we take this opportunity to shut this thing down.” I nodded, lifting Stargazer with my magic.

“Last chance, Pinks. Shut down the security system,” I said. “**NOW**.” The mare in the monitor laughed cruelly.

“No. You’re bad ponies, and you need to be punished,” The pink mare said. She nodded and the security robots surrounding us lifted their weapons. “Punish them.” Without thinking, I turned and fired on the closest robot, ripping it to shreds with a hailstorm of bullets. The sharp retort of Steeljack’s rifle, combined with the explosive power that was Para Bellum filled the air, along with the red laser fire coming from the security drones. I moved amidst the robots, dodging and trying to fight my way to the central core. Nixis gave a tightly controlled bark of fury as he slid past my right side, cleaving the spinning saw blade arm off a menacing drone in passing. I shot him a grateful look as I finished the crippled unit off with a quick applebuck.

More robots poured forth from the side walls, making me think that this insane computer must have had thousands of them. Pinkie Pie appeared on the other two monitors of the central core, then began flickering into existence on the remaining terminals in the chamber. Her maniacal laugh was a wicked chorus as I waded closer and closer to towards the console. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do when I got there. Try and reason with the virtual Pinkie? Smash it? I opted to try and reason with her as I cut down the last robot blocking my path. Stepping forward, I addressed the virtual mare.

“Pinkie! You have to stop this! Look, I’m sorry! Twilight’s dead! They all are! You’ve been stuck here, running this same prank for over two hundred years now!” I shouted, trying to shock some sense into the sentient program.

“Liar! She’s coming! I just need to punish you bad ponies and she’ll show up!” The angry pink mare shouted from the screens. Chaos continued to erupt from behind me as my friends kept the robots off of my back.

“I’m not lying to you. You have to believe me. It’s time to shut this down, and end the prank!” I replied.

“Please. We’re not bad ponies. We want to be your friend!” I kept talking, trying to convince the virtual earth pony to shut down the security system while I connected my PipBuck to the console. The second I connected it however, the pink mare growled angrily.

“Oh, I don’t think so miss bad pony, you’re not going to get to me that easily,” She said. A jolt of electricity shot through the console. I scrambled to disconnect the cable, but the bolt hit me square in the chest. I grunted in pain as I collapsed to the ground, fighting my twitching muscles to push myself back to my hooves. There was going to be no reasoning, no tricking this thing. I was going to have to tear this maneframe apart piece by piece to shut it down for good. I lifted Stargazer and began firing wildly. Sparks flew from the massive machine as round after round struck home. The virtual Pinkie howled a synthetic chorus of digital pain. Cables and wires flailed as bullets severed from the ceiling, but the maneframe itself stayed completely intact. If this thing was designed by Stable-Tec, it was designed to withstand a megaspell. Even the fire from Stargazer couldn’t pierce the inner workings of the device. Nixis appeared next to me, leaping forward with his wicked claws as he slashed at the maneframe. Even his unnaturally sharp talons were unable to make even a dent in the computer core.

“What is this thing made out of?!” I shouted. A blast of silver fire decimated more robot drones as Violet cantered up next to me. The virtual Pinkie Pies cackled and giggled wildly.

“You can’t shut me down! No sir! I’m here to stay!” She said. “You’re never getting out of here you bad ponies. Pinkie Pie is watching you... **FOREVER!!!** We’re gonna make you smile, smile, smile!” I looked

about, the security robots surrounding us from all angles as they forced me and my friends into a corner. I gritted my teeth, waiting for the end. Waiting for the computer program to make the call. I glared at the mare on the screen, her eyes wild with insanity. It seemed like no matter how much we fired and fired at the robots, more continued to appear. Was this part of the ultimate prank? I couldn't tell. Somewhere along the line, this computer had lost its simulated mind in the quest to administer the biggest joke that could have ever been played. Violet leaned close against me, holding Thunder Flash aloft in her magic. Her eyes were cold and determined. A flash caught my eye and I noticed something creeping along the sides of the maneframe.

Wait... is that...? What? I thought. A mix of purplish goo was slowly covering the wires and pieces of the console. The smooze forced its way inside the maneframe, using the grates and panels as access points.

“What?! What's going on? What is that stuff? No, no no no no!” Virtual Pinkie shouted. The screen began to leak purple goo as the mare began to scream and shout. As violent as the computer pony was, it was nowhere near as violent as the explosion that resulted from the smooze's intrusions. With a final multi-voiced shriek, the monitors around the room snapped off as one. The last I saw of the virtual pony was her frantically beating on the ‘inside’ of the central monitor. For a split second she met my gaze, tears rolling from her eyes as she pressed a hoof to the inside of the glass. I closed my eyes, and the maneframe died with an anticlimactic ***pop*** and a curl of fould smoke. The effect was immediate, as the robots menacing us fell over silent and still. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Smooze?” I called out amidst the quiet. The smooze goo began to pour out of the maneframe modules, reforming into the vague features of the mushy creature. A smile cracked on his face.

“Big computer go boom!” He said. I blinked, and then broke out into a giggle.

“How did you find us?” Patch said. “I thought you couldn't get out beyond your rooms?”

“I think crazy computer pony was too focused on you, the security system let me go,” The Smooze said.

“What was crazy computer pony?” I sighed as I looked up at the ruined remains of the maneframe.

“A bygone of the past era,” I said. I stepped up to the device, now noticing the Stable-Tec logo on the side of it. A name plate below the logo stated **CRUSADER MANEFRAE PROTOTYPE 0.5B**. “Huh. So it was a Crusader. Well a prototype at least. No wonder this thing was so...”

“Crazy?” Patch chimed in. I nodded. “I once heard a story about how a pony could upload their entire mind into one of those things. If this was a prototype... there's no telling what could have happened to an intelligence trapped inside it. And it had control of the whole museum.”

“Well, now it's toast,” Danish said, poking at the smoldering remains. “And I think it's high time we blew this pop stand.” Steeljack and Nixis nodded in agreement. I took one last look at the ruined computer, thinking about Pinkie's final prank. In retrospect, it would have been pretty funny had it not gone completely insane and tried to kill us.

“Yeah. Let's get the hell out of here.”

The journey back towards the ground level of the museum was far less harrowing than the trip down had been. With the security system fully disabled (that we knew of), there were no more random rooms or turrets that magically repaired themselves. Because of this, we were able to find another set of stairs. Luckily enough, this set hadn't been used as friction brake for a group of flying ponies, and wasn't home to a swarm of bloodwings. While I doubted that we'd get out of here without running into any more undead monstrosities, I was far more confident of our ability to deal with them than I had been with the virtual Pinkie. As we emerged into the lobby, I started to relax. We'd get out of this wretched place, find Pride and Spark... and then what? Faith had said that I would have to make a choice when I faced Spark. What had she meant by that? What choice? I didn't know, and for some reason... I wasn't sure if I cared. Spark had to be stopped, by any means necessary.

The moment I glanced up at the main doors of the museum, I knew that something was wrong. The doors

that we had used as barricades were shattered, lying strewn across the front of the lobby in piles of wood and metal. I flipped on my E.F.S., revealing a single red blip... right on top of us?

"Fuck, move!" I shouted, as I let loose a blast of telekinesis that pushed my friends away from my position. I noticed then that the Smooze was missing. *Where did he go?* I thought. I turned to move, just barely missing the dark form that pounded into the ground next to me, blasting a crater in the marble flooring below. A flash of red blinded my vision as blood poured from my muzzle. A shock of pain echoed through my entire face. A growl emanated from in front of me. I brought Stargazer to bear, preparing to fire on... *Oh... Oh FUCK ME*, I thought. Wrath, the leader of the Cult of Iron Will, knelt in front of me. His eyes were on fire as he met my panicked eyes with a steely glare.

"We meet once more... Ministry Mare," The minotaur rumbled. "I told you before... I will end you."

"Star! Get down!" I heard a voice from behind me shout. A blast of silver fire shot past my head as I scampered away from the cult leader. Wrath grinned and stood, batting away the blast with a simple swipe of his gauntlet.

"So this is how our final meeting is going to go? Letting others fight your own battles for you? I am disappointed. We still have an accord, you and I," He said. I narrowed my gaze at the minotaur.

"Everypony, stand down," I said finally. "He's right. I have to finish this myself."

"Star, you moron. You don't have to do this," Lust said angrily from the right of us. The black mare had stepped up next to me, as had all my friends. Wrath snarled.

"Sister. You will stay out of this," He commanded. Lust glared at the minotaur.

"And you will fuck right off. I'm sick of this shit Wrath. I'm sick of being Pride's bitch," She said. "I'm done with this, and I'm done with you." I smiled briefly. Even in the midst of this final match with Wrath, it was gratifying to see the black mare deciding to stand on her own hooves. I hoped she would get the chance to truly live, out from under Pride's shadow.

"Lust, it'll be alright. Everypony stay back. Wrath and I will finish this," I said, keeping my eyes trained on the cult leader. "Just you and I. If you threaten any of my friends... I swear to Luna I will rip your fucking head off."

"Agreed," Wrath said. Violet too glared at the minotaur as she stepped closely to me, nuzzling my neck quickly.

"Good luck, sweetie," She said softly. I nuzzled her back as Danish pulled her away. Nixis and Steeljack stepped back as well, along with Patch and Lust. Wrath cracked his knuckles through his metal gauntlets, and I cringed at the sound of it. I decided that I needed to be confident.

"So..." I started to say. "Where's your cult cronies at?" Wrath sneered at me.

"My brethren are waiting to lay siege to this place once I have killed you. I will carry your broken body from this wretched museum in pieces!" He said.

"Speaking of... how did you get in here? The impression I got from your guards was that they didn't like this place," I said, attempting to keep the minotaur talking as much as possible.

"Yes... this museum has always had something... wrong with it. Even the strength of Iron Will was not enough to penetrate its defenses. But now those defenses are gone. I can only guess its recent change lies at your hooves?" The cult leader said. I nodded.

"The security system in this place was quite unique," I replied, deciding to change the subject. "I know about Filly's Tower. About Pride and Stable 180."

"Oh? And what is it that you know?" Wrath said.

"I know that you used to be a regular Minotaur. I know Pride did something to you," I said, hoping to end this before it could even get started. "So why do this? Why waste time and energy fighting me? Together, we could stop her." Wrath bellowed with laughter.

“You make me laugh, Ministry Mare. You are pathetic. A waste of space. You could not even prevent your friends from being hurt in the Arena. How could you expect true strength to ally itself to you? Even if I was to fight at your side, your weakness could not defeat Pride.” The minotaur said. I narrowed my gaze at him. “You are weak. And I shall cull you from this world, like Iron Will says that I must do.”

“I’m... I’m not weak!” I shouted reflexively. I looked away for a moment, not letting the minotaur see the pain in my face. In truth, I knew he was right. I still had no idea how I was going to handle Pride. I had failed Lucky, and now... now I didn’t even know where she was. Violet had gotten her leg cut off, all because of my failure to contain Spark. Steeljack and Patch had both been injured in the violence in the Arena of Colter Field. When was I going to pony up and become better than this? “I’m not. I will find Pride, and I will stop her. I will make sure she doesn’t hurt anypony else, ever again!”

“Brave words, from such a weak mare. Why don’t you prove your strength then,” Wrath replied as he charged forward. A clawed gauntlet shot out towards me as I lifted Stargazer to block. The gauntlet struck hard, knocking the minigun out of my magical grasp and to the ground. A second claw came in behind it, aiming for my neck. I hopped back as his strike barely missed me. Grabbing Stargazer again, I lifted the weapon and dropped into E.S.A.T.S. I took a moment and studied the powerful minotaur before queuing up several shots to his body. Wrath was... not well. His armored gauntlets were rimmed with crusted blood where they dug into his bulging forearms. The injectors harnessed to his biceps had black snakey lines running away from them under his flesh. I wasn’t a medical pony, but that didn’t look at all good. In the frozen stillness of E.S.A.T.S., Wrath’s face looked worn and tired. His hateful grimace held pain and suffering, dark bags under his bulging eyes.

Regardless, this was only going to end one way. I ‘pulled’ the mental ‘trigger’ in E.S.A.T.S., and time fell back in. Stargazer fired. Round after round pounded the cult leader, knocking him back. Blood poured from his side as he snarled loudly and slapped one of his arm injectors. The blood flow began to slow down, and Wrath grinned.

“So you can shoot with the help of that computer on your leg. But that will not help you win against Pride,” He said, slashing out with his right claw, catching me in the side and knocking me back. I gritted my teeth and moved to dodge as Wrath appeared in front of me. His eyes were wild with glee. “Don’t be shy, punch them in the eye!” His fist shot in out of nowhere, striking me in the face. I distinctly heard something crack as I felt myself flying to the ground. I groaned as I tried to push myself up, feeling a foot hit my barrel, several ribs cracking under the pressure. Blood streamed into my vision and I felt warmth on my forehead. I was blinded by the bloody mess that was my face. Flailing about wildly, I pushed myself up and flared my horn. I threw up my shield spell just as Wrath’s fist slammed into it. Wiping the blood from my face, I glared at the minotaur. I heard several shouts behind me from my friends. I couldn’t make anything out that they were saying through the haze of my pain. I dropped the shield and growled.

“That’s it. I’ve had enough of this!” I shouted as I moved towards Wrath. I lifted Stargazer, intending to use the gun as a bludgeon. Wrath merely stood there, grinning widely as I struck him across the side. The blow forced the cult leader back as he spun around, slamming into my side with a well placed kick. I was able to catch this one in the muscle of my shoulder, using its energy to spin away from Wrath. I put my all into a spectacular applebuck. The kick landed hard enough to send a shock of pain up my hooves, and Wrath was blown completely off his feet. He fell backward, hitting the ground with a resounding ***crack***. The marble flooring shuddered underneath the cult leader’s massive frame.

“And that’s how we do it in the Wasteland,” I crowed, walking towards Violet’s smiling face. The cult leader growled as he pushed himself off the floor. I spun about as Wrath launched himself at me, grabbing me in a bear hug that brought us both to the hard ground. We rolled and tumbled over each other as we ended up slamming against a nearby pillar. I ignited my horn, pushing on the minotaur with my telekinesis. He flew backwards, hitting the wall and nearly putting a hole in the solid marble. Wrath levered himself to his feet and coughed, spitting a gob of bloody phlegm onto the floor. I could tell that despite his resilient nature he was hurting. I took a chance and looked behind me at my friends. They were standing to the side, silently watching the spectacle of my fight with Wrath. Violet’s eyes were concerned as she let her gaze drift up to my injured face. I smiled at her, trying to let her know that I was alright.

“Much better... Ministry Mare. Very passionate. Iron Will's strength is flowing through your veins,” He said, holding his side with a claw. “So, I shall share with you some tidbit of information about my wayward sister.” I stopped for a moment.

“What kind of information?” I said.

“You were right, Ministry Mare. I used to be a normal minotaur. But then, she came. Pride helped me achieve what I had always sought in my life... power,” He said, stepping towards me. I cautiously backed away, maintaining my distance from the cult leader.

“So... why do you hate her then?” I asked. “She gave you what you wanted, right?” Wrath snorted.

“I value strength. And Pride's tactics are anything but strong. She is manipulative, sneaky, and underhanded. She does not know the true value of strength. It's not that she doesn't know the way of Iron Will,” Wrath said in exasperation. “Most people don't. She doesn't have any respect for physical prowess or straightforward challenge.”

I blinked. The minotaur was disgusted by this, more than I had ever seen him when talking about me.

“She thought her wiles could control all of us, but as you've seen from my other brethren... only a scant few remained truly hers.”

“Like Sloth?” I said. Wrath nodded. “So she what... made you all? Are you even real?”

“We're as real as anyone else. But we are special,” Wrath said, continuing his stalking advance towards me. I kept moving backwards, unsure of what to do next other than to keep him talking. I panted hard as I did. I could still feel the blood on the side of my face and I felt like my sides were on fire. “And once you find Pride, you will know the full story. However, now I feel as if I must have some of your information. Why are you so interested in my sister?” I glared at him.

“She's got something I want. Something that is important, quite possibly to the safety of the entire Wasteland,” I said. “I'll say no more than that.” Wrath laughed heartily.

“So you fancy yourself a hero then? A bonafide Wasteland heroine, just like the Lightbringer?” He said, noticing my discomfort at using the Destroyer's name. “No? So you are just like Greed then, purely in it for yourself?”

“No!” I shouted, dropping to my front knees. I began to cry. “Because it's my fault! I let her out! I should have been stronger! I should have...” Wrath stepped up, towering over me like a monolith of hatred and power. “Please... I should have stopped her...”

“And you never will, because you are *weak*,” The minotaur said gruffly. “You have failed, and your mission ends here.”

“No!” A voice rang out. I looked up, seeing Violet. She looked... *angry*. My eyes widened.

“V-V-Violet?” I said. My green mare stalked forward, putting herself between Wrath and me.

“She's not weak! She's strong! And you have no right to judge her so after all she's been through!” She shouted. I smiled weakly. *Thank you Violet*, I thought.

“Oh? Sending in your little marefriend to stand up for you. How... precious,” Wrath mused. Violet glared daggers at him.

“Sometimes... sometimes she's not smart, and she definitely can't think of a plan to save her life. And sometimes I really hate how she beats herself up over shit,” She said. I blinked. *Gee... thanks for the vote of confidence there Violet*, I thought as she continued to speak. “But she has one thing you don't Wrath. And that's friendship. And if you want to fight her... you have to take on all of us. Because we don't let our friends down. And I refuse to let you do anything to her, because if you so much as hurt her... I will put you so far down into the ground not even the Steel Rangers will be able to find you!” I felt a hoof on my shoulder as I looked back and saw Patch... Steeljack... even Lust, Nixis, and Danish. They had all come forward to help me. The feelings that welled up inside me were incredible. They were my *friends*. And they

had shown faith in me, no matter how bad things got. Wrath snorted in response.

“Friendship? Having friends does not make one strong,” He said. “It makes you st--” I stood up and put a hoof out, cutting him off.

“No. Having friends does not make *one* strong. It makes the whole stronger,” I said. “You don't get it Wrath. I'm not standing by myself. My friends are with me, and they are my strength. They are my rock. And with their support, I can do anything. Including kicking your sorry ass into next week.” I smiled widely, having realized what Faith was talking about. Faith in the impossible... it meant having faith in what you couldn't see. Friendship was such an impossibility in the Wasteland. But yet, here it was... thriving in my heart. Without further words, I flared my horn and brought into being a brilliant blaze of light that coalesced into a solid blade of magic. “Prepare thyself for combat, foul wretch. We have unfinished business with you.” Wrath sneered as I charged past Violet, grinning widely. *I can do this!* I thought as the flat of my blade connected with the minotaur's gauntlet. He had raised it to block, much like he had the last time I had used this move against him. This time however, my magic was bolstered by a more powerful force. Friendship. The blade crashed into the gauntlet, but instead of dissipating it knocked the minotaur back towards the wall.

“Have at thee!” I shouted with glee as I slashed at Wrath, cutting into his shoulder with my magical blade. Blood spurted from the wound as the minotaur tried to slash back. I twirled around, grinning widely as he barely missed me. Flaring my wings out, I swung the glowing blade, slicing Wrath across the chest. A thin line of blood appeared there. Wrath snarled and lunged at me with his wicked claws. I pushed back, bringing up my alicorn shield. The minotaur struck the shield and began pounding away, trying to push through my magic with sheer strength. I expanded the shield, shoving him across the slick marble as I latched onto Stargazer with my telekinesis.

“It's time to end this,” I said, dropping the shield and catching the cult leader off guard. Stargazer lifted and I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up as many shots as possible, looking to disable the minotaur. Time came back into motion and round after round erupted from the minigun. Wrath barely had any time to move away before Stargazer's starmetal bullets struck. Wrath hit the ground hard under the force of the fire. Blood erupted from every wound at once. The minotaur lay there, unmoving. I stood over the prone form of the cult leader, blinking. *I... I did it? I actually did it?* I thought. I lifted the magical blade, expecting Wrath to pop up at any moment.

“Is he... is he dead?” Violet said. I turned away from Wrath's body, looking back at my friends. Something didn't feel right about this. Wrath was strong. He was powerful and fierce. My victory over him felt... hollow. Like it was undeserved. I started to walk back to Violet, turning around one last time to look at the cult leader's body. When I did, two pairs of red eyes were staring straight into my very soul. Wrath stood there, bloody and beaten, but somehow still breathing. He growled, launching a clawed gauntlet right at my face. He struck hard, and I felt something crack beneath the force of the impact. I went flying back, hitting the ground with a ***thud***. I pushed myself up to see the minotaur rushing towards me.

“It's going to take you a lot more than that to kill Wrath, Ministry Mare!” He snarled. Pain shot through my face and neck as I tried to move out of the way. Wrath struck me like a freight train, pushing me into a vicious grapple with the minotaur. Claws raked across flesh and I howled in pain as I tried to focus on my magic. My horn flared, as I slashed at the minotaur's back with magical blade. It struck with vicious force, and Wrath howled his pain into my ear. He let go for just a moment, which I took to unleash a blast of telekinesis. Wrath slid away from me, knocked back by the force of my magic. The minotaur sneered at me through his bloody face. We both slumped to the ground, panting hard as we tried to push on towards each other slowly. We stopped a few feet away from the other. Silence filled the air.

“Had enough?” I choked out finally. A throaty chuckle ripped through the air from the minotaur.

“Not nearly...” He said, coughing loudly. I couldn't help it. I started to laugh. This whole situation was kind of hilarious. “I will admit it, Ministry Mare. You *are* stronger than I thought you to be. You are a worthy opponent to take on Pride.”

“Really now?” I said. “I thought you were going to kill me.”

“Oh, that is to be expected. And when you've murdered my winged sister, then I shall find you and we will finish this,” Wrath replied as he tried to push himself up off the ground. He weakly lifted his hand, making a signal with it. Instantly, two minotaurs in blood red robes appeared on each side of him. “We will meet again, Ministry Mare. **COUNT** on it.” The cult leader disappeared just as quickly as his retainers had appeared. I groaned loudly. Pain shot through every part of my body. I tried to get up, but instead fell to the ground. I heard my friends cry out as I finally blacked out, the darkness taking me into oblivion.

I blinked, looking up at the hallway before me. *Of course*, I thought. The endless doors and torches stretched out as far as I could see. I shakily got to my hooves, gathering my limbs under me. Wrath had beaten me so soundly that even this spirit or dream form was hurting. My ears perked at the familiar ***fwoosh*** of the torch blowing itself out, followed by the ***creak*** of a door opening. I stretched, wondering what emotion I was going to meet this time, and trotted into the door. The door opened into open air, a standing frame on the hillside behind me as I stepped through it.

I recognized the fields just below Cloudsdale immediately. Amidst the war torn battlefield, a single purple unicorn filly sat. She was stroking the mane of a stallion laying next to her. I stepped up behind her. I could hear her crying.

“Hello?” I said softly. The purple filly looked up at me, tears in her violet eyes. She sniffled, looking back to the stallion. His electric blue mane spilled all over the ground. I realized that he was... dead. “Are you alright, little one?”

“No... No I'm not,” She said quietly. “He... he's dead. It's all my fault.” I sighed, sitting down next to the filly.

“It's... it's not your fault,” I said. “Shining Armor... he chose this. You know that right?” The filly nodded. “Let me guess... Guilt?”

“Remorse,” She said. “I loved him so much. He was such a good older brother. But he was hurting.”

“The Pink Cloud?” I asked. The filly nodded once more.

“I didn't mean for it to all end up like this, Radiant Star,” She said. “Now Spark's out there... and it's all my fault. I messed up. I should have listened to my friends... should have...” Remorse trailed off, and I could hear the hints of sobbing come from the poor little filly. I put my hoof on her shoulder, holding her close.

“No... it's not your fault. It's mine. I should have listened to Lucky and not her. Maybe this whole thing could have avoided if I had just paid a little attention to Spark,” I said, feeling a little defeatist. I had let Spark out after all. I was responsible for her. Remorse sniffled, looking up at me with fresh tears in her eyes.

“Remorse... we can't dwell on the past. Spark is out, and I need to stop her. Faith told me that there was a choice to be made. What choice?”

“Spark... she's not all bad. There's still some part of her that is pure. Nightmare might have been smart, but there's no way she could have erased everything that was the Element of Magic,” She said, looking back down at the dead stallion. I nodded. I knew this much already.

“So what can I do?” I said, extending a wing over the small filly. “Spark doesn't seem like the type to accept help.”

“I... I don't know, Star,” She said. “But I know that somewhere in there the real Magic is there. You just need to bring her out.” I pondered the filly's words. Was that really the choice I was expected to make? Kill Spark... or save her? I sighed. How was I supposed to make that choice? Spark was evil! She had nearly killed Violet, and her aspirations to become a Goddess could mean big trouble for the Wasteland. How could I even consider saving her?

“What if... what if I can't make that choice? What if I can't do it?” I said. Remorse smiled briefly.

“Then we may be doomed forever. Equestria needs the Element of Magic,” She said. “I know this is hard

for you. It's hard for us too. We endured the loss of Shining Armor, the betrayal of Spark, and the end of the world as we knew it. Now, we need your help to end this once and for all."

"I'll... I'll try. But I don't know... this is a lot to take in," I replied. Remorse looked back to the dead stallion, and began stroking his mane once more. We sat there in silence as the world faded back into blackness.

I awoke in bright light, feeling the warm sun on my face. I let my vision realign back into focus, the sign of the museum appearing right above me. I groaned, and looked back down at my body. Magical bandages were wrapped around my torso, and I felt like death warmed over. I tried to stand, and nearly fell over immediately. If it hadn't been for Violet, I probably would have gone face first onto the hard stone.

"Oof. Thanks," I croaked, finally adjusting to the light. My friends were standing around, having built a haphazard camp right outside of the museum. At the far edge of the camp was the Smooze. *Where did he go during my fight with Wrath?* I thought. He appeared to be hunched over, working on something. I stumbled, getting my footing as I trudged towards the creature. Violet helped me, staying silent as we walked. The Smooze looked up briefly, before continuing his attention on what he was working on.

"Hello," He said quietly.

"Hi," I said. "Well... we did it. We got out. You're free now." The thing looked back at me, a smile appearing on his slimy face.

"Yes... thank you so much. There's so much to see," He said. He turned away for a brief moment, grabbing something off the ground. "I made something else for you... to thank you." He lifted his hands, a small clay figurine resting there. It was... me, and the others. Violet stood proudly next to me on the base of the statuette. Patch and Steeljack were on each side of us. Nixis, Danish, and even Lust were even present.

They were perfectly accurate right down to the smallest detail. I smiled at the creature as I lifted it with my magic, placing it into my saddlebags.

"Thank... thank you," I said nervously. "Where will you go now?"

"Somewhere out there," He said, pointing out at the vast Wasteland. "Somewhere I can see everything there is to offer. I've been stuck for so long." I nodded.

"Just be careful out there. Some ponies might not be too welcoming to you, looking like you do," I said.

"But... if you look hard enough, you'll find friendship. It's an incredible thing, but friendship has survived hundreds of years of hate and anguish."

"In that case... I am thankful you are my friend," The Smooze said. "All of you. Farewell." He turned away as he began to trudge along into the Wasteland. I stood and I watched as he disappeared off into the horizon. I looked back, grinning at my friends widely.

"Let's go. Filly's Tower is just in the center of the city," I said confidently. "There isn't any time to spare!" I took a confident step forward, and my foreleg crumpled under me. Pain shot through me as I fell to the ground. I groaned, hearing laughter behind me.

"Sweetheart, you've been out for several hours after some serious injury. You need to rest," Violet said. I grunted in reply. I wasn't about to argue with her. My body ached all throughout.

"Fine," I said, rolling myself over so I could at least see her. She had a smug grin on her face. "But as soon as I'm up and able, we're going to find Spark." Her grin disappeared, replaced by a serious expression as she nodded. I looked over at Danish. The cream-colored unicorn had been talking with Lust as he met my eyes. He trotted over and sat down next to me.

"Darlin'," He said.

"Danish," I replied. "I assume you'll be getting back to the MMMM now?"

"Nope. I'm going to come with you," The stallion said. My eyes widened. "I reckon that you need help, and

what you're doin' is really important. If this Spark is as dangerous as you say she is, then not just Chicacolt, but the Wasteland is in grave danger. And to be quite honest... I like this city." I sighed.

"Thank you," I said quietly. Danish grinned. "I know that you must miss your gang though."

"I'll be honest, Star. I do need your help with the boss. Things are gettin' a little crazy there." The unicorn said somberly. "But I think this has to come first. The boys should be able to keep this cake from collapsin' while we're takin' care of Pride. For that matter, if things go wrong, the boys can handle themselves. They did before me, and they'll do so again if I die."

"Rather morbid way of looking at it isn't it?" I said. Danish shrugged.

"It's the way of the Wasteland, darlin'. Ponies live, ponies die. It's the way things are," He said. I hung my head for a moment. "You alright?"

"Yeah. Just... lot on my mind, you know. This is just... too much," I said quietly. "If you had to make a choice... one that you knew had the potential to cause a lot of hurt no matter what you did... would you do it?"

"Sure as shootin' would," Danish said. I cocked my head at him.

"Why?" I asked. "How could you make any decision?"

"Because you have to. Because... no matter what, you can't not make a decision. Even if you stood there and did nothing you're still making a decision," He said. "That's what choice is." My eyes widened. I realized that he was right. Regardless of what was going to happen, I would have to make this decision. This choice would have to be made.

"I... I hadn't thought of it like that. Thank you, Danish," I said. The cream-colored stallion nodded as he stood and trotted off. Soon, I was left alone as the rest of my friends handled the guarding of our makeshift camp. Violet joined me before too long, snuggling up close to me as night began to fall. As I lay there, I felt a bit better. The pain in my sides had begun to subside at least.

"Violet?" I said after a few moments of silence. My marefriend looked up from beside me. "I wanted to thank you. For standing up to Wrath. For believing in me." She smiled, coming in close for a kiss. She pulled back after the soft embrace.

"You're welcome," She breathed. "I would do anything for you. You know that, right?" I nodded, feeling very vulnerable at that moment.

"I know," I whispered. "I just really appreciate it. I so love you."

"We all love you, Star," Violet replied. "Just never lose faith. We're right behind you, supporting you all the way." She nuzzled my neck sweetly, and I let myself fall into her. We stayed that way for what felt like forever, locked in each other until we fell asleep.

The next morning found our little band in much lighter spirits. I was finally able to stand without falling over, the injuries I had sustained in my fight against Wrath were healed enough that I was capable of travelling. Not wanting to waste any more time, we packed up our things and began making our way back towards the city. As I walked, I realized just how far away the Museum had been from Chicacolt. As I looked back at the massive building, I could see a sickly looking lake in the distance. It glowed a green sheen in the morning light. To our immediate north, Colter Field loomed over us. I shuddered, thinking about the Arena and Wrath. I hoped not to go back to that place anytime soon.

We walked along, finally coming to the edge of the ruined city within a few hours. I decided that I had enough silence after a while, clicking on the radio to see what was going on in the city proper. The rough and tumble voice of the Minotaur greeted our ears.

Yeeeeeeeehaawwwww!!!! It's time again kiddies for the Morning MOO Madhouse, with your host... the

ONE, the ONLY, the MINOTAUR!!!

That's right my friends, it is I, the Minotaur, bringing you all the hottest news in the Chicacolt area! And boy do we have some news for you! It seems our good friend, the Ministry Mare, has been seen! The Mare herself was last seen escaping Colter Field after fighting the leader of the Cult of Iron Will. Later on, something big went down at the old Museum, and the Ministry Mare was at the heart of it. The terror of the Museum has been broken, and she survived to tell the tale! Good on you, Ministry Mare! I want the story straight from the pony's mouth, next time you stop by!

In other news, the political background of Chicacolt is heating up. The Lotus Triad is making deals and alliances with the other gangs, folks. There's also shake-ups with the Cowpones. It appears the old bastard the Bullfather has finally kicked the bucket. The gang now has a new leader, a shadowy figure we only know as 'Cow-Face'. The gang themselves have kicked up their activities, taking their slavery operations to the next level. They've taken over a few of the small factories within city limits, forcing their slaves to work to get them up and running. Cow-Face has some aspirations of grandeur it seems.

And with that, we're off and running with the smooth rocking beats of the Rolling Ponies! See ya on the flip side, kids!

A smooth chunky beat filled our ears as we stepped onto a ruined street. The city was ominously quiet. Filly's Tower loomed in the distance, a black monolith standing over the rest of the ruined city. It called to me, beckoned even. There... just below the tower itself... was Stable 180 and Pride. Spark was beyond that. I didn't know what would happen when we got there, but I knew that I was going to have to figure it out. *No more running*, I thought. *No more avoiding*. I was ready, but the choice I faced weighed heavy on my heart. A hoof on my shoulder brought me out of my thoughts. I looked down, seeing Violet smiling up at me.

I nodded and we continued on, moving onto a street that Violet's book had called the 'Magnificent Mile'. Mareigan Avenue. Once a thriving center of commerce, it was now a ruined path of concrete and asphalt. Rusted hulks of skywagons and ruined travel carts littered the road. The shops that lined the street were in a state of perpetual disarray. Gang graffiti splattered over every inch of wall space. What struck me as odd however was how still and quiet it was. There was no noise... not even the persistent howl of the wind that we gotten so accustomed to in this city. An check of my E.F.S. showed that I was right to be paranoid, as several red blips appeared on each side of the street.

"We've got company," I said, motioning around us. Violet had already floated out Thunder Flash. Before anypony could get a shot off, gunfire streaked across the street, dust and debris flying into the air. I ducked behind a nearby skywagon and lifted Stargazer, firing towards the source of the sound. The sharp retort of Para Bellum sounded off behind me, and I heard the gurgle of a dying pony falling from a nearby store.

Patch whooped a victory cry as more gunfire rained down upon us. I couldn't see where they were firing from. Only my E.F.S. showed that the red blips were directly on each side of the street. A glimmer of silver flashed from above, and I caught a glimpse of one of our assailants. It was a dirty white earth pony raider, his crimson mane styled in a mohawk. A slick black leather jacket rested on his shoulders, and a battle saddle with a hunting rifle attached was attached to his back. The stallion shouted wildly with insane glee and took aim. Before he could get a chance however, he exploded in a shower of gore. I grinned over at Danish, smoke rolling out of the barrel of his carbine. The cream-colored stallion took cover next to me, a grimace on his face as he looked up at me.

"Fucking Hellraisers!" He shouted. "What the fuck do they want?" I cocked my head at him.

"Hellraisers?" I asked.

"They're a bunch of raiders who think they're a gang," He replied. "Otherwise known as the Hellraisers.

Fuck... there's radroaches that have more sense than these stupid fucks." A flash of silver fire struck the side of the store-front that the gunfire was coming from, punching a hole into the concrete. I growled as I stood, lifting my gun into the air and dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I couldn't see a damn thing, so I just queued up numerous shots into the store windows. Time resumed and Stargazer fired. I could hear shouts from within

the store. The front door of the shop exploded open and I heard a ***thwump*** noise. A silvery apple hit the ground at our feet.

“Grenade!” I yelled, instinctively tossing the death apple as best as I could. The grenade got about half my length away from before it exploded, still caught in the haze of my telekinesis. Shrapnel dug into my sides, and I grunted in pain. Luckily, I was the only target it had caught. A shot pinged off the ground in front of me. I looked up just in time to see a bloody blue coated raider charging at me, his assault rifle aimed right for my head. I flared my horn, throwing up my alicorn shield. The stallion, being as dense as Danish said they would be, charged right into the shield and hit the ground hard. I took a brief look around the street.

The rest of the gang had poured out of the dubious safety of the storefronts, engaging my friends in tight little knots of battle.

I leapt into action, lifting Stargazer as I moved. The minigun meted out hot, fiery justice against our would-be assailants. I had to admit, Danish was right. The Hellraisers weren't very smart, and they didn't seem very interested in talking either. When they did speak, it was usually to spout profanity or scream wildly. What was also interesting was that they all seemed to be earth pony stallions. There were no unicorns or pegasi, no mares in the ranks of the Hellraisers. I took out another member of the raider gangers as I made my way through the melee to Violet's side. My marefriend was busy with her own battle, taking on two of the stallions at once. Thunder Flash made quick work of them and I brushed up against her.

“Like old times?” I said, grinning. Violet smiled back, and nodded. We stood back to back, firing in tandem with each other. Meanwhile, Nixis was violently ripping apart pony after pony, growling almost musically. I admired the controlled ferocity that the hellhound could sometimes channel. Steeljack and Patch also fought side-by-side, the couple playing off each other's strengths. Lust was working with Danish, ripping limbs off of any pony that threatened him while he worked his way across the chaos of the battlefield. The fight was going well, much better than I had feared initially.

That was when another set of shots rang out, a third group joining the battle. A flash left a charcoal black unicorn right in my face, a combat shotgun held in her magic. A sharp grin was on her face, and I recognized her as one of the Lotus Triad's enforcers. *The Triad and the Hellraisers... working together?* I thought. *This can't be good.* The unicorn made a hoof gesture, and more of the Triad's enforcers began to appear intermingled with the raiders. I heard a snicker from above. I looked up, seeing the familiar face of Lotus Petal standing on top of the nearby store-front. The battle stopped for a moment as I noticed the Triad enforcers training their weapons on me and my friends. I knew at that moment we were outclassed and outnumbered. The Hellraisers had drawn back, clearly waiting for the Triad to act.

“Well, well, Ministry Mare,” Lotus Petal said. “We meet again.”

“Lotus Petal,” I called out to the pink mare. “What's the matter? Couldn't get enough of me?”

“Pssh. Please. We still have unfinished business, you and I,” The pink unicorn said. She grinned widely.

“Besides, I still have your other ear to finish off.” She lifted her cruel knife in the air with her magic, waving it as if she was taunting me.

“I don't think so. I've got far more important things to deal with at the moment,” I said. “If you recall, I kicked your sorry ass last time.” Lotus Petal cackled wildly at this.

“If I recall correctly, you spent most of the time talking to yourself,” She said. “No. We're going to finish this little game. You and your friends are mine.” I growled under my breath. I needed a way out of here. A little pony in the back of my head told me I should just end Lotus Petal. Then at least this would all be over. Another little pony chimed in, and I took a deep breath. No... I couldn't just kill her. I had to be better than that. I had to *do* better. I looked over at Violet. She was panting hard, barely holding onto Thunder Flash with her magic. A glimmer in the sunlight caught my eyes. I smiled. *Yes... that will do*, I thought as I reached inwards and touched my magic. I only had one shot at this. My horn began to glow and Lotus Petal's eyes widened.

“Fucking kill her! Don't let her ---” She said before a massive ***crack*** cut her off. Steeljack's rifle echoed out across the street, blowing a hole in one of the nearby enforcers and drawing Lotus' attention. The

distraction was enough to give me the second I needed in order to cast my spell. My horn flared and the magic released and the world fell away into nothingness. It reappeared a few moments later, and I smiled.

“Did it,” I said, releasing my breath. I looked around me, noticing the confusion on the faces of my friends. I winced at the pain in my horn. The teleportation spell had taken a lot more out of me than I had realized. I slumped to my haunches, grunting as I fell over.

“Star!” I heard a voice call out. Violet was next to me immediately. I could see a mixture of concern and surprise on her face. I smiled weakly.

“Hey,” I said, looking up at her. “We got away, right?” She hesitated and then nodded.

“We did, thanks to you,” She said. My love smiled, and helped me up. I groaned in pain as I looked up, seeing where my spell had landed us. A golden globe towered above us, and I got the distinct impression that we were up somewhere high. I grimaced, feeling the pain in my horn once more.

“Wow...” I heard Lust say. A low whistle emitted from the mare's mouth. I followed her gaze, seeing the whole of Chicacolt stretched out before us. The words *Equestrian Sun-Times* were etched on the side of the ruined globe. I had somehow managed to teleport us onto the roof of a very tall building. In the distance, Filly's Tower loomed over the middle of the city. A quick glance behind us revealed that we were more than several streets away from Mareigan Avenue. The sun hung low in the sky, gilding the city with a divine touch at odds with its ruined nature and fractious inhabitants.

“Well then, nowhere to go but down,” Steeljack said, breaking the silence finally. I nodded. The low throbbing of pain in my horn told me I wasn't casting a teleport spell like that any time soon. Patch bounced behind him as we headed towards the only door on the roof. It appeared to be locked, but Lust made short work of that with a swipe of her wing blades. We filed into the tiny stairwell, and I walked along with Violet supporting me. I smiled as she floated out a Med-X, jabbing it into my side. It helped... a bit. The pain was still there, but it was lessened considerably. The stairs ended at a door that had been chained up. A slash later and the chains fell to the floor, clattering loudly. I checked my E.F.S., but nothing more than the green blips of my friends appeared. I nodded at Lust. She pushed the door open and we stepped into the hallway.

The hall was dusty, and it definitely looked like it hadn't been touched in over two hundred years. Blackened skeletons lay on the floor every few feet. Ponies from the world before the megaspells dropped. At the far end of the ruined hallway was another set of stairs that went down into the main office level. The offices were completely barren. It seemed like the ponies had tried to move either up to the roof or even further down when the end of the world had happened. I stepped forward, being helped along by Violet as I slumped down to my haunches. Pain shot through my head.

“I... I need to stop,” I said, breathing hard. “I have to rest. I... I...”

“It's alright, sweetheart,” Violet replied, sitting down next to me. “I think it'll be fine if we stop here and rest for a bit.” The others nodded as they moved further out into the office level, checking to make sure that we were indeed alone. I sat there in silence next to Violet, leaning into her and sighing.

“Thanks...” I said. “I guess that teleportation spell really hit me hard.” I chuckled at the silliness of something as simple as magic burnout hitting me this hard. Why had it hit me this badly? The fight with Wrath, the stunt in the stairwell, and this teleport. That was quite a workout, but it shouldn't have hit me this hard. I lay my aching head against Violet as the others came back into view.

“It's clear,” Danish said to Violet. “There's some elevators, but they don't look like they work. We're gonna have to hoof it all the way down.”

“Great,” Lust said, rolling her eyes. “Remind me again why I'm following you still?”

“Because you're afraid Pride will find you and kill you?” Patch casually mentioned. Lust growled.

“Shut it,” She said. I glared at her and she instantly shut up, her cheeks flushing red. “I mean... sorry.” Patch sighed.

“It's fine,” The green mare said. “I'm sorry too. Friends?” She stuck out her hoof. The pegasus smiled

weakly, and took the hoof.

"Friends," She said. I smiled. Maybe things were looking up after all! I watched as my friends spent their time setting up a barricade in case we were attacked. I struggled for a bit with boredom, trying to keep myself occupied while I rested. For a little while, I pulled out Twilight's diary, reading through her old friendship letters to the Princess. I came upon the final entry once more, sighing deeply. Twilight's words cut across the pages like a knife. Was she really in so much pain that she felt there was no way out? I let my gaze drift over to my case of memory orbs. There was still one more I hadn't viewed. I looked over at my friends. They were busy discussing the plans to get to the bottom of this building. I felt... disconnected. I hadn't been able to pay attention to anything, the throbbing of my head distracting me from even watching my friends.

"Violet?" I called out. My marefriend looked over, smiling. My eyes moved to the box of memory orbs. Hers followed mine, locking onto the box and then back to mine. She nodded slowly. I mouthed *Thank you* and opened up the box. The final memory orb from Fort Knowledge sat there, taunting me. What secrets did it hold? I was about to find out. I latched onto the orb with my magic, letting the world fall away into nothing.

OoooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The body of my host was... different. It was... the same as my normal body? I was an alicorn! *Wait...if I'm an alicorn... that must mean...* I thought as everything around me came into focus. I was sitting at a table in a long dining hall, in what appeared to be the palace. My host smiled politely at the servant that stepped forward and took my plate. Seated across from my host was a familiar purple unicorn.

"...So you see Princess, I have it all planned out. We'll coordinate with the other Ministries to get this project completed. I'm sure it will mean big things as we work towards the end of the war," Twilight Sparkle said as my host looked over at her. I was Princess Bucking Luna! *How? Luna was reclusive during the war. Why would she have ever agreed to have a memory extracted?* I thought as I realized that my host hadn't exactly been listening to the other mare.

"I'm sorry?" My host's deep and powerful voice echoed across the room. Luna's guest pressed her ears back, looking a little distraught at my host's lack of attention. "Forgive us, Twilight Sparkle. We were... lost in thought."

"It's alright Princess. We were just discussing the megaspell project. You know, the one that the Ministry of Peace came up with?" Twilight said. My host pondered the unicorn's words for a moment.

"You wish to research the concept further?" Luna said finally. Twilight nodded. "Then you have our blessing to do so. What are the reports from the other Ministries on their progress?"

"Well... Applejack's Steel Ranger program is just getting off the ground, but it looks very promising. I think I speak for everypony when I say that it has a lot of potential to save a lot of pony's lives," Twilight began.

"And then of course there's Rainbow Dash's Ministry. I'm... not exactly sure what she is doing honestly. Pinkie's just... Pinkie. I'm slightly concerned for her to be honest."

"Indeed. We shall have a talk with Pinkamena at our earliest convenience," My host replied. The alicorn pondered for a moment, and continued. "Twilight. How fares your brother?" Twilight's eyes widened at the mention of Shining Armor. She stammered, trying to get the words out.

"He... He's fine." The lavender unicorn said. "Why do you ask?" My host raised an eyebrow.

"We are concerned for General Armor's health. We... No, I am concerned for you, Twilight. You have let this disease... this affliction of his dominate your life," Luna said. "We wish to ensure that you are thinking this through, clearly." Twilight sighed and looked up at the Princess of the Night, a mixed expression of fear and confusion on her face. She took a few moments to recompose herself, and began to speak.

"I am thinking this through, your Highness. I told you before, I am quite certain that I can find a cure," She said with confidence. Luna smiled. "Don't worry, Princess. I have everything all completely organized."

"We have faith in thee, Twilight Sparkle. When all is said and done, you will be regarded as one of the great heroes of Equestria," My host said. Twilight saluted and stood up from the chair she had been sitting in.

"Thank you... Princess," She said. "I won't let you down." She turned and stalked out the main door of the dining hall. Luna sighed as she watched her go. I felt my host stand, looking at the batpony guards standing near the door.

"Leave us," She said, her voice filled with power. "We wish to be alone now." The guards looked at each other and nodded. They left the hall, leaving the Lunar Maiden alone. Luna looked out the window of the dining hall into the night. Her horn glowed and the windows opened, letting in a cool breeze across her midnight coat. I felt the alicorn shudder slightly at the touch. She was about to turn away from the window, but something stopped her.

"Well, well, look at pretty Princess Luna," A cold, dark voice echoed in the back of my host's mind. Luna spun about.

"Show yourself, fiend!" She shouted. The voice cackled wildly. The alicorn scanned the room for any sign of the intruder.

"Come now... you don't recognize me?" The voice continued. My host sneered, turning about once more to face her foe in the flesh. Another alicorn appeared in the room before her, this one a solid black pony with blue steel armor.

"*You*," Luna said. "What are you doing here, Nightmare Moon?" The other alicorn chuckled lightly.

"I would have thought you of all ponies would have been happy to see me," Nightmare replied. She trotted past the Princess of the Night, looking out the window briefly. "I trust you are well?" My host glared at the other alicorn.

"How we are is of no consequence to you, fiend," Luna replied. "I repeat: What are you doing here? The last time we saw you, you were being run off by the Elements of Harmony."

"The Elements of Harmony. Pfft," Nightmare Moon said. "Did you really think that those pathetic relics would have any real effect on me? I escaped, you foal. I've been here... all along."

"What do you mean?" My host asked. "How did you escape?"

"Simple really. I just hid at the right time," The black alicorn replied as she trotted past the Princess of the Night. Luna scowled at the other alicorn. "Of course... I've had to do a bit of masquerading to stay hidden, but soon I won't have to worry about that much longer."

"The war," My host said. "Your doing?" Nightmare Moon chuckled lightly.

"No... while I would like to claim that I started the war with those silly superstitions the zebras carry about us, no... you ponies are to blame for it, right from the start," She said. "No... I will claim responsibility, however for Celestia's little protégé."

"What have you done to Twilight?" Luna said, anger rising in her voice.

"Oh you know... a push here, a push there. She really believes in the work she's doing, you know," Nightmare Moon said. "Did you know she has an idea on how to turn regular ponies into alicorns? An entire army of creatures just like you and I. Can you believe it? How delightful she is."

"You will stay away from Twilight Sparkle, fiend," Luna challenged, locking eyes with the other alicorn. "Or we shall end thee."

"Please... you couldn't end me if you thought really hard about, *Woona*," Nightmare said, rolling her eyes.

"The only reason I'm revealing myself to you now is to gloat. Soon, with Twilight's help, we shall rule Equestria. Now then, I'm afraid I must take my leave of you my dear. So many things to do, so little time." She grinned widely, her fangs showing clearly in the soft light of the torches. Her horn glowed midnight black and she disappeared into the cold night. My host snarled as she spun about, storming out the door as the memory faded away.

I came out of memory feeling quite disoriented, but at the very least it seemed that my headache had gone away. Violet lay next to me, reading over the history book on Chicacolt. I stirred on my bedroll, drawing her attention. My other friends were mostly sleeping, Nixis silently patrolling the perimeter of our crude encampment.

"Hey," She said quietly. "Everything alright?" I nodded.

"It was... strange," I said. I started to explain what I had seen in the memory, mentioning explicitly the parts having to do with Twilight. "Nightmare was responsible for corrupting Spark. I just... I don't know what to do, Violet. Is there something good in there? Or is she truly evil now?" Violet sighed.

"I don't know either, Star. It sounds like the only way to know for certain is to confront Spark directly," She said. "Don't worry, we'll get there. We're not far away from Filly's Tower at least. Did you know the construction of the tower itself goes deep into the foundation of the city itself? It's all here in this book."

"Does it say anything about the megaspell?" I asked curiously. Violet cocked her head at this.

"What megaspell?" She replied.

"While... while Spark had my body under control, I sort of had some company. Lucky was around," I said, pulling out the figure that the Smooze had given me.

"I... I see," Violet replied. "Is she still around?" I shook my head.

"No... And I'm worried about her. I think Spark might have... done something to her, or driver her off. I don't know," I said, shaking my head sadly. "Anyways... Lucky told me that there's some major megaspell that's in Filly's Tower. It was some sort of defense spell." Violet looked at the book again, murmuring under her breath.

"No... nothing here about that. But then again, this book probably wouldn't have any info on something that secret," She said. "Being a Ministry project and all... I don't know. We'll just have to watch out for it I guess. Do you think Pride has access to it?"

"I doubt it. Lucky had said it was in the Tower, and that the Minotaur had it. I'm sure that even with the Stable underneath the Tower, he keeps it well under wraps. I just hope he doesn't use it," I said. The sun began filtering into the office windows, and the rest of our motley crew began to awaken. I stood, feeling whole, healed and rested. I looked to my friends, and grinned widely. "Everypony ready?" I received nods of affirmation from my companions. We moved forward as one, and I kept a close eye on my E.F.S.

Nothing showed up as we descended into the stairwell down to the next floor. It seemed like the prewar ponies that designed this place made it so that you had to progress through each floor to get to the next one. I silently wondered if that was intentional.

The next floor was bare as well, no signs of bodies or skeletons. There wasn't even any rubble or debris! It was extremely confusing. *Maybe there weren't that many ponies working here on the day the megaspells dropped*, I thought as I stepped into the cubicle farm. I didn't get five steps in before a turret popped out of the ceiling. Instead of bullets however, it began spraying magical beam fire at us. I growled, putting up my shield and raising Stargazer. The laser beams struck the magical shield, harmlessly bouncing off. I fired, punching a large hole in the metal casing of the turret. It exploded in a flash of red fire, spraying metal and sparks all over the floor. I dropped my shield and stepped forward.

"Everypony keep a close eye on the ceiling. I have a feeling that won't be the last one of those we'll see," I said. "Danish, take up the rear. I'll hang in the center and throw up a shield if we run up against anything else." The cream-colored stallion nodded and hung back behind us, floating along his carbine rifle with his magic. We moved into the hallway leading to the next set of stairs. The hall was the same quiet as the Miracle Mile had been. Too quiet. Amazingly enough, nothing happened at all as we made it to the stairwell. We trotted down carefully to the next two floors, watching for any more turrets or security systems. Each floor was just like the rest, barren. *What happened here?* I thought as we continued forward.

I pushed on the door for the third floor with my hoof, finding that it was locked. I flared my horn, blowing the lock off of the door with telekinesis. Behind me, Violet chuckled quietly.

"I do have to admit, my love. You do have a way with locks."

"Whoa," I said, looking into the doorway. This floor... it was far different than any of the others that we had seen. The floor was solid black, outlined by soft white lights. Grey terminals lined the walls, and several large monitors were clustered in the corners. The most noticeable thing about this floor compared to the others though was the fact that there appeared to be no exit. No door to any other stairs, no elevator... nothing. I stepped in, putting my hoof down on one of the black tiles. The room lit up immediately as the floor changed from black to white. The terminals flared to life as well, lines of code scrolling down the screens. A black and white pony appeared on the monitors, his crimson eyes the color of blood.

"Ahhh, the Ministry Mare and her friends. Welcome." It said, grinning with gleaming white teeth. I shuddered when I realized they were sharpened, jagged and pointy. "I want to play a game."

"Game? Where are we? What is this place? Who are you?" Patch said. The black and white pony chuckled loudly.

"Who, me? I'm nopony important," The black and white pony in the screen said. "Now then... shall we begin? The rules are very simple. If you win... I'll let you go free. If you lose... you all die."

"And how exactly are we supposed to win?" I asked, snarling. "Do I get to shoot you? Please tell me I get to shoot you. Because I have someplace important to be, and you are in my way."

"Oh! Impatient, are we? Right then, well let the games begin! And good luck to you!" The black and white pony said, grinning widely. The floor flared with a red light, black walls rising out of the tiles. I cried out, along with my friends as we were separated. The room was a maze now. *How fucking big is this place?* I thought as I stepped forward. *And what is it with pre-war ponies and space/time distortion! So fucked up...*

"Is everypony alright?" I called out, hoping they could still hear me.

"Star? Is that you?" Violet called back. I pounded on the side wall, trying to make a dent in it.

"I'm here!" Patch yelled. Steeljack and Danish called out their affirmations as well.

"Nixis is here, Ministry Mare! I have tried to slash the walls, but they seem to be resistant to my claws," The hellhound shouted.

"Lust is here too, sexy," Lust called out from another side of me. I sighed. At least the others were okay for the time being.

"Everypony hold on, I'm gonna try and teleport us," I said. A deep chuckle interrupted me as I started to flare my horn.

"Tut, tut. That's cheating," The voice said. The monitor at the far end of the first hallway flared to life, revealing the black and white pony. His red eyes remained impassive as he grinned widely. "As you were just cursing, this is a spacetime distortion, my dear. A teleport out of here would leave the lot of you as more of a pile of sausage than a group of ponies." I growled.

"What the fuck are you?" I shouted. He chuckled madly.

"That's part of the fun of the game," he replied. "Now, are you going to play, or am I going to have to end the game prematurely?" I glared at the screen.

"Star, I don't think he's bluffing. We'll see each other at the end of this," Violet called out. I sighed, moving forward down the hall. The long hall ended in a sharp right turn, taking me down another long hallway that ended in a fork. The monitor in the center of the fork illuminated. The black and white pony grinned at me from it. I was really starting to get sick of seeing that face.

"Well my dear, now time for our first challenge," he said. "Before you lies two paths. One leads to the truth. The other... leads to lies. It's up to you to decide which is the proper path."

"That's not a very good riddle," I said. "Which one leads out of here?"

"There's no fun in just telling you," The black and white pony replied. "However, I am sporting, and will give you a hint. The truth is hard, sometimes a lie is easier to believe. The path on your left will lead to the truth. The path on your right... the lie." I paused, considering the pony on the monitor. There was something amiss with this, beyond the obvious weirdness of a spacetime distortion in an office building. It was naggingly familiar, but I couldn't put a hoof on it. I decided to head left, trotting along the hallway. It ended in a large open room, with the same red light up tiling that I had been walking on. However, in the center of this room was a large bank of monitors. It lit up as I stepped in and began to play some sort of video feed. I heard Violet's voice come from it.

"I hate you!" My love's voice rang out from the screen. The image was of me... and my friends. Violet was shouting at me. "I never want to see you again!"

"I hate you, too!" My voice rang back. "And I never want to see you again, either!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!" The ponies and hellhound around us walked off in separate directions. Violet glared at me and stomped away. The image on the screen distorted as it flickered out of existence. I stared at it, wondering what it meant. *I would never yell at Violet like that*, I thought.

"Oh? I think you might," A voice said from all around me. "You wanted the truth. The truth is... this is the future... your future."

"That's impossible," I said shakily. "I-I would never..."

"Wouldn't you?" The voice continued. "You and your friends are bound to fail. In the end, it will tear you apart. Are you sure that is what you want?" I started pondering his words. Were we really bound to fail? Was the end result of our journey the end of our friendship? The end of everything we'd ever worked for?

"I... I..." I started to say. "I don't..."

"That's right... you don't. And you never will, *Radiant Star*," The voice replied. I blinked. *Wait... I never told him my name, how...?* I thought. "Oh yes... I know who you are. But do you know who I am? If you can figure it out, then you'll win the game. I'll even let you skip the other challenges, which is a shame. The pit and the pendulum is always fun, and a sack of vipers is so hard to come by in the Wasteland."

"I..." I couldn't say much else, my voice having caught in my throat. The vision on the monitor had really rattled me. I was afraid. Afraid of losing Violet, of losing my friends... afraid of Spark and her vision for the Wasteland. I was still no closer to figuring out what I was supposed to do with the Element of Magic.

Forcing myself to focus on the task at hand, I trotted forward into the next hall. This... thing, whatever it was, knew who I was. Granted, lots of ponies knew who I was, but only as the Ministry Mare. This thing had called me by name. I started to wonder if maybe Pride had gotten wind of us being in the city... and if this was just one crazy mind-fuck dream she had cooked up.

At least I sincerely hoped that was the case.

I turned down the next hallway, trying to rack my brain and figure out what was going on. The thing had said this was just one big game where we were supposed to win. But how? How was I supposed to figure out who or what this thing was? None of this made any sense whatsoever! I stopped for a moment as a stray thought entered my mind. *Sense. Of course... that's it. None of this makes any sense!* I thought as I came into the next room. In the center of this room was a pedestal where six stones sat. My thoughts drifted back to the Museum, and the faux Elements of Harmony. The six stones in this room however, were made from the same type of glowing tile as the rest of this place. Each one was colored based on its bearer. At its center lay the Element of Magic, glowing a bright lavender.

"The Elements of Harmony... pathetic relics of the past. They've done your race no good," The black and white pony said from the monitor. The center Element went dark as I stepped up to the pedestal. "Without Magic, the rest of the Elements will wither and fade. Without a spark, there is no light to guide their way."

“More riddles?” I said, looking up at the monitor. The black and white pony chuckled.

“Cold, hard fact, my dear. Ponykind put all their faith in the Bearers of Harmony. And look how well that ended up for everypony,” He said. “No... my riddle, and the second challenge is as follows. *The spark goes out, and hope is lost. Ignite the spark, and find the way forward. Three tries are yours to make, fail and thus seal your fate.*” I looked intently at the pedestal. The faux Elements were beginning to fade in color. I focused on the center Element, the one that was dark. I picked it up with my telekinesis, hoping that maneuvering around the rocks would stir some sort of reaction. Nothing happened. I set the rock back down on the others, and walked around the pedestal. *Is there some sort of trick to it?* I thought, trying to process the riddle in my head. *Ignite the spark? But how?* I thought.

The pony in the monitor leered at me I focused hard on the rock once more. I opted for a shield spell this time, wondering if I could force the faux element to spread its magic to the others. A shiny purple shield appeared around the darkened element, but once again nothing happened. I growled, feeling very frustrated with myself as I tried to figure out what to do. I had been so sure the shield spell would do it, but all I really had succeeded in doing is placing a shield around a rock. I dismissed the spell, leaving the darkened element lying on the others.

“One more try,” The pony on the monitor said mockingly. I glared at it.

“I know, I know. Just give me a minute,” I muttered under my breath. I studied the rocks closely. The material they were made of was the same as the flooring. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that each one had a cutie mark engraved upon it. The darkened one held the cutie mark of Twilight Sparkle. I closed my eyes and mulled over the monitor pony’s riddle. If normal telekinesis didn’t work, and a shield spell didn’t either... maybe just any sort of magic could do it? What would happen if I simply charged the rock with a bunch of magic at once? It was worth a shot. I opened my eyes and set to work. My horn glowed and I began to fuel as much magic as possible into the rock. With a spark of light the rock exploded, spreading its light to the other spheres. A shuddering noise met my ears and I looked up. The next hallway had opened up. I grinned at the pony in the monitor.

“Piece of pie,” I said. The black and white pony simply sneered at me, saying nothing. I frowned. *Sore loser*, I thought.

I wondered what the others were being subjected to. I had my suspicions, and I believed I knew who was doing all of this. With nothing else to do in the room, I moved forward into a maze of halls, twisting and turning. Pretty soon, I was sure I was lost. I turned down another hallway, finally coming to a final room. It was the same room as where we had started in. The black and white pony leered at me from every monitor as I stepped in. I knew it was time. Time to move to the endgame.

“So... you find yourself from whence you came. You know what they say, you cannot go back again,” The creature rhymed. “Do you have a guess for me? I do so love guessing games.”

“You know... it took me a little bit to figure it out. I can't believe I didn't see it before,” I said, glaring at the pony on the screen. “What do you want now, *Discord*?” The black and white pony's eyes widened and a toothy grin appeared on its face as the eyes changed colors from red to a pale yellow. The thing expanded out of the monitor, growing a long snake's tail as its body stretched and expanded. In moments, the god of Chaos and Disharmony stood before me.

“Well played, Radiant Star,” The beast snorted. “I had hoped you would figure it out, given our past history.”

“Again, what do you want?” I asked, angrily. “You know my power is no longer here. You must have sensed it. So why are you here?” Discord paused in thought for a long moment. I shuffled my hooves angrily, not willing to aggravate the unpredictable chaos god (ha!) any further.

“A test,” He said finally. “You see, I've been tracking your efforts for some time, so yes I am quite aware of Magic's exodus from your body. I, however, am interested in *you* my dear.”

“Me? Why me? And what test?” I said.

“A test of your resolve, oh fairest of all mutant creatures,” Discord said, chuckling madly. “I had to see

whether or not your heart was still in it. I nearly thought I broke you with separating your friends from you and showing you the vision of your future.”

“But that wasn't real, was it?” I replied. The beast slithered around me, grinning widely. The different textures of his hide on my fur made me shudder.

“Oh, but it was. That was just one possible future that awaits you. You corporeal beings are so blinded by your linear concept of time. Every thinking being, and a few that don't, have the power to change their future. Time is not a river, like you ponies think, but a storm of great chaos.” The god said, springing from my back. Discord landed in front of me in a rain slicker and two different sized rubber boots, a skeletal umbrella clenched in his hand as storm winds whipped a gust of chocolate rain over us. I leaned into the wind, shouting to be heard over it.

“What do you mean, we have all the power?!” I bellowed... into sudden silence. Discord stood unclothed, holding his ears and wincing.

“Why all the yelling, Radiant Star?” He asked plaintively, before tossing me a wink and crossing his arms in front of him. “Like anypony, Radiant Star, you are the captain of your own ship of fate, to horribly abuse a metaphor. The vision I provided of your future is certainly a possibility, if you neglect and mistreat your friends.” Discord lounged back on a throne that was suddenly there, a misshapen construct of wood and concrete. “In short, Radiant Star, you've already passed four tests in my little game. You chose the correct path, you didn't let a possible future stay your course, you solved the little riddle of the Elements, and you deduced *Me*. All in all, I'm quite impressed.”

“If you're so impressed, why don't you get us out of here already?” I said. The beast laughed, laying crosswise on his throne and kicking his legs joyfully over the edge.

“What fun would that be? No... I wanted to see you sweat,” Discord said, grinning widely. “Your friends did just as well, although none of them figured out who I am. They should be arriving in 3... 2... 1...” The god snapped his fingers and in a flash my friends appeared around me. They looked confused as to where they were. Violet glanced up at the spirit and her eyes widened.

“D-D-D-Discord?” She said. I put my hoof on her shoulder.

“It's fine. Take a deep breath. He's not here to hurt us, are you?” I said, smiling. The god chuckled madly, slithering about the room like a snake.

“Indeed, my dear Radiant Star. You and your friends shall be free to go, but I have one final riddle before I leave... one which you will have to ponder well,” Discord said. “*A heavy choice awaits you in due rhyme, one which will affect the very course of time. Choose wisely or the world will burn.*”

“A choice?” I said, reflecting back on my thoughts of Spark. “I... I will think about it. So, that's it then? No epic struggle between us? No fight to the death?”

“No, my dear. The best part about being a god of Chaos is that I don't have to be predictable. It's in the name, even! Take care of yourself, Radiant Star, we shall meet again, in the due course of time,” The spirit of Chaos said. “Now then. Ta, ta!” Discord snapped his fingers, and a flash of light engulfed us. Soon, the world was gone in bright unending light.

I opened my eyes, and the world coalesced around me. I looked up, seeing the sun in the sky. We were standing in front of the Equestrian Sun-Times building in the courtyard. My friends were on all sides of me, staring in confusion. We stayed there, silent for a few moments.

“What just happened?” Lust said finally, breaking the silence.

“Discord,” I said flatly. “Spirit of Chaos and Disharmony.”

“Really, now?” Danish said. “I thought that was just old hullabaloo in them old pre-war books. You know,

scary stories to scare tha' foals into behavin'."

"No... he's real alright. And he just keeps getting weirder and weirder," I said as I began to look over my friends. "Now then, is everypony alright? All body parts in place? I wouldn't expect Discord to leave us untouched." The others began to check each other out, but nothing seemed to be amiss. Why had Discord appeared to us like this? What was his angle? Did he still want my power? Thoughts of my previous encounter with the spirit of Disharmony swam freshly in my mind.

"According to my map, we're just a few blocks away from the center of the city and Filly's Tower," Violet said from beside me. "If we hoof it, it shouldn't take us more than a half hour." I nodded.

"Alright then, let's get going," I said. We began to trudge along towards the looming black tower. While we walked, I explained to Nixis, Danish, and Lust about our first meeting with Discord. As we drew closer to the center of the city, a tight feeling crept up into my chest. Soon, I would be confronting Pride. Not just Pride... but Spark as well. I still wasn't sure what my decision was going to be, but I knew I was going to have to make it soon. I pondered Discord's riddle. The world would burn based on my choice?

We walked in silence as we finally stepped into a massive clearing. All around the blackened tower, the buildings in its immediate vicinity had been reduced to mere rubble. The ground was charred and the air was thick with the smell of burning. The tower held itself over the entire area, a monolith of pure blackness that seemed to dominate everything. I looked up at it, wondering what was going to happen next.

Filly's Tower. Pride. Spark. A choice that would affect the entire world. Everything was falling into place, and I was ready. I would not let my faith in myself, or my faith in my friends falter again. Discord was right about one thing... I had not let myself fall apart in his presence. I couldn't afford to fall apart again. I wouldn't. I would be strong, and sure and true. Supported and surrounded by my friends, I would march right into the gates of Tartarus to stop Spark for good, if that's what was needed.

No pressure, right?

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Level Up!

Perk: Faithful Filly: Your faith in your friends will carry you through any situation. While in the company of your friends, you gain +10% DR.

New Spell! Teleport (Rank 5): Your teleportation skills are now Princess Luna legendary! You can now massively teleport up to six other targets long distances. Your targeting however, still needs some work.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 19: Baker's Dozen

The square root of five hundred and forty-six is twenty-three point three six six six four two eight nine one zero nine.

Power. Despite what many ponies will tell you, true and absolute power corrupts everything. There is no escaping the lure of power. Power is addictive, desirable, and destructive. I had power... once. The ultimate power of the Element of Magic resided in my mind. If truth be told, I had almost given in to Spark's lies. I almost let her win, and that would have destroyed myself and Violet.

Looking back, I realize that Twilight herself struggled with the lure of power. She failed, and in the end gave in. Spark had controlled her life with the lurid promise of Shining Armor's revival. In short, Spark won and survived to this day using her forbidden magic.

Looking ahead, I face the ultimate confrontation with Spark and Pride. Will I be able to resist the temptation of the power they offer?

Filly's Tower.

It loomed over us like a monolith, taunting us. Mocking us openly as we stared at it. I scanned the surrounding area, looking for a path towards the building. Blackened and burned debris littered every inch of the streets. Every building nearby was flattened as if they had been struck by a force of epic proportions. It was like that everywhere I looked. It was strange. This entire area felt... dead. It felt like there was nothing here. No life lived here, not even the radroaches and vermin that infested the rest of the Wasteland. The desolation was complete, the silence eerie.

I took a step forward, walking into the ruined area. I narrowed my eyes as I gazed upon the tower, wondering briefly what we would find there. A grating noise erupted from the area around us, causing me to stop cold in my tracks. There was something... something there that I was missing. This was too easy. There was no way we would be able to just waltz right into the tower like this.

"Star?" Violet said, looking up at the blackened building. "What's wrong?"

"Something's... something's not right," I said. "Don't you guys feel it?"

"I don't feel anything," Lust said. I nodded.

"Exactly! There's nothing here. This entire area feels lifeless. It's... wrong," I said, the panic I felt making my voice jump and quiver.

"Star, it'll be fine. There's nothing to be afraid of, we just need to keep going," Violet said, placing a hoof on my shoulder. She smiled, looking up at me with concern in her eyes. "Once we're inside the tower, we can --" A loud whining noise interrupted her. I looked up at the Tower. The cloud cover surrounding the top of the monolithic building was glowing and crackling with energy.

"Then what is that?" I said, pointing up. A shaft of blue light shot forth from the cloud, striking the ground before us. My eyes widened. "Run!" I shouted. We turned away from the shaft just as a pulse of energy slid down the beam. It exploded when it landed, the intense blast knocking us to the ground. The shaft of light disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, the whining noise dying down. I groaned as I pushed myself up, feeling rock and other rubble embedded in my hind quarters. My friends were in a similar predicament. Another whining noise erupted from the Tower above, another shaft of light centering directly on us.

"Fuck!" I heard Lust shout. I barely had enough time to think as I flared my horn, wrapping myself and my friends in an aura of magic. There was no time for teleportation, so I sent a silent prayer to Luna as I gripped

my friends as hard as I could and *shoved*. Moments later a second pulse of energy floated down the shaft of light, blasting another crater out of the ground beneath it. I kept pushing on my friends until we were back on solid ground. I stood shakily as I looked down, hoping that we were beyond the borders of the Tower area. Unfortunately, we weren't. The whining noise started up again, and another shaft of light appeared a short distance away from us.

"Everypony up and at it!" I yelled. "Head for the perimeter!" We scrambled to our hooves as another pulse of energy struck, shaking the ground beneath our feet and blasting rubble into the air. I glanced back quickly as the shaft of light receded. The concrete below where it had struck had been destroyed, leaving a dished crater and a cloud of fine dust. I realized that none of us really wanted to get hit by one of these things. I kept rolling around what it could be in the back of my mind. I had never seen a weapon like this before in my entire life. My eyes widened as we ran, another shaft of light appearing in front of us. *Not only is it targeting us, but it is following our movements and predicting where we're going to go*, I thought, shouting out at my friends to make a hard left. We turned, nearly skimming past another shaft that popped up to our side. Luckily, we made it past it before the energy struck ground.

"Where did we come in?!" Violet shouted. I glanced ahead, seeing normal buildings in an almost sort of... ring around the Tower itself. I pointed as another shaft of light came down on our tails. The energy pulse came much quicker this time and we barely were able to keep going before it hit the ground. I snarled and flared my wings out. I'd had enough of this thing, and hoped to maybe buy my friends some time to get out to the perimeter. It was the only way I could think of that they could get to safety.

"You guys go! I'm going to draw it's fire!" I called out. Violet looked at me with fear in her eyes.

"What?! No, you can't Star!" She yelled back. I grinned, giving my love a wink.

"Don't worry! I'll be alright! You guys just get your rears in gear!" I replied, giving my wings another flare. Violet sighed for a moment and turned back to gallop after the others. I could have sworn I saw a tear forming in her eyes when she did. I spun about, bringing out Stargazer. "Alright, you've got me here! Show yourself!" The whining noise started up again, bringing down another shaft of light, this time immediately upon me. *Shit!* I thought as I tried to move.

I didn't have enough time. In my haste, I did the only most logical thing I could think of. I lifted Stargazer above my head, hoping that at the very least the pulse would strike it first and give me enough time to move away. I didn't want to do it, I loved my gun very much, but if I had to choose... I had to choose my friends. *If this doesn't work, I'm sorry Violet...* I thought. *I wish I had been just a little smarter.*

The energy pulse came down in a flash, striking the minigun in its bluish embrace. Then something... unexpected happened. I had started to move to avoid being made into paste on the ground before I realized that the energy pulse had actually *stopped* at hitting Stargazer entirely. The gun floated there in midair and did absolutely nothing. I blinked. *What...?* I thought as I moved beyond the range of the shaft of light to get a better look. Stargazer's casing wasn't even bent by the force of the pulse! I prayed thankfully to Luna that her weapon of choice had been made so strongly, but it raised new questions as to the weapon's construction. How was it capable of surviving something so powerful in the first place? I shook my head, clearing my thoughts as I realized this exactly wasn't the time or place to be pondering Stargazer's secrets.

The energy pulse finally dissipated, leaving Stargazer floating there, untouched. I grabbed the gun with my magic and began to run as the whining noise waned, the shaft of light receding. I flapped my wings hard, bringing myself into a flying gallop as I weaved in and out of the new shafts of light that had begun to appear. I only hoped that my friends had made it to safety. A flash caught my attention. Violet was waving her metal hoof at me from just outside the perimeter. I grimaced as I flapped my wings hard, finally coming to rest amidst her and the rest of my friends.

"Star! You're alright!" She exclaimed as she trotted up to me, burying me in a mound of green mare-y goodness. I leaned into her embrace, but all the while I kept my eye back on the Tower.

"I'm... I'm fine," I said quietly. "You didn't have to worry."

"I know, but I still worried anyways," She replied, looking up at me and then back at the Tower area. "So what do we do now?"

"I don't know... Dammit!" I shouted as I looked around. All of the shafts of light had retreated, and the grating noise trailed off into silence.

"What the fuck was that?" Lust said. "Somepony attacking us?" I shook my head, panting hard.

"I thought you would know, haven't you been here before?" I asked. Lust pondered my question for a moment, and shook her head.

"No, now that I think about it. At least, never above ground," She replied. "But that doesn't answer my question - what was that?"

"I think... I think that it's the megaspell," I said.

"Megaspell?" Lust said. "I may never have been to the tower above ground, but I've lived here all my life and I've never heard of a megaspell in Filly's Tower."

"This city died because of a defense megaspell located in the Tower," I said, looking up from our hiding spot up at the Tower. The clouds shrouding the top of the tower glowed with arcane power, almost as if they were waiting for us try and chance another run at the dark building. It mocked us once more, and I growled.

"Fuck!" I shouted. "We're so close too!"

"Star, come on. We'll find another way in," Violet said. "Just calm down."

"Calm down?! Calm down?! Fuck, Violet! She's there, right there!" I shouted at her, not lowering my voice in the slightest. "I can feel her. She's mocking us. Sitting in her safe spot, she's laughing." My marefriend sighed and grabbed onto my, pulling me close into her embrace. I broke down in front of her and the others, falling into her as I started to sob. A quiet cough interrupted us. I looked up at Danish, who stood sheepishly in front of us.

"There... there may be a way in from the underground," He said. "I can't make no guarantees, but it's decent odds that my boss might know a way in." I blinked.

"Why would your boss know how to get into Filly's Tower," I asked. "What are you not telling me, Danish?" The cream-colored unicorn sighed.

"Alright, look," He started to say. "You're probably going to be angry with me about it, but..."

"But what, Danish?" I said, frustrated tears springing into my eyes. "What is it?"

"My boss. His name is Gluttony. And he knows how to get into Stable 180," Danish muttered. I blinked again, before launching myself at the stallion.

"You son of a bitch!" I shouted, grabbing ahold of him. "All this time, you had a lead into the Tower?!"

Danish struggled against me, and I growled, staring into Danish's terrified eyes. I didn't get far, however, before a green shimmer surrounded me and separated me from the unicorn. I looked up, seeing Violet's horn flaring.

"Look, I'm sorry alright?!" Danish shouted back as he regained his breath. "I wanted to tell you, but the boss... he told me not to. He wanted to see how you'd handle Wrath first. Truth be told, I think he kind of likes you. Why else do you think the MMMM is backing the Ministry Mare?" I glared at him.

"Violet, let me go so I can murder this deceiving bastard," I said coldly. "He's been playing us right from the start." Violet shook her head.

"No. Not until you can calm down and think rationally," She said.

"Oh, I'm quite calm. And I've rationally decided to rip Danish's head off and pour the lies out," I said. Danish snorted.

"Star, cut it out, would ya?" He said. "I like you. I really do. Why else do you think I'm telling you this shit now? You want to get into Filly's Tower? Stable 180? I can help you with that." I glanced away from the

stallion, seething with rage. "I don't like this anymore than you do. If I had a fucking choice about all of this, I would have told you the first time I met you. But I don't."

"Wait... your boss is Gluttony?" Lust interjected. I thanked Luna for the pegasi's interruption. I was mad, madder than I'd ever been. Somepony I had considered a friend had lied to me, and I kept trying to work out in my mind why. Danish nodded.

"What do you know about him?" I heard Violet ask. Lust shrugged.

"Back in the day? He used to be a big time gangster buck. On occasion he and I would take a 'roll in the hay', if you get my drift," she replied. "After Pride though... he disappeared. I wish I knew more, but I just can't remember anything else. It's like there's something there, blocking my mind out."

"That's fine, Lust. Thank you," Violet said. Danish snorted.

"I sure as hay don't remember you," He said, glaring at Lust. "Before the boss became the boss, he was just a regular MMMM enforcer."

"You probably wouldn't remember me," Lust said wistfully. "After all, I was... different back then." Danish nodded in response.

"What do you get out of helping us?" I said quietly, interrupting the two.

"I get my boss back," Danish said, looking back at me. "I meant what I told you before. Things aren't good in the MMMM. Several of the groups are even talking about overthrowing Gluttony. He's not a bad pony. He just... needs a little help, is all." I looked away again, thinking about what the unicorn had said. I felt like I had been betrayed, but I couldn't blame the stallion, not really. Danish's boss wasn't just his employer, he was his friend. The threat to the MMMM as a whole and to him was definitely enough to keep him from revealing his true boss. I sighed, looking back at Danish.

"Fine. Violet, you can let me go now," I said calmly. Violet nodded and released her magical hold on me.

"Danish. I'm still not happy with you. But... but I understand. You're trying to protect a friend, am I right?" The stallion nodded.

"Gluttony never used to be the big boss. At one time, we were best friends. I just want to help him," He said, his eyes pleading with me. I sighed.

"Then we'll help," I said. "We'll meet with this Gluttony, and see what we can do to help the MMMM. After all, I really do owe you one for saving our lives at Colter Field." Danish chuckled.

"Nah, you don't owe me for that. I'm only asking you to help me... because I really do consider you a friend," He said. "And not just a friend of the MMMM, but... my friend." I groaned audibly before grabbing the stallion into a fierce hug.

"Do anything like that ever again, and I really will rip your head off," I said, smiling. Danish laughed.

"Deal," He said, pulling away. "Alright then, everypony. Follow me. We'll be there faster than Celestia can eat out a full grown filly."

"I like him," Lust said, winking at me. I shuddered at the thought of one of the Goddesses doing... *that*. I shook the thought away and stood. I looked back at Filly's Tower, looming over us. *I'll be back*, I swore silently. *I'll be back before you know it, Spark. And when I find you. We'll end this silly game between us.*

"Star? You coming?" Violet called to me. I looked back at her and smiled.

"Yeah, I'm coming," I said, trotting along after her. Spark and Pride would have to wait once more it seemed. *Just another thing getting in my way*, I thought. I just hoped and prayed that Pride wasn't stupid enough to unleash Spark upon the Wasteland. And even further... I wondered if Lucky was there too. I found myself missing the green mare terribly, even though she was just a figment of spectral pony-ness. I mulled things over in my mind while we walked, staying deathly quiet. The rest of the group was chatting idly as Danish led us from street to street. We began to move farther away from the Tower, as I could feel the utter lifelessness that the place exuded lift off my shoulders like it was some form of burden.

We walked along the streets of the ruined city for what felt like hours. Danish led us down alleyways that he had indicated were marked safe by the MMMM. I wasn't exactly paying attention to how he knew, and quite frankly I didn't care. My mind was still stuck on what I was going to do about Spark. I knew that somewhere beneath her harsh exterior, there had to still be something good. But how was I going to pull it out? Was that really what I wanted to do? Spark had caused so many problems for me and my friends, from attempted bodily takeover to almost murdering my love. I seethed with hatred of the spirit of Magic. It had tried to turn me into that which I feared the most... another Goddess. That wasn't what I wanted. I just wanted to be... well... me again. A tap at my shoulder brought me out of my stupor. I looked down and Danish was standing there. He had a sharp grin on his face.

"We're here," He said as he pointed up the street we were now occupying. Situated just several feet away was what looked like an old abandoned factory. A symbol of a donut emblazoned the door leading into the factory's shipping dock. "Follow me, and keep quiet. Let me do the talking and you'll be alright."

"Expecting trouble?" I asked casually. The cream-colored unicorn snorted.

"Don't think so," He replied. "Boys know better than to fuck with me." I nodded as Danish stepped up to the door and knocked in a rhythmic tone. The door opened slightly, revealing a dirty brown earth pony stallion standing behind it.

"Password?" The guard said. Danish grinned.

"Con Mane," The unicorn answered. The guard simply nodded and pushed the door open. Danish stepped in past the guard, waving for us to follow. "Good to see you, Boysen."

"You too, Danish," The guard said. He looked up at me and his eyes widened. "Umm... does... does the boss know you're comin'?" Danish chuckled.

"I'm on my way to see him now," He replied. "He in his usual spot?" The guard, Boysen, nodded. "Righty-o then. Take it easy there, Boysen. Don't work too hard, aight?"

"S-S-Sure thing, boss man," Boysen said, still trembling with fear as we trotted up behind Danish and into the halls of the factory. I stepped up next to the unicorn and spoke quietly.

"What's up with him?" I asked.

"Oh, you know. You're the Ministry Mare. Not every day you get to see a radio celebrity," Danish said, chuckling. "Boysen's a good buck, though. Not too bright, good for guard work at least." We continued along as we made it into the factory proper. I looked around in wonder at the operation that the MMMM had here, which I assumed was the gang's central headquarters. Ponies of all shapes, colors, and races fluttered to and fro, attending to the factory's various pieces of machinery. Everything from donuts to cupcakes and even more specialty desserts such as apple strudels and chocolate moose mousse was being made here. I couldn't help but be amazed at the amount of sweets and confections the MMMM was putting out. I also couldn't help but notice the stares. Everypony continued working, but I could see that while they did they were staring at us as we walked through the factory. *Am I really that famous?* I thought as Danish led us to a section of the factory that was the office department. At the far end of the cubicle farm were two guards in front of a large door.

"Oy! Danish!" One of the guards, a pale blue unicorn stallion with a frizzy dark blue mane, shouted. His horn glowed, tossing a knife through the air at the cream colored stallion. I almost moved to break into a combat stance and grab the knife before I saw Danish's familiar colored magic take the knife.

"Blueberry," Danish said calmly, sending the knife to the ground in front of the other unicorn. "I need to see the boss."

"Bullshit, you do," The blue unicorn said. "He's busy."

"No, I really need to see him. It's important," Danish said angrily. He motioned at me with his hoof. The other unicorn sneered at me and looked back at Danish.

"Oh, *that*. Fuck, Danish, you got a death wish or something? You know the boss ain't gonna be happy 'bout

you bringin' her here," Blueberry said. Danish snorted.

"Don't care. She needs to be here. Now you gonna let me through, or are we gonna have words?" The cream-colored stallion said, stomping a forehoof to the ground.

"Ugh. Fine. You can go in, but just you and her. The others stay out here. Got it?" Blueberry said. Danish nodded. "Good. I don't wanna hear you cryin' to me when you get sucker-punched like a little bitch in there, Danish. You had better have a damn good reason for this."

"Trust me, I do. I do," Danish said, looking up at me. "You ready for this?" I nodded.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said. I looked over at Violet and the others. "I'll be fine. You guys just hang out here, and we'll be right back." I trotted behind Danish as he passed by Blueberry and opened the door for me. The blue unicorn continued to sneer at me as I stepped inside the office. Except this wasn't exactly an office... it was like one huge part of the bakery. Kitchen ovens lined the walls like some sort of strange art display. In the center of the room was the largest mass of... flesh I had ever seen in my life. It was surrounded by food of all shapes and sizes. It was vaguely earth pony-shaped, and it took up nearly half the room. Veins popped out from all over the creature as it turned to a rather large banana cream pie and began devouring it without even batting an eye. It turned about and regarded me for a moment. Its eyes were black as night. I couldn't even begin to understand or read them. It turned back to its banquet and spoke, its voice sounding like metal grating upon metal. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped.

"So you finally came," It said. "It's about fucking time."

"Well, don't just stand there with your jaw hanging out like an open door, you gonna say something?" The gargantuan beast muttered. I slowly closed my mouth and looked away for a brief moment. "Hey!" The creature shouted, drawing my attention back to it. "Don't look away when I'm talkin' to you! You're the Ministry Mare, aintcha?"

"Y-Y-Yes," I said shakily. *This is Gluttony? Shit...* I thought as I looked up and down the MMMM boss pony. *Danish wasn't kidding when he said he was huge.* Gluttony rumbled with laughter, his fleshy sides shaking and quivering as he did.

"Good, good. I've been expecting you for some time, Ministry Mare," The giant earth pony said, before looking down at the cream-colored stallion next to me. "Danish. I assume that this mare has some friends with her?" My friend nodded. "Excellent. Put em up would ya? We don't wanna be ungracious hosts. And leave us be for a while. I've got business to discuss."

"Sure thing, boss," Danish replied. He looked over at me and winked. "I'll be waitin' for ya when you get done talkin'." He turned and strutted out the door past Blueberry Pie, who merely looked on in confusion as the door closed again. I let my gaze drift up to Gluttony, who was now staring at me with his giant, soulless black eyes.

"So... you've been expecting me?" I said, trying to sound at least somewhat confident in my ability to speak to this thing.

"Indeed I have. As I understand it... you've been tearing this city a brand new plothole," The grating voice of the beast echoed throughout the kitchen. I chuckled nervously at this.

"I wouldn't say that," I said. Gluttony rumbled again with laughter.

"Please. You've taken on the Cult, the Triad, and you even put that old cow, the Bullfather out of commission," He said. "But the gangs aren't really why you're here, am I right?" I nodded. "Thought so. You're here for Pride."

"You know a way to get into Stable 180?" I asked.

"Of course, I do. I was fucking born there!" Gluttony erupted. "That is, I was an original inhabitant of the

Stable, before I became as you see me today.”

“And why would you wish to help me?” I said. “After all, Wrath wanted to help me too by killing me.”

“Wrath. That fucking cow is so stuck in his Iron Will bullshit he doesn't see what's really going on around him,” Gluttony said. “Pride is poised to fuck this city in its proverbial asshole, and to be perfectly fucking honest with you... I like it here. I'm comfortable. And I don't want that comfort to go bye bye.”

“I... I see,” I said. “So you want Pride out of the picture so you can be comfortable?”

“Fucking right you are!” Gluttony laughed. “I'm not much for this shit anymore to be honest, Ministry Mare. Even running the MMMM is a lot of work, juggling the goddess loving companies. I'm tired, Radiant Star. I want to retire. But if Pride gets her way, I won't be able to do that, now will I?”

“No... you certainly won't,” I said. “So then, how do I gain access to the Stable?” Gluttony chuckled loudly before pointing with a giant fleshy hoof at a cabinet on the left side of the room.

“In there you'll find a map of the sewer complex of Chicacolt, along with a memory orb. You need to watch that shit. It will put a lot in perspective for you about Pride, and what you should expect when you finally find the bitch,” He said.

I trotted over to the cabinet and opened it up. Sure enough, there was a detailed map of the entire sewer system in the city, the Stable clearly marked. Next to it was a swirling grey and black memory orb. I swept it up into my bags and looked back at the gargantuan beast.

“Thank you,” I said. “I will make sure Pride is stopped. You can count on that.” I started trotting back towards the door, stopping for just a moment to look back at Gluttony. “You know... you're not what I expected.”

“Oh, and what did you expect?” Gluttony replied, chuckling.

“To be truthful, I sort of expected you to try and kill me,” I said. “Seems like every one of your little group has tried that at least once. Even Lust, despite the fact that even she is starting to turn herself around.”

“Not my style, sweetheart. Besides... I think if I had to fight you, you'd probably win. I mean, fuck... you beat Wrath,” He said. I grinned. “And as far as Lust is concerned, I always knew that mare had it in her to be better.”

“She told me that she knew you,” I said. Gluttony nodded, his large form shaking in the cold lighting.

“A long time ago... when I didn't look quite like this...” He said, sadness twinging the edges of his voice.

“But that's neither here nor there now. She's got her own destiny, as do I.”

“I suppose I should tell you, Pride is in a position to absorb a power that will allow her to realize her dreams,” I said.

“I've suspected as much since I had Danish break you out of Colter Field. She came to visit me, said that something big had happened,” Gluttony said. My eyes widened.

“Did she say anything about Spark?” I blurted out. Gluttony looked at me curiously.

“I apologize, but no name like that came up in our conversation. She seemed... excited though,” He said. I sighed.

“I need to get to Stable 180 then as quickly as possible,” I said with a determined grimace. Gluttony chuckled.

“Then Luna be with you, Ministry Mare,” He said. “If you do manage to kill my dearest sister, bring me her head. It shall be a pleasure to... *devour* it.” He grinned, his teeth gleaming in the light. I shuddered and turned about. The gigantic... thing went back to gorging himself on sweets and pie. I sighed. I could see why Danish wanted me to help so badly. He was watching somepony who was his best friend slowly become a horridly obese creature who simply didn't care about anypony else around him. I pushed open the door, seeing Danish waiting for me. He smiled.

"So, what do you think of the boss?" He said as I fell into line next to him. We trotted along down the hallway, which was now empty of any other guards.

"I'm... I'm not sure to be honest," I replied. "He gave me the information on how to get to Pride... but there was no trade-off." Danish nodded.

"That's because I'm the one making the deals," He said. "I'm calling together a meeting of the companies of the gang. You're gonna help me fix things for the boss." I snorted.

"You want me to mediate a truce? Me? What am I going to say that will sway the companies to cooperate?" I said.

"Don't worry. Hopefully you won't have to say a thing. You just need to be there. All of the MMMM, Gluttony included, think you're one amazing mare, sugar," Danish said. "All the things they've heard on the radio... you taking down the Cowpones, the Triad, Wrath. If they aren't impressed by you, they're afraid of you." He continued, grinning like his boss. "But the MMMM is fractured right now. Gluttony's in there eating himself to death, and the rest of the boys are wondering where this is all goin'. They're scared, and rightly so."

"And you don't think Gluttony is going to do anything about it?" I replied. Danish shook his head feverishly.

"No. The boss doesn't have the focus on the gang he once did. But we have to try to unite anyways. If we can, we can show him just how in control we can be," The stallion said as we exited the long hall. We were in what appeared to be an apartment complex now. A few short feet away was a door that stood halfway open. I could hear our other friends' voices drifting out from it. "Now, you all should get some rest. I'm setting up the meeting for tomorrow." I nodded and pushed the door open. Violet looked up at me as I stepped inside. The others were sitting quietly, talking amongst themselves.

"Danish said that there was some complicated business happening here, Star. How did your meeting with Gluttony go?" She asked.

"He's... interesting. He gave us this map to get into Stable 180 through the sewer system," I said, pulling out the map and handing it to Violet with my magic. She took it and quickly scanned it before handing off the scraps of paper to Nixis. The hellhound grinned as he handled the ancient map, using his intelligence to quickly determine where we had to enter the sewers from. "There's... something else. Danish has asked for me to attend a meeting of the MMMM companies. He wants to unite the gang again, stop the in-fighting."

"What's stopping us from just leaving that fucker here and going to the Stable?" Lust interjected. I glared at her.

"Because like it or not, I owe Danish for saving our asses at Colter Field. And having met Gluttony... I can understand why he wants to help so badly," I said. Lust's eyes narrowed at me.

"So, the old bastard really is still alive? I'm gonna have to stop in some time and say *hello*." Lust purred. I shuddered.

"I don't think you'd be that interested in him now, Lust," I said. "He's about five times your size now... at least." Lust looked to be deep in thought for a brief moment, before finally shuddering herself. I chuckled. "Anyways, I think it's high time we got some rest. We've got a big day tomorrow."

"I thought Danish said that he only wanted you there?" Patch said.

"I think if things are as volatile as Danish is making them out to be, then we had better be prepared for the worst, and that means bringing all the security we have," I said, taking my bags off and setting them next to our bedroll. I laid down, feeling very morose. I had been so close to the Tower, and yet now it felt so far away. My mind whirled with thoughts of Pride, of Spark, and of Gluttony. I felt bad for the poor... thing. He was a victim of power. A victim of the insanity that was Pride. I wondered what would happen afterwards, for all of us. Violet and I would probably go back to the Followers, but what about Steeljack and Patch?

What about Nixis, Lust, and Gluttony? What would these ponies, no, these people do without Pride meddling in their lives? I sighed and buried my head into Violet's neck, trying like hell to get some form of sleep. My eyes closed finally as I allowed my mind to drift into dreams.

I groaned. The endless hallway stretched out before me in both directions, just like it had for so many months. *Why can't I have normal dreams for once?* I thought. I sat in front of a pair of white double doors with a green and red flame above it. The fire went out with a ***fwoosh*** and the doors swung wide open with a ***creak***. I stepped through the doorway, leading into a long grey metal hall. I trotted along, wondering where I was going to end up. The hallway finally opened up into a large cylindrical room I had seen before. It was the room where I had left the Book. The room with those freaky little statues in the Museum. In the center of the lab stood a purple unicorn with... two heads? The unicorn turned about and grinned widely with its two heads as it took notice of me.

"She's here," The left head said. The other one nodded.

"Yes, she is..." The right one replied. The two heads smiled again and began speaking in unison.

"Welcome, Radiant Star," They said. "We are Avarice."

"Avarice? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I said, stepping up before the pony-shaped thing.

"Avarice is the pursuit of all things. Power, fame, fortune. We are the center of Twilight's emotions associated with greed," The thing said.

"Greed. What was Twilight greedy for?" I said. The two-headed unicorn laughed heartily.

"Twilight was greedy for many things... her greed for power consumed her, as did the love of her brother," It said. "It was this greed that allowed Nightmare to corrupt us so." I pondered the thing's words. How far had Twilight been willing to pursue this to save Shining Armor?

"Nightmare. She was around during the war. How was it that Twilight didn't recognize her?" I asked the thing.

"Twilight was too consumed... too ingrained in the promises of Spark to even care," It replied. "But we are not here to hear your questions about Twilight. We have questions for you."

"For... for me?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"We wish to know what you are going to do to Magic," The amalgamated being said. "You have a choice to make, after all." I narrowed my gaze at the thing.

"I'm aware," I said. "I... I haven't decided yet. Furthermore, I still haven't decided what I'm going to do afterwards."

"That choice remains unspoken... for now. You must decide what you will do with the Element of Magic. We remind you that much hangs in the balance," The thing said. "Without Magic, the spark that drives the Elements of Harmony will not exist... and this puts the world in far greater peril than ever."

"I know, I know!" I shouted at the creature. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet, alright? It's all I've been thinking about."

"We urge you to think harder," The thing said. "Your decision will affect more than you know." I sighed and looked down at my hooves. What was I going to do about Spark? Discord had let on that I would be making a choice that would affect the world. Did that have to do with the corrupted Element of Magic? Or was he talking about something else. I couldn't figure it out. I looked back up at Avarice. I had more questions that needed to be answered.

"While I was out of my body, I was visited by Twilight. I need to know... where is she? How did she contact me?" I said.

"Twilight is not here right now," The thing said. "We are not at liberty to tell you any more."

"Why not?" I said angrily.

"Because you are not ready," The two-headed unicorn replied coldly. I growled.

“What do you mean? I'm ready for... whatever it is I'm supposed to be ready for!” I shouted. The two heads chuckled.

“If you don't even know what it is, how can you be ready?” They said. I groaned in reply. I hated mind games like this. The twin heads of Avarice grinned widely.

“Fine,” I said, gritting my teeth. “Then I've got a message for Twilight I want you to pass on: After I take care of Spark... we're done. I want my old life back. I don't want to be her. I want to be me.” Avarice's heads glared at me. They clearly did not like my answer.

“We're not a messenger service, Radiant Star. Make your choice. Only then will you be ready to face the end,” They said as things began to fade to black.

I awoke, much as I always did, to darkness. As my eyes refocused on the room, I shivered. A draft had begun blowing through our living quarters in the night. I felt instant warmth as Violet snuggled closely next to me, murmuring in her sleep. I quickly realized that I had woken up when everypony else was still asleep. Everypony... except for one. My eyes widened when I counted the others in the room. Lust was... gone. I carefully extricated myself from Violet's embrace, leaving her grasping at the blankets in a sleepy attempt to recapture my warmth. She looked so adorable, I almost couldn't pull myself away, but I had to. I had to know where Lust had gone off to. I made my way through the dark room, peering out into the hallway. *No sign of her there*, I thought. I was about to turn away when I heard a voice.

“Star?” The soft feminine voice reached my ears. I perked up instantly, craning my neck around to see where it had come from. Standing outside the window of our quarters on the fire escape was the pony I had been looking for. She also appeared to be the reason the draft was now making everypony shiver. I sighed as I stepped out onto the cramped fire escape and sat down next to her, sliding the window closed behind me.

“Everything alright?” I said. Lust shook her head.

“I just... I'm frightened,” She said quietly. I couldn't believe my ears.

“You're shitting me,” I said incredulously. “The great and powerful Lust, afraid?”

“Har, har. Laugh it up,” She said, sticking her tongue out at me. “I'm serious. I can *feel* her Star. Pride. She's just waiting for the right time to strike. To turn me back into what I was before.”

“I thought you had broken free of her?” I asked. Lust shrugged.

“I don't know that I will ever be able to fully break free of her until she's dead,” She said. I looked out upon the city of Chicacolt. The MMMM's base wasn't terribly high, but even three stories was enough that I could see a large part of the city. Campfires and the odd streetlight glowed against the velvety dark, Chicacolt in all its faded, musty glory.

I don't think I had ever considered Lust a true enemy. Even when she was trying to kill us, she had been playful. She'd enjoyed the fight, enjoyed the teasing. This wasn't that mare. Lust was nervous and unhappy, and now I considered her a true friend.

“Lust. Trust me when I say... you can do it. You just need to be stronger,” I said. Lust groaned.

“You think I don't know that? You think I liked what I was before leaving her?” She said. “I was an assassin. Pride's sword. Sure, I had fun with the job, Star, but I was a *weapon*. Some of the things I did... I don't know that I can ever be stronger than that.”

“But you can. All you have to do is trust in me. Trust in your friends. You do know that we are your friends, right?” I said, trying my best to console the poor mare. She nodded.

“I... I know. Even... Even Patch, despite the fact that she doesn't like me very much,” The black mare said. I chuckled.

“Patch does like you... you two actually have a lot more in common than you think. You're both intelligent, strong mares. I don't doubt for a second that she wouldn't have your back in a pinch,” I said. Lust nodded, clearly mulling over what I was trying to say. She nodded finally and smiled.

“I suppose you're right. I guess I would too...” She said, grinning. “However, we've got one problem.”

“Problem?” I cocked my head.

“Yeah. If we're gonna be facing Pride, we're gonna need some extra guns. I'm going to need new power armor,” She said. “I've been able to survive so far on my wits, but that's not going to help me in a real firefight. I need firepower, and I need it bad, sister.” I chuckled.

“How do we handle that?” I said, feeling very confused. I wasn't even remotely sure how one acquired pegasus power armor like I had seen Lust previously wearing.

“You don't have to worry about anything. I just need to have a little chat with Gluttony, and possibly Patch. Gluttony has one of my old suits stashed away, just in case he ever got to rip another one off of me,” Lust said, pausing to draw a happy sigh. “Good times. Anyway, Patch should be able to help me upgrade my arsenal, once I get some armor together.” I nodded, and then shivered once more.

“That's great... but I'm a little cold. Can we go back inside?” I chattered. Lust grinned.

“Oh, what's the matter? Don't wanna stay out here and let me *warm* you up?” She cooed. I shuddered.

“Once again Lust, marefriend. Have one. Sorry,” I said. Lust chuckled.

“Still got it though,” She said, rubbing a hoof on her chest and blowing on it. She started to head back into the room, before stopping once more and looking up at me. “Star?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks again,” She said, disappearing back into the room. I grinned. No matter what hold Pride had on her, she would not have it any longer. I would personally see to it that the black mare would get to live her own life. I looked back up at the sky. Luna's moon held high in the air, fuller than I had ever seen it. I gave up a short prayer to the Lunar Princess, and stepped back into the room myself, closing the window behind me as I did. Violet was still curled up in our bedroll, looking as adorable as ever. Lust smiled as she stepped out into the hallway. Knowing where she was headed, I paid no mind as I laid back down next to Violet and curled around her.

At some point I must have fallen asleep, because I distinctly remembered being awoken to a cold metal hoof poking me in the side. I groaned and rolled over.

“You know that thing kind of hurts,” I said, opening my eyes to see Violet standing there. She had a concerned look on her face. “What? What's wrong?”

“Lust,” She said quietly. “She's gone.” I laid my head back, a chuckle escaping my lips as I looked back at Violet, who cocked her head with a confused expression. “What? What's so funny?”

“It's fine. She went to go see Gluttony,” I said. “She'll be back soon, trust me.” Violet looked at me funny.

“What? I woke up in the middle of the night and she was out on the fire escape. We had a bit of a chat, and she's going to go procure some new power armor for herself.”

“I... I see,” Violet replied. I snickered as I sat up on my haunches.

“You're cute when you're asleep, by the way,” I said. Violet's cheeks went red immediately. I grinned, reaching forward and stealing a soft kiss on her cheek. I looked around the room, checking on the others. Patch and Steeljack were still sleeping somewhat soundly in the far corner, while Nixis was sitting in the other corner. He was back to poking away at the map we had received from Gluttony. I stood and trotted over to him. He appeared to be stuck deeply in thought as I came up behind him.

“Find anything?” I said, startling him. He let out a snarl and I gave a sheepish grin. “Oh, sorry about that.”

“It's alright. I haven't been sleeping too well, I guess,” The hellhound replied. “The map seems rather straightforward. This particular entrance to the sewers is going to take us down through what appears to be a

Ministry Hub.”

“A Ministry Hub?” I said. “Does it say which one?” The hellhound shrugged.

“I’m not too familiar with the area, but it looks to be a Ministry of Peace Hospital Hub,” He said. I nodded. At least it would be a nice change of pace from the insanity of the other Ministry Hubs I’d been in before. Having nothing better to do, I opted to sit down next to Nixis and look over the map with him. There was an extensive network of sewers beneath the city, but this particular set of tunnels only ran between the Ministry Hubs and Filly’s Tower. *Must have been some sort of secret passage for the Ministries*, I thought.

The rest of the morning came and went with little to speak of. We had breakfast, and took stock of our supplies. With the company meeting not scheduled until that night, there simply wasn’t much we could do other than wait. Danish stopped by at some point during the morning, and he had agreed with our decision to secure and enforce the meeting. Eventually, I just sat, thinking about things until a knock at the door brought me out of my stupor. I looked up as the door opened, and a vision of cold, black metal filled my eyes. Lust grinned, stepping into the room to show off her new power armor. It shone like black diamond. The carapace-like material the armor was made of snugly fit the sleek powerful mare well. Her visor was pulled back, revealing her trademark grin.

“Still fits!” She said happily, trotting around in the armor. Uncannily, she barely made a noise as she pranced and fluttered about. *Must be a pegasus thing*, I thought. The black mare posed for the others as they came up to greet her.

“Wow. That’s... actually kind of nice,” Patch said, letting her gaze drift up and down the armor. Lust grinned even wider.

“Thanks...” She said, trailing off before looking over at the green mare. “Umm... gee... I’m not good at this, but I was kind of... kind of hoping that you would help me with the weaponry, Patch.” Patch’s eyes widened.

“Really? You... want me to help you? Is this some sort of trick?” The green earth pony said. Lust shook her head nervously.

“No... I really want your help. I’ve seen how good you are at repairing things and this other stuff, I was hoping you could help me come up with something really good,” She said. Patch lit up with delight as she launched herself forward at the other mare, grabbing her into a hug. Lust chuckled. “Umm... ok, you can let go now, greenie. We got some work to do remember?” Patch laughed as she pulled away and dragged the black pegasus away to the far corner of the room. I smiled. Finally, those two found something they both enjoyed and were able to connect on. I couldn’t be happier. Eventually, the two left to go find somepony to barter with for materials. I went back to having a nap, thinking about the night ahead of me, of Spark and Pride, and of a decision I had yet to make.

I was pacing. The meeting was in an hour, and neither Lust nor Patch had made it back to our room yet. I was getting nervous, even though both Violet and Steeljack kept telling me that I had nothing to worry about. Still, I worried for the two mares. I don’t know exactly why, I knew in the back of my mind that the two could take care of themselves, but I still worried.

“Star!” Violet shouted, breaking me out of my pace. She glared at me. “Sit! You’re wearing a groove into the floor!” I complied, plomping down onto my haunches.

“Sorry... I guess I’m still worried. It just reminds me of when you and Patch were kidnapped by the Triad,” I said. Violet rolled her eyes.

“That was in the middle of Triad territory. We’re among friends here, remember?” She said. I sighed and nodded. With Gluttony and Danish on our side, the MMMM had been respectful, if not terribly friendly. I was about to stand and pace once more when the door opened, revealing Patch and a very weary looking Lust. The green mare was wheeling in something on a cart that was covered up by a tarp. I couldn’t quite tell what it was. The black pegasus next to her had a very annoyed look on her face.

“Why can't I see it yet?” Lust whined. Patch chuckled.

“You have to wait. I wanted to reveal it to everyone at once,” She said. Lust pouted in the most adorable way ever and sat down next to us.

“I take it you two got along well?” I whispered to her, earning myself a grin from the mare.

“Yeah, but once she started building it she kicked me out of the room and wouldn't let me see it! Said she hit some inspiration and wanted it to be a surprise,” Lust said. Patch meanwhile was humming to herself as she positioned the cart and the tarp just so.

“Alright, so... I really really hope you like it,” Patch said. “The idea was almost as tough as the build, but I'm happy with it, and I think you'll like it.” She stood back, ripping the tarp away from the cart. The device sitting on the cart was sleek and black, just like Lust's power armor. Three broken red hearts had been painted on the side of the barrel, arranged almost like a cutie mark. It took me a few moments, but I realized that it was some form of missile launcher. A rotating cylinder held several missiles that were prepped to load immediately into the device. Patch grinned widely as Lust's eyes lit up like it was Hearth's Warming Eve.

“Like it?” Patch said. “I had a hard time thinking of a good name for it, so I picked one that I felt fit you the most.” I smiled. Surely Patch had finally come around to seeing what good there was in Lust? “I want you to meet... The Bitch.” I blinked. *What?* I thought. I looked over at Lust, expecting the mare to come up with some snarky comment in response. Instead the mare appeared to be... crying?

“Oh... Oh wow,” She said, choking out her words through her tears. “You... you really do understand me!” She rushed forward, locking the green earth pony into a spine-crushing hug.

“Oww, okay you can... you can let go now!” Patch said, wheezing. Lust chuckled and pulled away. “It's all ready for you to go, and it's battle-saddle mounted. It can cycle in several different types of missiles at an activation in your power armor, but unfortunately the only ammo I could get my hooves on was plain old frag missiles.”

“That's fine. I love it, thank you so much,” Lust said as the other mare hooked the missile launcher to the power armor's battle-saddle. Lust flexed her wings experimentally and hovered in the air.

“Doesn't seem to be that heavy either,” She said. “I can get used to this kind of firepower. Watch out Wasteland, The Bitch is back!”

“Wanted to try my hoof at explosive devices,” Patch said, looking up at me and chuckling. “I think it turned out pretty good.” I nickered and smiled at the two mares.

“I think so too,” I said. “I'm very proud of you two, but we need to get going here. The meeting will be starting soon, and we need to be in place.” The two nodded, and Patch went to collect Para Bellum. We made our way out of our room, intending to meet with Danish at the meeting location. Danish had purposely chosen to have the meeting outside of the MMMM headquarters in a nearby abandoned park. Along the way we discussed who would be where for security purposes. Lust and Patch would be our eyes in the sky, positioning themselves in higher vantage points where the two could maintain watch. Steeljack and Nixis were the brute force, watching the meeting from the sidelines in case any trouble arose. Violet and I were going to be at the head of the meeting table, quietly watching Danish as he addressed the companies of the MMMM.

The sun had begun to go down, allowing Luna's moon to take its rightful place in the night sky by the time we arrived in the center of the park. Patch and Lust split off, the two mares chatting animatedly about weapons and armor. I smiled. I was happy those two were now hitting it off. Steeljack and Nixis peeled off into opposite directions, taking their places at each end of the meeting area. Violet and I continued forward, meeting Danish at the head of the large slab he had just finished moving into place with his magic.

“I'm glad y'all are helpin' me out with this,” He said. “I really appreciate it.” I smiled.

“No problem,” I replied. “When are the companies supposed to arrive?”

“Any time now,” Danish said, his eyes intent on the park entrance. Within a few moments, ponies of

various colors and creeds began to filter into the entrance. However, each group was distinctly separated by their chosen style of dress and it was very easy to determine who was with what company. In all, eight companies sat down at the massive slab, each one represented by a single pony who was to act as that company's speaker for the meeting. The crowd of ponies was murmuring loudly at the sight of me. I could tell that none of them were expecting me to be there. Danish stood up on the stone slab, placing a hoof in the air and magically amplifying his voice with his magic.

“Alright! Shut yer yaps!” The cream-colored stallion said. Everypony that had been chattering looked up at the unicorn. “I now call this here meetin' of the eight companies of the MMMM to order! As y'all know, my name is Apple Danish, and I represent the Applebuckers. Settle down, you rowdy lot, and let's do the roll call!” At once, the seven other representatives stood. The earth pony left to Danish stepped forward. He was dark brown colored with a slick black mane. His outfit was reminiscent of a French waiter. His high pitched voice made me hold a hoof to my muzzle to hide my grin.

“I am Horte Cuisinart, and I represent 'ze French Inquisition!” He shouted. His entourage, a snooty group of high class pastry chefs, yelled in what I assumed to be Fancee. Danish thankfully had taken the time to explain to me and Violet about the different companies and their heads. Horte Cuisinart's ancestors were supposedly French immigrants to Equestria. The group was well known for their French desserts and pastries and also acted as public faces of the MMMM in the various settlements ran by the gang. Next to Horte I recognized the blue unicorn Blueberry. He stood forward, grinning.

“I'm Blueberry Buckle, and I represent the Buckleberry Boyos,” He said. His group consisted of unicorns and earth ponies, each one of them dressed in smocks that were so filthy they couldn't even be called white anymore. Blueberry was a serious contender for the title of leader of the MMMM. He also didn't get along too well with Danish. The cream-colored stallion hadn't wanted to discuss what had soured their friendship. The Buckleberries handled most of the fruit-based buckles and pastries. They also acted as guards in the MMMM headquarters. Next to Blueberry, another unicorn stallion stood. This unicorn was white as snow, and had a light blue tinged mane.

“My name is Whipper Snapper, and I represent the Whipped Cream Royalists,” He said. The group behind him wore royal blue traditional suits and jackets. Whipper Snapper was a business first stallion, and his company ran most of the cream-based bakeries and whipped topping plants. At the far end of the table, a pinkish earth pony with a dark black mane stood. I almost swore that it was a mare, but I couldn't tell. Even the voice of the pony left me feeling unsure of myself there.

“I'm Piña Colada, and I'm representing the Buttercream Boys,” The earth pony said, glaring at the titters and giggles that he received on announcing his name. His group appeared to consist solely of cake bakers, the telltale signs of cake frosting covering their work aprons. Piña especially glared at Whipper Snapper, and I remembered Danish's words about how the two factions had nearly come to blows against each other. Piña, Danish had told me, was often made fun of because of his feminine coloring and name. Still, his group was powerful, single-hoofedly responsible for keeping the cake factories they ran on track. On Piña's left, a red pegasus with a brilliant yellow mane stepped forward.

“I'm Electric Red, and I represent the Cherry Chimichangas,” He said. His entourage howled in reply, flaunting cutie marks that mostly related to cherries. Electric Red was the only pegasus of the entire group. Danish told me that he was Wasteland-born to a family of cherry pickers. The Chimichangas were responsible for much of the food growth that the MMMM depended on. Growing food in the Wasteland was difficult, but somehow the gang managed. Next to Electric, a unicorn stood forward. The stallion was cream-colored in nature, almost like Danish, except that he was more... gruff looking. His mane was a dark muddy brown.

“Yo, my name is Donut Don. I represent the Sprinkle Seven,” He said. The six stallions behind him all appeared to be roughly the same, each one with some sort of donut based cutie mark. They cheered loudly for their leader. Donut Don and his group were the elite enforcers of the MMMM. They were the ones called in if legs needed to be broken and debts needed to be collected. Finally, at Danish's right, a murky green colored earth pony stood forward. He had a dark brown mane.

"I'm the Moose."

Silence reigned at the big table for long moments, before Danish stepped forward, placing a hoof on the pony's shoulder.

"The Moose represents the Chocoholics," He announced, to belated cheering from the Moose and his group, who were a frayed and ragged looking bunch. Stepping back to the center of the table, Danish nodded at the seven pony representatives and spoke again.

"Alright, boyos. Take a load off would ya? Y'all are welcome to the table," He said, clopping his hooves. Two of his entourage that had shown up stepped out, bearing several large platters in their unicorn magic. The platters floated along, landing on the slab table as they opened up, revealing a veritable feast of cakes, pastries, donuts, and other various bakery fare. Danish grinned. "Dig in boys. After we eat, we'll get down to business."

"So I says to the guy, 'Hey guy, that ain't no guy, that there's a lady!' And he goes 'Well how am I supposed to know! He's pink!'"

"Oh ho ho! You do crack me up, Danish!" Horte Cuisinart replied to our host's joke. I looked down at the half eaten piece of pie on my plate and then over at Violet. I hadn't exactly been that hungry, and now I was merely picking at my food. Violet smiled as she slurped down a third piece of pie. I shuffled myself next to her and spoke quietly.

"You know you're gonna get fat off of this stuff, right?" I said teasingly. Violet blushed fiercely.

"Just more of me to love!" She replied. I giggled. "So what do you make of all of this?"

"I don't know. I guess we can't really get a good idea until the meeting starts up properly," I said. I looked over at Danish. The cream-colored stallion was still engrossed in conversation with Horte Cuisinart. I guess I should have known that the meeting would have consisted of a feast, given the MMMM's members. As I pushed my plate away, I found myself being tapped on the shoulder blade by a familiar blue unicorn. Blueberry Buckle leered at me as I looked down at him.

"So, you're the Ministry Mare. Funny, I expected you to be a little bigger," He said. I snorted.

"Are you implying that I'm fat?" I said. Blueberry chuckled.

"Not at all. You're just not what I expected," The stallion replied, still leering at me. "So, you got to meet 'da boss? That must have been real excitin'." I glared at the unicorn. I realized that he was just trying to prod me into doing something to disrupt the meeting.

"It was fine, thank you. I believe the meeting is about to begin though," I said, letting my gaze drift up to Danish. Danish nodded at me and stood, hopping up on the table and flaring his horn. Magic amplified his voice as he spoke.

"Alright boyos. If I could have youse attentions, we'll kick this meeting off right," He said loudly. "The issue at hoof, boyos, is tha' future of the MMMM. We all know that shit has been going down in this city, and now more than ever we need to stick together. Gluttony is still our boss, and as long as he is we need to respect that."

"Gluttony's leadership is as stale as week-old crust, Danish. His time as leader is done," Blueberry piped up. The stallion glared at the other unicorn. "We need somepony who's going to take charge of this group, and keep us going."

"Yeah! As it stands, we barely have enough money to cover operations, let alone keep the outlying settlements afloat," Whipper Snapper said. Piña Colada snorted.

"Please, if you stupid fucks would stop spending so much money on stupid shit like fancy prewar tech, maybe you'd have enough to cover," The pink pony said. With a pause for a deep sigh, he continued. "I

agree with Danish. We need to stick together. With the Triad a threat, and the Cowpones stepping up their slave ops, we have to protect our settlements.”

“And how are we expected to be able to do that if we are spending all of our money on Gluttony's insane feedings?” Whipper replied curtly. “Besides, the investments we've made towards better production have really made things work a lot better for us, Piña.”

“Pretty colors,” The Moose interjected. The strange jittery pony was looking at his hoof. It looked like he had just a little too much sugar in his system.

“Oh, shut up Moose. Nopony's talking to you anyways,” Piña Colada said.

“Look, all I'm saying is that Gluttony isn't doing his job,” Whipper continued. “I agree with Blueberry. We need somepony who is going to put the gang first.”

“And who the fuck do you think that should be Whips?” Danish piped up. “Huh? You? Are you gonna be the big bad boss?” Whipper Snapper went deathly quiet. “Didn't fuckin' think so. You're not leader material.”

“And what? You are?” Blueberry replied. “Fuck you too, Danish. You ain't got tha' balls required to run this shit either. You're just Gluttony's little lap pony.” The civilized meeting had just gone out the window. Ponies from all of the companies yelled at each other, brandishing weaponry and making threats. Danish and Blueberry were glaring at each other. I could see Steeljack and Nixis getting nervous. If something wasn't done fast, this would escalate into an all-out civil war.

“**QUIET!**” I shouted loudly, using magic to force my voice over the shouting ponies. The effect was immediate. The companies stopped as one, staring at me. I coughed. “Now then... If I may have your attention please?”

“Oh, nice one Danish. Having the Mare talk for you, are you? Fucking coward,” Blueberry snarled. I spun about, glaring at him with daggers in my eyes. The blue stallion shut up as he saw my eyes.

“I know you're all upset,” I said loudly, so that everypony could hear me. “I know that things look bleak, but you're all here and you're all together. That alone is more powerful than any of you know. You have a golden opportunity here, to make this city a better place. I believe that you can do it, but fighting amongst yourselves isn't going to help!” Everypony was deathly quiet. I was about to continue before I was interrupted by gunfire. The crowd began to shout and cry out.

Where is it coming from? I thought as I levitated Stargazer in front of me. Violet stood next to me, brandishing Thunder Flash. The companies of the MMMM were rife with panic. Only the leaders of the companies remained as the rest began to flee. Blueberry Buckle moved up next to Danish, levitating out his own rifle. The gunfire subsided as we took cover beneath the stone slab.

“Great job, Danish. Gettin' us shot at? Real fucking cute,” Blueberry said.

“Shut the fuck up, Blueberry. You heard what Star said. Fightin' ain't gonna get us anywhere, we've got to stick together if we wanna get out of here alive,” Danish replied angrily. From above, I heard the sharp retort of Para Bellum. Whatever was out there firing at us, Patch was trying to fire back. I looked out from our hiding place. While most of the gang had managed to move away from the firefight, there were still plenty of ponies out there bleeding to death. I scanned the haze of dust that the gunfire had kicked up, searching for Steeljack and Nixis. I couldn't see them. I looked at my E.F.S., hoping that there was some indication of who was attacking us. Red blips scattered the park area, and I blinked. How had I not noticed them before? They were right on top of us! I peered out again, seeing the reason why. Shimmering images littered the park area as unicorns bearing the familiar style of dress of the Lotus Triad appeared. Thankfully, I could still see the green blips belonging to my other friends. From our vantage point, I could see that most of the groups of enforcers were busy tracking down the fleeing companies.

“Shit, it's those Triad bitches!” Whipper Snapper yelled. “They got the fuckin' drop on us!”

“Alright, everypony... calm down. We can get out of here, we just need to work together,” I said calmly. “Steeljack and Nixis are still out there. So we have a chance.”

“Work together? Fuck that shit,” Whipper replied, levitating out twin pistols. The unicorn snarled and rolled out from our vantage spot, firing blindly at the nearest enforcers. His shots went wide, missing as he pushed himself up from the ground and ran for the nearest dead tree. A shot from behind caught him in the shoulder, putting him to the ground immediately. The stallion howled in pain before a bullet caught him in the head, splattering his brains all over the ground. Again, above me I heard Para Bellum opening fire, along with a sharp whining sound that could only be The Bitch.

“Anypony else want to argue against working together?” I said flatly. No pony else said a word, except for the Moose.

“You’re pretty,” He blubbered. I groaned. Danish floated out his carbine rifle, grinning widely.

“Alright, here’s the deal kiddos,” The cream-colored stallion said. “Star and Violet are gonna lay down some cover fire while we move out. Everypony sticks together and no pony gets hurt. Take your shots wisely, and make them fucking count.” The rest of the heads nodded solemnly, looking out from our cover at the limp body of Whipper Snapper. No pony wanted to end up like him. “Alright, let’s get a move on boys!”

We emerged from our hiding spot into pure hell. Dust filled our noses as we moved through the battle, which seemed more like a slaughter. While many of the company ponies were trying to fight back as they were running away, many more of them didn’t even have weapons and were just being killed mercilessly. I spun about, laying down a stream of fire into a group of enforcers that had spotted us, ripping the head completely off one of the unicorns while severely injuring another. I grimaced. While this wasn’t what I wanted, I had no choice. *This can’t be a coincidence*, I thought. *Lotus Petal must be really pissed off to want me this badly.* A sharp ***crack*** rang out ahead of us and I could make out the forms of Steeljack and Nixis fighting a nasty group of enforcers that were wielding beam rifles. Nixis bounded along, leaping through the air and latching onto one of the earth pony enforcers. His claws shredded the mare to pieces.

“Star! You’re alright!” I heard Steeljack shout. I nodded as I galloped up to him.

“We’re fine! What about you two?” I replied. He shrugged.

“About as good as anypony else,” He said. “Have you seen Patch or Lust?” I shook my head. Another powerful retort from above us told us that Patch was still up there somewhere, and that no pony had managed to hit her yet. We were broken up out of our reunion by an explosion nearby that nearly knocked us to the ground. I looked up, seeing a clump of black-clad unicorns that were firing grenades from launchers throughout the park. I snarled, latching onto the next wave of the explosives with my telekinesis. I held them there until they exploded, scattering the enforcers and destroying their magically held weapons.

“Alright, everypony! We need to keep moving and keep together!” Danish yelled. “Let’s show these fucks what it means when you mess with the MMMM!” A spotty roar of agreement came from the leaders of the companies. Even Blueberry couldn’t help but chime in, even if he followed it with a stream of profanity about Danish. We moved forward through the park, taking care of any pockets of enforcers as we went.

There didn’t seem to be any end to the assault. I was honestly surprised. I didn’t know that the Triad had such numbers. As we reached the center of the park, I realized that the Triad had set up shop here beforehand. An encampment stretched out before us, filled with Triad enforcers.

“Fuck... they knew we would be here. They fucking knew!” Blueberry said. “How the fuck did they know!”

“Maybe because... I told them,” A voice from behind us said. We looked back, seeing Piña Colada standing there, a smug grin on the pink stallion’s face.

“You what?!” Blueberry shouted. “What do you fucking mean, you told them?!” Piña snorted.

“Money makes the world go round, you stupid fuck. What, you think I was gonna sit around here and put up with your shit forever? You fuckers can go fuck yourselves,” He said. Blueberry growled.

“Your money ain’t gonna do you no fucking good when you’re dead,” The blue stallion shouted, levitating out his rifle. The other stallion chuckled as Blueberry took his shot. The bullet pinged off of something insubstantial.

“Pssh. Did you really think I'd reveal my duplicity to you without some form of backup?” He said, pointing to a device on his foreleg. “Best thing about pulling some weight for the Triad? The perks. Personal shield generator.”

“Yes, you've done quite well, Colada,” A new voice said. A light blue earth pony mare stepped up from behind the stallion, a grin on her face. “Ahh, the Ministry Mare. We finally meet. My sister was right, you are a hard mare to catch.”

“Sister? Who are you?” I said. The mare chuckled, revealing her rump. Her cutie mark was a lotus flower blooming.

“My name is Lotus Bloom, and I'm one of the leaders of the Lotus Triad,” She said. “And you all are now my prisoners.”

“Fuck you man!” The Moose shouted, pulling out his pistol and pointing at the mare. “I ain't goin' nowheres with you!” Lotus rolled her eyes, stomping her hoof. All around us, the shimmers of dropping stealth fields revealed unicorns and earth ponies, heavily armed. Every weapon they had was trained on us.

“What do you want with me?” I said calmly, lowering Stargazer. The others followed suit as I addressed the light blue mare.

“Oh, you know. Fame, fortune, all of the above. But really, I came for your friends. I will be heralded as the pony who took down the MMMM, after all,” She said. Danish glared at the earth pony.

“I don't think so, darlin'. It's gonna take a lot more than a little raid to keep us boyos down,” He said. Lotus Blossom tittered with laughter.

“Please. My enforcers are hunting down the rest of your pathetic gang's hideouts as we speak. The MMMM is done for, you stupid fuck. We won. Get over it,” She said. I snorted, drawing her attention to me. “You... You're different. My sister has a bit of a revenge complex against you. I think she will quite enjoy you, wrapped up on a silver platter just for her.” I glared at the mare, when my E.F.S. was suddenly filled with one large red blip. It was... *Oh shit. That could only be...* I thought as my eyes widened. I scrambled to move backward, drawing the surprised stare of the mare. Instinctively I threw up a shield around myself and the ponies around me as quickly as I could.

“What the fuck are you --” The mare started to say. I could see her looking up through the haze of my shield. A massive hoof shot down behind her, knocking the mare to the ground. Flesh rippled up it as the mare quivered in fear. The massive form of the beast above her snarled in anger. The MMMM company leaders shouted as their glorious leader appeared. Gluttony's eyes were black as night, but I could still feel the rage emanating from them.

“So, you stupid bitches think you can just rip the MMMM a new asshole, and we won't retaliate!?” The gigantic creature roared, stomping a hoof and flattening several of the Triad's enforcers that were surrounding us. Flapping her wings proudly next to the MMMM leader was Lust. She had a grin on her face. *Of course you would*, I thought, thanking Celestia for the pegasus mare's quick intuition. The meeting had been doomed from the get go, but Gluttony would be the one to ultimately rein in control once more by saving his wayward company ponies. “I don't fucking think so!” The giant earth pony reared, letting loose a thunderous shout of rage as he slammed into the ground with both forehooves. Lotus scrambled to get away.

She never made it. A wave of earth kicked up by Gluttony's attack struck Lotus Blossom, burying her in an assault of dirt and rocks. She lay there, unmoving. Gluttony roared once more as bullets pelted his fleshy hide. He spun about, his tough hide ignoring the small-arms fire. Danish grinned as I lowered my shield.

“Alright boss!” He shouted. “Come on, you lot! Get on out there and support your companies! Show those Triad bitches they don't belong in this town, and make the big boss proud!” The MMMM leaders shouted and yelled, galloping into the fray, leaving Danish and Blueberry facing down Piña. The pink stallion looked scared as I stepped up between the two unicorns. Danish shot a hoof out. “Star, you're gonna have to stay out of this one. This fuck is a traitor to the MMMM, and that makes him our business. And there's only one way the MMMM can take care of this business.” His horn glowed as he muscled through Piña's shield generator, ripping it from the other stallion's hoof in an impressive display of magic. Piña immediately fell to

the ground, begging for his life.

“Please! I didn't mean to! I just wanted what was best for the MMMM!” He shouted. Danish snorted, lifting his carbine rifle.

“You mean, you wanted us to end? Fuck you,” He said, pulling the trigger. Piña's body slumped to the ground, a large hole in the side of the stallion's head. Danish and Blueberry looked at one another, and nodded in silence before they moved to help their brethren. Another roar from above us drew our attention to Gluttony, who had moved forward and was now obliterating the encampment. A whining noise erupted from The Bitch as Lust fired the missile launcher. Explosions littered the camp, the pegasus moving to and fro to pick her targets. We were about to go assist, when a bouncy green earth pony mare came galloping through the hazy clearing.

“Patch!” I shouted. “Good to see you, sister!” The green mare grinned widely as she spun about, firing point blank at the enforcer that had been chasing her. Her bullet tore through the other mare's eye, dropping her to the ground instantly. Patch panted hard as she pulled herself up from the ground, meeting our gaze.

“About damn time! I've been trying to catch up with you guys since the attack started,” She said, huffing. “Lust took off to go get Gluttony. She figured that it was the best that she could do.”

“Well, she certainly helped. I believe the MMMM has things well in hoof now,” I said, looking over at the unconscious form of Lotus Blossom. I trotted over, lifting her out of the dirt with magic. I thought for a moment as I stood over her. “You know... I could do it. I could kill her. And I would have no problem with it at all.” I nearly jumped when the mare coughed.

“Then... fucking do it already, coward,” She choked out. I stood there and closed my eyes for a moment, thinking about it. I opened my eyes and looked back down at her.

“No. Because that would make me a worse pony than you. Valuing life, even the life of an enemy, isn't cowardice. It's called mercy. Look it up some time,” I said, dropping the light blue mare and turning away from her. I looked over at my friends. “Let's help clean up, shall we?”

An hour later, the dregs and remnants of the MMMM had managed to finally return to their headquarters. Gluttony's steps caused small craters to appear in the street as we followed behind. Danish and the other leaders of the companies were behind us, talking amongst themselves. The cream-colored stallion trotted up next to me, smiling.

“Everypony alright?” I asked. Danish nodded.

“We lost a lot of good ponies out there, but we'll be able to rebuild. It's going to be tough, though,” He said. He looked... sad. I could empathize. I'm sure that many of the ponies that were lost were Danish's friends.

“Listen... Danish. I would totally understand if you wanted to stay here. You don't have to come with us to Stable 180,” I said quietly. Danish was about to reply when we were cut off by a loud voice above us.

“No,” Gluttony said simply, stopping to regard the both of us. “Danish will go with you. I owe you that much... Ministry Mare.”

“Me? What do you owe me?” I said, feeling very confused. The gigantic beast rumbled with laughter.

“If it was not for you, and for Danish here... I would have stayed in that room forever, force-feeding myself to my eventual death,” He said. “I realize now, that I can't quit. The MMMM is mine, and I can't let it fall apart. Even if I have to deal with the companies squabbling like children, they are **MY** children. You and Danish helped me see that. Thank you, both of you.”

“Shoot, boss. It weren't nothin',” Danish said humbly. “We were just worried 'bout ya. I was worried 'bout ya.” Gluttony's eyes, although black as night, appeared to be sad. He nodded.

“No matter now. The MMMM shall remain under my protection. United under my rule, the companies of

the MMMM will cooperate. We will defend our settlements, and the ponies of this city,” He said loudly, so that the company leaders behind us could hear him. They cheered for their wayward leader, and I couldn't help but smile. Gluttony was back in harness, and the rank and file of the MMMM were aware of how much they needed him. This crazy bunch of ponies had learned to work together. Whatever happened in my future, the MMMM would thrive thanks to the magic of friendship.

Several hours later found our group back in our room at the MMMM headquarters, preparing to make the journey to Stable 180. Nixis had enough time to finally finish going through the map and had come up with a good route for us to progress through. I sat next to Violet, cleaning Stargazer and humming to myself.

The aftermath of the Lotus Triad's assault wasn't pretty. The MMMM had lost between forty and fifty of their own, including the leaders of the Whipped Cream Royalists and the Buttercream Boys. Ponies had already stepped up to fill these positions, though.

Gluttony had taken charge of the MMMM as a whole with a fervor the gang hadn't seen in ages. He was everywhere, his massive form surprisingly silent when he was sneaking up on a slacker or miscreant. It was a good time to be a member of the MMMM, and I was proud to have played a part in the revitalization of the group.

After getting some rest, I made my way down to speak with the leader of the MMMM once more. I knocked on the door to his sanctum, hearing him call for me to come in. I stepped inside, seeing the massive beast bustling busily in his colossal kitchen. The filth and stacks of food were gone, and Gluttony was just finishing loading an oven into a cart. A scrawny young earth pony buck drug the cart off, and Gluttony turned, acknowledging me with a nod.

“Ministry Mare,” He rumbled. “I take it you are ready to leave?” I nodded.

“We are,” I said. “You know... it's funny. Danish told me that you two were once best friends. And last night, I could really see that.”

“Danish speaks the truth. We were once very close, before I became the thing you see before you today,” He said.

“So you... you remember?” I asked. Gluttony nodded.

“I remember what I was like before *her*. I remember what she did to me, to us,” The beast replied. “I do not know why I remember, but I remember.”

“And what did she do to you and the others?” I said. It was time to get some answers. If I was going to be storming Stable 180, I was going to need more information on Pride, and now was good as any time.

“She changed us. Pure magic, compressed into solid form. It turned us into these... things,” Gluttony said. I sighed, looking at the floor with sadness in my eyes. I looked back up at Gluttony, tears beginning to form as I spoke.

“Who... who were you? Originally?” I choked out.

“I was a friend. I was a brother in arms. I was a father... once,” Gluttony said. My tears began to flow freely and I slumped to the ground. Gluttony rumbled. “Do not cry for me Radiant Star. My path is set in this life. I am what I am, and there is nothing I can do about that.”

“It's just... just so messed up!” I exclaimed through the tears. “I can't believe somepony would even do such a thing! And not just you... but Lust... Lust...” Gluttony nodded.

“Lust will remember, in time. She will eventually reconnect with the kind pony she used to be,” He said. My eyes widened, catching the giant earth pony's interest. “Yes... Lust was not always the sarcastic and snarky little mare she is today. She was a lover and a fierce friend.”

“I...” I started to say. I paused for a moment to gain my composure. I looked up at Gluttony. “I will defeat her. Pride will be stopped. I will do this for you, for Lust, for Cranky, and even for Wrath, Envy, and Greed.

You deserve no less.” Gluttony chuckled.

“I thank you, Ministry Mare, for your promise. May Luna protect you,” He said. I stood and wiped my eyes before trotting to the door. I stopped and looked back at the leader of the MMMM.

“May Celestia bless you,” I finished for him as I pushed open the door and trotted out. I made my way back towards where we were staying. Too many thoughts swam through my mind. Pride. Stable 180. Lust and the others. I was lost, I didn’t have any idea what to do. Plus, there was still Spark to deal with. What if Pride had already joined with the Element of Magic? Were we already too late to stop them? *No*, I thought. *If that had happened she would have made herself known by now. She wouldn't be hiding in Stable 180...* A nagging thought itched the back of my mind. There was something I was still missing. My eyes widened when I realized what it was. The memory orb! Gluttony had given me the orb with explicit instructions to watch it. I pulled the orb out, finding a nearby abandoned room to hole up in until the memory was finished. I knew Violet and the others might be worried for a bit, but I needed to see this thing. It felt like there was some crucial piece of information that this orb held that I would need to know before we entered Stable 180. I latched onto the device with my magic, feeling my world fall away into nothingness.

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I’d been stallions before, in memories. The different configuration was almost familiar in a way. I was in Chicacolt. The familiar city stretched out around my host as he trotted along. I was also distinctly aware that I was a unicorn. A shotgun levitated in the air next to me as I glanced about shiftily. There was nopony in sight as I moved around a ruined building and saw my host's intended destination. It was a small settlement just outside the city, one that I had not seen before or recognized. Colts and fillies played on the outskirts of the settlement. The shotgun came up as I realized with fear what my host was intending to do. Before my host could move however, the glow of his magic was replaced by a dark blue glow, preventing my host from moving the shotgun further.

“So... this is what you have been reduced to,” A voice said from behind my host. A voice that made me shudder with fear. My host turned, seeing a midnight colored alicorn hovering behind him. Pride. The alicorn looked sad, her eyes bright with unshed tears as she met my host’s gaze.

“Piss off, Diamond,” My host said. My eyes widened as I realized that I had heard this voice before. It was Greed. *Oh no, no no no no*, I thought as I wished for the memory to end right then and there. However, it continued on much to my dismay. There was something... off about the unicorn's voice though. It didn't sound like the Greed that I knew. My host glared at the alicorn.

“Please... Cutter... don't do this. You don't need to do this,” The mare said, pleading with my host. I felt... confused. This wasn't like Pride. Was this somehow before Pride became who she is now? Why would Gluttony even have this memory? My host snorted.

“And I said to piss off. Diamond, you don't get it do you? I have to do this. They’ll kill her if I don't do it,” He said. Pride sighed and put her hoof on my host's shoulder.

“Look, I know we're just friends, but I care for you. We'll get her back. Lilith will be fine. I promise you,” The alicorn mare said. “Just please, don't do this. There's a better way.”

“And what way is that, huh? Those statues you keep going on about that you think you found?” My host shouted. “They aren’t real! You don't get it! You keep stuffing your head into those books of yours, you're too busy to notice that your friends are in trouble!”

“They're real!” Pride replied angrily. “They are! I can prove it to you! You have to trust me! We’ll show those fucking raiders that we mean business - we can TAKE Lilith back!”

“It's too late, Diamond. I made my deal with the devil. I'm doing this, and you're not going to fucking stop me,” My host growled angrily, ripping the shotgun away from the alicorn with a flare of magic. I turned about, ready to start down the hill towards the settlement as the mare spoke once more, stopping my host in his tracks.

“Wait!” She called out. My host turned back. “If you really are set on doing this... Then let me help you.” My host's eyes widened.

“Diamond, you... you can't help me, you don't have it in you. What are you gonna do? Help me slaughter this whole town?” My host replied.

“Do... do you trust me?” Pride said quietly.

“What?” Greed replied.

“I said... do you trust me?” The mare asked. My host paused for a few moments and then nodded. Pride smiled. “Then come with me. I want to show you something.” Her horn glowed brightly and within the span of a second my host's vision went black. Seconds later, the world around me reformed and we were in a different place. My host glared at the alicorn in front of him.

“What the hell? Where are we?” He said, looking around the dark tunnel. My host's eyes drifted down past Pride, finally coming to rest on a large gear-like door. The number **180** emblazoned the front of it. “The... Stable? What are we doing here? I thought we were told never to come here, Diamond.”

“I know. But trust me, alright?” Pride replied, leading my host past the door and into the Stable. The dark gray walls felt like they were crushing me as we trotted along. We stopped eventually at what appeared to be a large medical bay. “Alright, we're here.”

“Medical? What are we doing in Medical?” My host said. Pride smiled.

“I've told you before about the research I've been looking into,” She said.

“Those statues? Damnit, Diamond, we just talked about this,” My host replied. A soft chuckle came from the mare's lips.

“Yes, well... You've forced my hoof. I wanted to wait, to make sure they were safe,” She said, igniting her horn and opening up a cabinet at the far end of the room. “But you have left me no choice.” A bluish light began to fill the room as my host looked over at the cabinet. Inside of it stood several tiny statues, carved out of bluish metal and into the shapes of various races. There were seven of them in all: unicorn, pegasus, alicorn, earth pony, donkey, minotaur, and zebra. I blinked. *These things... they keep showing up. What the hell do they mean?* I thought as my host stepped up to inspect the figurines.

“What do they do then? How is this going to help me get Lilith back?” My host asked.

“I found these statues in an old Ministry of Arcane Science hub. The history behind them is quite... amusing,” Pride replied, ignoring my host's question. “You see... the audio logs I found with them indicated that they were some sort of artifact that had been dug up by a famous archaeologist during the war. Her name was Daring Do. The Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle seized the artifacts to study them. The log didn't say much more than that. I've had to piece together what these things are capable of on my own since then.” My host glared at the alicorn once more.

“So these things are some ancient artifacts dug up by some famous pony, big deal. How does it help me?” He said. Pride laughed.

“Tell me something Cutter... what do you want most in life?” She said, sparking her horn. “What do you desire, more than anything?” My host narrowed his eyes. He looked away for a brief moment, before looking back at Pride.

“Power,” He said. “I want power. I want to protect, to destroy. I want it all.”

“And you shall have it all,” Pride replied as her horn glowed brightly, wrapping its magic around one of the statues. It was shaped like a unicorn. The statue lifted into the air and floated up to my host's face. “Touch it. Touch it and you will be reborn. You will be given everything that you desire...” My host looked down at the tiny statue.

“Diamond? Are you sure this is safe?” He asked, his voice now sounding... scared. Pride grinned widely, her eyes flashing red. I realized that she had already undergone her transformation. She was no longer the

Diamond that my host knew. She had become Pride. My host shook off his fear, and touched the statue with his hoof. A jolt of electricity shot throughout his body and it shuddered, falling to the ground. Energy crackled along my host's skin as it began to react to the arcane magic. He screamed loudly as joints began to grow and muscles began to stretch. After several moments of agonizing and terrifying pain, my host's body gave out completely and he slumped to the ground. His vision went dark.

“Cutter?” A voice cut through the darkness, forcing my host's eyes open once more. My host's body had changed. It felt... stronger. My host stood, facing the alicorn mare. A sly grin crept across his face. Pride smiled widely. “Welcome back, my dear friend. It seems that it worked.”

“Yes...” My host erupted. *That voice...* I thought. The voice was definitely the same. My host was no longer Cutter. “It worked perfectly. I can feel it. The power. It's running all through me.”

“Excellent. And what will you do with your power?” Pride said, stalking around the stallion. “I've often thought about what I would do with such power...”

“I will crush them,” My host said. “Those stupid fucks who think they can keep my Lilith from me. I will crush their skulls beneath my fucking hooves like paste.” Pride turned, facing my host. An evil grin emerged on her face. Her eyes flashed an evil red.

“And you will get your chance to do so,” She said, stalking in a slow circle around my host. “But now that you have this power... you can no longer rightly consider yourself Cutter. Cutter was weak. He was a fool. You... are not. No... you must have a new name, a name that truly fits the desire for power you so seek.” She stepped past my host and drew close, whispering in his ear.

“*Greed...*”

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I lifted my head, letting my eyes refocus onto the room I had stopped in. I stood and tucked the memory orb back into my saddlebags. My mind mulled over what I had just witnessed. It was the creation of Greed.

Greed had once been normal. He had friends, it seemed. He was friends with Pride... and she had tricked him, hadn't she? Had she made him into Greed because she was already so twisted inside that she needed to turn others into what she had become? I thought about the statues. We had seen them at the Museum. What did they all mean? Were they really the reason behind their whole transformation? My mind swam with thoughts and I sighed. Both Greed and Pride had mentioned a Lilith, and that she had been in some sort of trouble. My eyes widened as I realized that in some strange way... I already knew who Lilith was.

Lust.

I shuddered at the thought of it. Had Greed gone and saved his lover, only to convert her into a killing machine? If Pride had kept his mind intact, why would she have needed to wipe Lust's memory? I trotted along, trying to process what I had seen. I stopped once I arrived back at our room, dreading pushing the door open. I didn't know if I could look at Lust, knowing now what I knew. I didn't have much of a choice though, as the door opened and Violet peered out at me.

“Star?” She said. “You alright? Where the hell have you been? We're getting ready to go.” I smiled nervously.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I was talking to Gluttony and lost track of time,” I said. “Are we all ready then?” Violet nodded.

“Nixis has got the map all sorted out,” She said as I followed her inside. Everypony (and hellhound) waved as I smiled. Lust sat in the far corner, chatting idly with Patch as the green mare finished working over her power armor. Eventually, everything was ready to go. We exited the room, finding Danish waiting for us.

“Darlin’,” He said, tipping his fedora. I noticed he was wearing a brand new one. His carbine rifle slung off of his side. “We all ready?” We nodded and we began to move as one, heading out of the MMMM Headquarters. Once out on the streets, Nixis bounded up next to me and pulled out the map. I looked

down at the route marked on it and nodded. As we walked along, I kept silent, letting the others talk amongst themselves. All of this new information that I had seen was still running through my mind, along with my continuing inner conflict concerning Spark. I didn't even bother to click on the radio to see if the Minotaur had something to say about the Triad and the MMMM. I didn't think the Minotaur would have anything to contribute that wouldn't just piss me off. I had enough on my plate.

Instead, I just walked. And walked. After what felt like forever (in all reality it was only around an hour according to my PipBuck, but it felt like much longer), we arrived in front of the decrepit remains of what appeared to be a Ministry of Peace hospital. It was beginning to get dark again, bathing the front of the ruins in an ominous gloom.

"Where's the entrance to the sewer supposed to be at again?" Patch said, visibly shaking.

"Inside there," Nixis said, pulling out the map. He put it away after studying it once more, and we moved forward, heading into the courtyard of the hospital. The stench of death hung in the air around us. Skeletons and debris littered the courtyard. It appeared that nopony had been here in quite a while. The doors to the hospital hung drunkenly on of their hinges, falling off easily as I pushed on them with my magic. The lobby was just as cluttered. I brought up my E.F.S., looking for any signs of hostile activity. Nothing. I motioned to my friends and we pushed forward, following the halls towards the maintenance stairs. The map had stated the entrance to the sewers was below the maintenance section of the hospital. The long halls were a little... creepy.

"Is anypony else a little freaked out about this place?" Lust said nervously. "Or is it just me?"

"No, you're not the only one. There's something... just not right here," Steeljack replied. I nodded in agreement. Something was off here. It didn't feel right at all. We eventually found ourselves at the end of the longest hall, faced with a door that was locked. I poked at it with my magic, hoping to open it easily. Of course, as was par for the course... the door resisted. I snarled, pouring more energy into my horn as I ripped the door from its hinges. I panted as I lifted the metal door, setting it off the side. On the other side of the doorway was a large wide room with a massive set of stairs leading downwards. We started down the stairs, hoping that the map was right and that we were on the right track.

The stairs stretched down several stories below the hospital itself and eventually we found ourselves in a large underground complex. A grated entrance appeared at the far end of the room. It was the entrance to the sewer as indicated on the map. It was locked, and it appeared to be electronic in nature. A terminal sat next to it. I tapped a bit on the keyboard, trying to break my way in. Nothing seemed to work. I sighed, as I realized I knew what I needed to do. I reached out and touched the door with an application of telekinesis. The door flared to life and opened immediately.

"Whoah," Danish said. "I dunno what it is about you and doors, sweetheart, but they sure do like you." I shrugged.

"I... I don't know why," I said. A shimmering light caught my eye as the others stepped into the entrance to the sewer. I stopped for a brief moment as a holographic image flickered to life in front of me. An image of a mature pegasus mare with a pink mane appeared. Her yellow coat shined and her blue eyes glimmered through the image of the hologram.

"Oh. Umm... Hello Twilight. It's me... Fluttershy.

I know that what we did was wrong. We tried our best, but in the end it all went wrong. Where did it go so wrong?

I always thought that I was doing my part to save Equestria by giving the megaspells to the zebras. That if we were at a standstill, nothing bad would happen and we would make friends.

I was so wrong. I think I... I think I made it worse...

Oh Twilight, I'm so sorry. I know I shouldn't blame myself, but I can't help it. And now it's all over... and this

is my penance for the sins I committed. I wish I had done better. I wish I could have believed in myself like you always believed in us.

I wish we could have been together again, just the six of us... like old times. I miss those days. I miss when the only things we worried about was Winter Wrap Up and whether or not my animal friends would enjoy flying through the air on one of your spells.

I deserve whatever fate is in store for me. I truly believe that. I'm sorry."

I felt a tear roll down my face as a stray memory shot into my mind. Memories of the yellow mare erupted from Twilight's thoughts and I did my best to fight back the tears. I looked back at the entrance, where Violet was waiting for me.

"Star?" She asked. "You okay?" I nodded.

"Yeah... I'm fine. Just a little... shaky is all," I said. Violet smiled.

"You want to talk about it?" She said. I trotted next to her as we made our way through the grated entrance.

"No... I'm fine, really. I've just got a lot on my mind," I said as we finally caught up with the others. Nixis was busy studying the map. He pointed down the nearest tunnel. The smell of rotting flesh assaulted our senses as we started trotting down it. I looked down at my E.F.S. again. Still nothing. And yet... there was still something there. The back of my mind and the back of my neck agreed - we were being watched. A low growl emanated from further down the tunnel.

"What was that?" Patch said. I flared my horn, casting a light spell. I sent the ball of light down the tunnel, seeing something slithering along the walls. Another growl erupted from whatever it was that was making it. I was still seeing nothing on my E.F.S. Whatever this thing was, it was either non-living or it was just too fucking big to show up.

"Shit!" I shouted, pulling out Stargazer in a flash. I stepped back just as a slimy tentacle wrapped around my leg. It yanked hard, knocking me to the ground. It pulled me along, stopping abruptly as the tentacle was ripped away by a flare of silver fire. I looked up to see Violet floating Thunder Flash along in her magic, a determined look on her face. Gunfire lit up the tunnel in front of me as Steeljack and Danish opened up, slamming into the tentacle thing. The beast roared in pain as tentacles shot out of the darkness to meet the gunfire. Another slimy one grabbed onto my leg, and I yelped as it lifted me into the air. As it pulled me closer, I was able to get a better look at the thing. It was some sort of giant sucker monster. I realized that the thing was unable to actually move from the top of the tunnel as it was fused into the ceiling. In the center of the amorphous thing, rows upon rows of jagged teeth sat in a large circular mouth. Some of the tentacles were even coming from there!

"Fucking piece of shit! Let me go!" I shouted, as I reached out with my magic for Stargazer. The minigun appeared next to me as I unleashed a torrent of bullets at the tentacle holding me, spraying greenish blood everywhere and forcing the slimy appendage to release me. I flapped my wings, holding myself aloft as I regained my composure. I slipped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots towards the center of the creature's giant mouth. The spell released and Stargazer unleashed its payload, hitting home as the bullets slammed into the beast's mouth. The thing roared in agony, drawing its tentacles back inward as blood spurted from the orifice. The silvery streak of Thunder Flash's shot and the gunfire from my other friends finally did the work. The monster's screams echoed across the tunnel as it finally died, its slimy body hanging limply from the ceiling it was cemented to. I panted hard as I dropped to the tunnel floor.

"What in the flying fuck was that thing?!" Patch exclaimed. I looked back at the rest of my friends. They too, were visibly tired. I groaned, looking forward again and further down the tunnel. I sincerely hoped that this was the only one of these crazy ass things. Of course, this being the Wasteland... I was quite sure that something else would rear its ugly head before we got to Stable 180. I suddenly found myself wishing I could just teleport there like Pride had in that memory orb.

We cleaned up, and began to move forward once more. After our encounter with the tentacle thing, we were

on high alert, all us keeping our respective weapons at the ready as we trotted down the dank tunnel. The further in we moved, I knew we were getting deeper as the floor became saturated with dark water. My PipBuck began to click, indicating varying levels of radiation. Those of us that needed it silently took a Rad-X and RadAway. I looked into my saddlebags and sighed. We didn't have much of the stuff left, unfortunately. It had been one of those things we hadn't thought of when left the MMMM headquarters. I hoped it wasn't going to be a problem.

A few moments later we found ourselves in a large cylindrical area with three different tunnels in three different directions. I looked over at Nixis, who was already pulling out the map. He was muttering under his breath as he tried to locate where we were.

"Everything alright?" I asked. He shook his head.

"This... this room isn't on here," He said. "I don't know where we are."

"Do you think we got the wrong map?" I said, narrowing my gaze at the hellhound.

"I... I don't know. I don't think so. Unfortunately... until we can get somewhere I recognize on here we won't know for sure," The hellhound replied. "Which means we have to pick a direction."

"Nixis, let me take a look at the map while they go checkin' around," Danish said, trotting up. "I'm sure you're right, but I know Gluttony. He wouldn't lead us astray." Nixis nodded, handing over the map to the cream-colored unicorn. As the two began to pour over the piece of paper, I trotted around the dank cylindrical room we were now in. Pipes and boiler units grew thicker on the walls as I came to the right tunnel entrance. I peered down the dark tunnel, not seeing much of anything. I grimaced. If there was something down there, I would just draw it to us if I cast a light spell. Steeljack stepped up and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Yes?" I asked, looking down the tunnel some more.

"The other two tunnels look exactly the same," The stallion said. "And worse, they all appear to go down. I'm at a loss, until those two figure out the map." I nodded.

"Well then, I think perhaps we had better take a rest then," I said loudly enough that the rest of them could hear me. "We'll set up shifts for watch. I'm not too keen on rushing down there without being ready. I have a feeling we won't have time to rest once we get there." Violet nodded as the others agreed with my assessment of the situation. Steeljack volunteered to take first watch, and as always I volunteered for the last position. I shuffled myself onto my bedroll, yawning. I wasn't sure why, but I was really tired. I looked over at Violet laying next to me. I smiled as I closed my eyes and rested my head, falling asleep instantly.

While it wasn't the hallway with the doors, it was still a very bad dream.

I was running down the dark gray halls of Stable 180, and I wasn't alone. I panted hard, trying to find a place to hide. Something shadowy and dark was chasing me. I cringed in fear as I found myself in the Stable's Atrium. The rotting corpses of long dead ponies lay strewn about the wide open space. I pushed forward, moving down the next hallway. I took a moment and glanced backwards, not seeing the shadow still on my tail. I dipped into a nearby room, closing the door behind me and hoping to Luna that the thing hadn't seen me.

"S-S-Star..." A voice called out behind me. I spun about, seeing... Lucky! She was being held against the wall by some form of spectral chains. Purple lightning arced across the chains and the green mare groaned in pain, her eyes meeting mine. There was sadness there, mixed with genuine concern. She tried to smile, wincing as she did.

"What... what happened? What are you doing here?" I said, trying to process what I was seeing.

"Star... you've gotta get out... save yourself..." Lucky replied. "Please... I'm not worth it."

"No... no. I failed you once before, I'm not going to fail you again!" I shouted, reaching out with my magic to try and remove the chains from the mare. Nothing happened.

"Star... it's... it's okay. I'll be fine. You need to go," Lucky said, wincing again as purple lightning punished her again. I slumped to my haunches, tears filling my eyes.

"It's just a dream... it's just a dream..." I began to say, repeating it over and over to myself. Lucky smiled.

"If only..." She said wistfully. "Star... you can't come to Stable 180. Please, turn back. Spark... she's here. She's trapped too. I followed her here, hoping that I could stop her... but Pride trapped us both." My eyes widened.

"It's... it's really you?" I asked. Lucky nodded.

"It's me," She said. I sighed.

"Goddesses, I missed you," I said, chuckling. "Don't worry Lucky. I'll save you. I'll get you out of there..."

"Star... don't. As long as I'm here I can do my best to keep Spark under control. It's like I have some sort of... effect on her. Like I counterbalance her or something. It was how Pride was able to stop her," The green mare said. I shook my head.

"No, Lucky. I can't do that. I have to face Pride and Spark. I have a choice to make. I need to do this," I said determinedly.

"Why? Why do you have to do this? Why can't you just go home and leave well enough alone?" Lucky said. I grimaced.

"Because if I don't do something about this, no one else will," I said after a moment's pause. A grin onto along my face. "Nice try though... *Pride*." Lucky rolled her eyes as the chains dissipated. The mare's coat changed color as it went from green to midnight blue. Pride's red eyes smoldered in the darkness of the room.

"Hello, sweetie." The alicorn said, grinning. "Your dreams have become more interesting since we last faced each other. This Lucky... you feel very bad for having caused her death?"

"More than you know, you psychotic bitch," I said flatly.

"I do have her... and your little friend Spark. It was amusing when she came to me, and told me everything. Of course, she also tried to assume control of my body. The fool, she didn't know what she was getting into. I'm not a normal alicorn by any means, so there was no way that she could ever hope to take me over," Pride replied nonchalantly. I narrowed my gaze at the mare.

"So what, you just thought you'd try to convince me to stop coming?" I said angrily. "I hate to tell you, I'm right on your door step now." Pride grinned again.

"I know. And I'm waiting patiently for you to get here, but not until an old friend of ours says hello," She said. "Knock loudly when you arrive. I would hate to be an ungracious host." She waved a hoof, the walls of the Stable around us dissolving into nothingness. She started to fade to black. I growled.

"Wait!" I called out, catching her attention. "Diamond... you loved Cutter didn't you?" Pride snorted.

"I see you've been to see Gluttony," She said. "No matter. Whatever you think you saw... was a long time ago. Diamond is long gone... there is only Pride." With that, she faded completely away, leaving me to wait to wake up.

I awoke in a cold sweat. *What a dream*, I thought as I pushed myself to my hooves. Violet and the others lay sleeping around me, except for Lust who was patrolling the perimeter of our camp. I sighed, stepping forward and tapping the black mare on the shoulder. She smiled as she looked up at me.

"Hey," She said. I tried to smile, but failed horribly at it.

"Hi," I replied in a low monotone voice.

"You alright?" Lust asked. I shook my head.

"Bad dream," I said, shaking visibly. "I have a really bad feeling about this." Lust nodded.

"Me too," She said. "It's weird... I know I've been here before... but I just can't... I can't remember any of it."

"What do you remember?" I said. Lust hung her head low.

"Not... not much, really. Just feelings, here and there," She said. "I wish I could remember more. I wish I knew who I was, really." I swallowed hard. I knew already who the mare had been. She was Lilith, lover of a unicorn stallion named Cutter. Cutter... who became Greed. Greed... whose death I was ultimately responsible for. If Lust ever found out... what would she do? Would she be able to forgive me? I put a hoof on her shoulder, smiling.

"It'll be fine, okay?" I said. "We'll help you remember." Lust smiled.

"Thanks," She said. By this time, the others had begun to awaken. Nixis and Danish began to look over the map once more, this time looking a little more optimistic as they appeared to be rested better. Within a few moments, the two looked to have some form of an answer.

"I believe that the tunnel to the left is where we need to go," Nixis said as he brought the map over to me.

"Danish and I both agree on this." The cream-colored stallion nodded his agreement.

"Alright, then. Left it is," I said as I helped Violet pack up our things. We headed into the left tunnel, the floor sloping downwards as we carefully walked down the slippery and wet surface. Water dripped around us and the stench of sewage assaulted every one of our senses. The tunnel ended in another long sewer tunnel, this one much larger and more open than the others we had been in. Tunnels branched off from it on each side. Danish and Nixis assured me however, that the correct way was to keep heading straight. As we moved, I glanced at my E.F.S., seeing several blips of red there. I perked my ears up, listening for any signs of what it could be. *Probably radroaches*, I thought as we moved forward.

Of course... life is never that simple. The cold, wet, sucking sounds filled my ears before I saw the first ghoul. It leaped out of one of the side tunnels, growling as it tried to latch onto its nearest target, which just so happened to be Lust. The black mare spun about, slicing the creature in half with a quick slash of her wings. The thing gurgled as a pink substance emanated from its dying body.

"Fuck! Pink Cloud!" Lust shouted as she leaped back, taking wing and flapping away from the dead ghoul. More sucking wet sounds echoed throughout the tunnel.

"Canterlot ghouls?" Danish said, his eyes widening. "What the fuck are they doing down here?" I shook my head.

"No... they're not Canterlot ghouls. They'd be a hell of a lot harder to kill if they were," I said. "It's Cranky. He's fucking with us. Trying to keep us from reaching the Stable." I spun about as another ghoul popped out of a tunnel. I lifted Stargazer and fired, tearing the head completely off the creature's body. More pink substance flowed from the stump where the head had been. Where was Cranky hiding at? Was he nearby? Or did he leave this little gift just for us? Lust snarled as she landed next to me.

"I recognize this shit... Sloth, right?" She asked. I nodded, glancing down at my E.F.S. Again. More red blips began to appear. We were surrounded by them. And if we killed them... eventually this whole tunnel would be filled with the Pink Cloud. I had to hoof it to Cranky. The donkey ghoul was definitely smart. There was really only one option.

"Run!" I shouted. We began galloping down the tunnel as hard as we could. *So much for being rested when we get there*, I thought as ghouls began to pour into the main tunnel, gasping and sucking and groaning as they chased after us. My E.F.S. was lighting up like a pre-war Hearth's Warming tree as we pushed our way through the throng of undead monstrosities. The ghouls weren't trying to slaughter us though, merely slow us down. Cranky was pulling his punches. In some sick sort of way, I wondered if he wanted us to reach Pride. A small group of the beasts appeared in front of me. Rather than kill them, I reached out with

telekinesis, knocking them over to the ground. At the far end of the tunnel I could see the entrance to the next section. We reached the entrance a few moments later and my friends barreled through.

“Keep going!” I yelled, stopping on a dime and pivoting around to fire behind me with Stargazer. My bullets ripped through ghoul after ghoul, spraying more of the pink substance about. I roared as I kept firing, destroying as many of the beasts as possible. I leaped back into the next room, trying to think of some way around these damnable things. I looked up, grinning as I saw that the archway of the entrance to the next chamber was made of solid stone. I latched onto the stonework with magic, ripping a block from it. That was all it took. The ceiling came rumbling down, slamming onto those ghouls that were unfortunate enough to wander in its path. I turned about, seeing my friends looking down the next tunnel. At the far end of it was a large gear-shaped door.

“Is it...?” I started to say as I stepped away from the landslide that had both trapped us and saved us. I pushed past Violet, inspecting the door in front of us. A large yellow **180** was emblazoned on the side of the ruined door. It lay next to the entrance to the Stable, a dark gray hallway extending deep inside the underground complex. I floated out Stargazer, and narrowed my gaze at the Stable door.

Pride... Here I am. I'm ready for you... are you ready for me?

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Level Up!

New Perk! Negotiator: You sure know how best to inspire ponies to action. You gain +20 to your Speech skill!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

New Perk! Technocratic Wizard: Your skills in creating weaponry/armor/tech has increased greatly. You gain +20 to your Repair and Science skills.

Chapter 20: The Sins We Commit

I'm sorry, Zecora, I'm trying my best, but... I can't stop thinking about Trixie. There was something different about her. It's like she's gone from high and mighty to mean and nasty.

Choice. What is it like to not have choice? Are we truly the product of our destiny? Is choice just an illusion? We like to think that we are the masters of our own fates, but what of the choices that life makes for us? We don't choose what we look like. We don't even choose what our cutie marks are. Do we even have the capability to choose who we love? I'm not sure. I only know that I am faced with a heavy choice to make. Do I try to save what's left of Spark? Or do I destroy her, confident that she will never harm another soul ever again?

I feel like Twilight herself must have made many choices along her path that led to the end of our world. Did she choose to let Spark do what she did? Or did she simply let fate be, and let her choice be removed from her? I wish I knew. I wish I had some clue as to what I was meant to do, what I was meant to be. I've spent so long wishing that I could go back to being me, that I don't even know who 'me' is anymore.

As I stand upon the precipice of disaster, I wonder... was it my choices that brought me here? Or was this all just some sort of cosmic joke, and I'm the punch line? Only time it seems... will tell...

The door to Stable 180 stood immediately before me. Behind me... my friends and the collapsed tunnel that was both our savior and our destroyer. I knew I had no time to lose. It was time to find Pride, and put an end to everything. I stepped forward, touching the massive gear-shaped door with my forehoof.

“Everypony ready?” I asked. Nods of agreement came from my friends. The ponies (and hellhound) that I had surrounded myself with were more than ready to support me in my time of need. I was glad that I had them, and in turn I knew they were glad that they had me. I sighed. I was going to definitely need them if I was going to make it through this in one piece. “Alright. Whatever happens, we need to stick together. Don't get separated and keep each other safe.”

My horn glowed, reaching out to the Stable's main door, enveloping it in a sheath of telekinesis. The door lifted away easily from its socket, and I set it aside with a clang. The removal of the steel cog revealed a long and dark tunnel that led deep into the underground complex. Like the flight through the tunnel, this was too easy. Almost like Pride was pushing us here. I knew that she knew we were coming from her intrusion into my dreams, but was she planning this from the very beginning? Were we walking into one giant trap?

“Okay...” I said as I moved into the hallway, beginning our long walk into the Stable. “Let's go.” We began to walk as Violet, Danish, and I ignited our horns with light spells, bathing the gray walls in an unhealthy mix of our magical colors. While the mismatched colors of our magic weren't pretty to look at, they at least provided some form of illumination. I looked at my E.F.S., trying to keep track of any possible hostile activity, but all I had was some error about it not being available. I looked over at Violet, who had a concerned look on her face.

“Is your E.F.S. acting up at all?” I asked as we continued forward. The tunnel into the Stable felt like it went on forever. It also seemed as if we were moving downward instead of straight. Violet nodded.

“Pretty much everything on my PipBuck seems to be on the fritz,” she replied. I scowled. The sheer depth of the Stable could explain the automapping failure, but that didn’t explain E.F.S. Of course, even when it was working, I didn’t understand how it worked., so I was unsure. Maybe something down here was blocking the device's spells?

“We're going to have to be extra careful then,” I said quietly. “Everypony on full alert.” Nixis kept a rear guard with Steeljack, the two friends staying close to each other. Violet and I shared point. Lust, Danish, and Patch hung near the middle and sides, watching and waiting for Pride’s first move. The long tunnel tapered down, dark metal panels appearing over the rough stone. After the transition from tunnel to hallway was completed, branching paths started to appear. There were no signs or guide markers on any of the offshoots. That made sense, at least. Pride certainly wouldn’t make it at all easy for intruders to delve her secrets, or that of the Stable she called home. I wondered briefly what this Stable actually did. Gluttony had mentioned that he was originally an inhabitant of the Stable, but did not say what had happened here besides the fact that it now belonged to Pride.

We stopped at the first intersection that we came to, trying to get a better understanding of our surroundings by sending a light spell down each of the paths. It seemed like they only led into more featureless hallways. Each one was lined with not just typical gray Stable walls, but also massive pipework that lined the walls of each tunnel. Did the entrance of the Stable somehow take you to the maintenance areas if you just followed it straight? I felt very confused, and without the use of my PipBuck's automap feature I had absolutely no idea where to go next.

“Anypony have any bright ideas?” I muttered, more to myself than anything. Lust spoke however, and I was a bit surprised at what she had to say.

“I think... I think we have to go to the left,” she said quietly. “I just have this feeling that's where we need to go.” I nodded.

“Are you starting to remember?” I asked. Lust shrugged noisily in the power armor she wore.

“I don't... I don't know. I feel like there's some bits poking through, but every time I try to really remember it... I lose it,” she said, sighing. We began moving down the hallway, as I pondered the mare's words. I felt truly awful for her, but there wasn't much I could do about it. She had to remember things on her own, but still... I felt horrible knowing even what I did know about her past life. Lilith... Lust... Lilith. What would happen when the pegasus fully remembered herself? Would she accept what she once was? Or would she choose to forget? My mind swam with worries as we walked. The cold gray walls felt like they were closing in on us. I'm not even sure I knew how long we had been walking for. The hallway finally opened up into another series of tunnels.

“How big is this place?” Nixis wondered out loud.

“Pretty big,” Violet said. “I can't imagine how many ponies this Stable housed. We must be in the maintenance levels though, because there aren't any doors that go anywhere.”

“I'm more concerned that Cranky hasn't shown himself,” I said quietly. “Those ghouls on the way into this place? I'm pretty sure those weren't even the beginning of what he has in store for us.” I glanced

about, checking my E.F.S. again. Nothing. *Whatever's messing with it must still be active*, I thought. It was a very uneasy feeling, not having the E.F.S. to tell me if there were any hostiles about.

"If I may ask, who is this Cranky you speak of?" Nixis asked. "Maybe he's given up on finding us?" Danish nodded in agreement.

"Ah... well Cranky is Sloth. He was an old friend of a friend of a friend..." I tapered off, groping for the best way to explain Cranky Doodle Donkey. "He's... He's a Canterlot ghoul of some sorts. I'm not exactly sure what he was before... but he's working for Pride, and he's not one to give up so easily."

"We met him on the way into Chicacolt. He wanted to try and bring us to Pride, but he just kind of... let us go," Steeljack commented. We rounded the next corner, chatting idly amongst ourselves when I heard it. That... *sound*. Sucking and gasping and clawing at the walls. *Ghouls*, I thought. I tensed up.

"Do you guys hear that?" I said. "There are ghouls nearby." I glanced about, relieved. *Where are they?* I thought as the sound began to grow louder and louder. We moved down the hall as silently as possible. I glanced at my E.F.S., hoping and praying that whatever was blocking it had magically stopped and that I could see where the monsters were. No dice. We stopped at the end of the hall, coming to another fork. The sucking sounds were deafening now. It was if they were everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"Where are they?" Violet said quietly. "Why don't they just attack?" I shook my head.

"I don't know," I said, motioning to the right. "Cranky's pushing us, he's got to be. Let's try this hall, hopefully we find where we're supposed to go before Cranky's ghouls find us." I moved into the hall, worrying about the noises around me. In these cramped hallways it was going to be difficult to defend ourselves effectively. Ghouls were highly unpredictable to fight, especially ones that were controlled by a higher intelligence. Cranky was playing us every step we took. He was pushing us somewhere, but where? A loud clicking sound caught my attention over the din of the ghouls as we moved down the long hall. I glanced back, seeing the already dark hallway begin to grow darker. Another click, and the next section of hallway went pitch black.

"Umm... I don't like the look of that," I said, another click emanating from the ceiling, heralding the darkening of the section ahead of us. "I think we should move a little faster..." I flared my horn, shooting a light spell behind us. It struck the darkness and disappeared without a trace, swallowed as if it had never existed. "Okay, a *lot* faster!" The darkness thickened as we started to canter forward, trying to keep ahead of the loss of light. We rounded the corner to the next hall, finding ourselves in a wider passage. Metal doors lined the gray hall, the signs that indicated where they led either blank or missing. I didn't care where they went to. We had to keep moving forward. The magical darkness behind us continued to fall, coming dangerously close to our rear. I didn't want to know what would happen if it reached us.

"Shit! Cranky, you're a BAD DONKEY!" I shouted as my canter turned into a gallop. *How the fuck is Cranky doing this?!* I thought in my panic. The sucking sounds of the ghouls were all I could hear. It was unbearable. Unfortunately, the next corner led to a hall that was extremely cramped. As we moved forward, what light there was at the end of the hall began to darken as well. We were being boxed in. I spun about, looking for an exit but finding nothing. It seemed like there was nothing to do but wait as the darkness on each side of our group inched closer and closer. The sucking noises ceased, an empty quiet filling the hall. A waiting quiet.

“Somepony wanna tell me what’s going on here?” Lust said.

“Something wanted us here,” I said, pulling Stargazer out with my magic. After the constant din of the ghouls, the quiet was too much. The first ghoul launched out the darkness behind us without warning, growling loudly as it landed next to Lust. The black mare snarled, slashing down with her wings, taking its head off. I barely had time to look back as two more of the undead monstrosities came from the other side. Violet and I lifted our respective weapons, turning the two beasts into a bloody pulp. The sucking sounds began anew as two groups of ghouls lurched out of the darkness ahead of and behind us.

“Fan out! Don’t let them get close!” I shouted, turning Stargazer on the nearest ghoul and splattering its brains all over the metal floor.

“There’s not enough room!” Patch called back. “We need to find somewhere a little more open!” I agreed, but with the darkness surrounding us, I wasn’t sure where we were going to go. More of the ghouls appeared, as if out of thin air. Patch bounced over onto Steeljack’s back, firing away at the undead horde with pinpoint precision. Her lover grinned widely and widened his stance. The armored pony was still able to shoot his rifle with Patch using him as a shooting platform, and the ghouls suffered for it. The loud ***crack*** echoed throughout the hall as it struck a nearby ghoul, turning it into paste.

“Shit. We can’t keep this up for long,” I said, using Stargazer like a club to knock back two more of the monsters. Pretty soon, we’d get tired or run out of ammo, whichever came first. There was no way out. I began looking around for something, anything that we could use to get out of this. I looked back at Lust, who was busy slicing two of the undead beasts in half with her wings. “Lust! We need an exit, fast!” The black mare nodded, her eyes wide as she glanced about the cramped hall.

“These maintenance tunnels, they always had some sort of access port that led into the ductwork!” She shouted as she began looking down at the floor beneath us. “Give me some light, Star. I can’t see down here.” I nodded, sparing a flare of magic to stick a light spell to Lust’s head. The mare grinned widely as she began to pull on one of the tiles on the ground. With a grunt, she ripped it away, revealing an access shaft that went straight down. It was just big enough for everypony to fit. I grinned.

“Lust, you’re magnificent. Everypony, down the hatch!” I shouted. Nixis went first, howling as he slid down the shaft. Danish followed, along with Steeljack and Patch. I glanced back at Violet and Lust. “You two go on, I’ll hold them back and try and seal it up so they can’t follow!” The two mares nodded, leaping down the hole in the ground. The horde of ghouls pressed forward, pushing against my defenses in the tight hall as I backed towards the shaft. I took a moment to access my PipBuck, praying the inventory - Yes! I pulled a specific item out and closed the inventory.

“Fuck you!” I shouted, as I dropped down the hole, leaving the grenade behind. As I slid down the device blew, a massive ***boom*** echoing down the shaft along with a plume of dust and grit. I fell free through the air below me, landing on the hard metal floor next to the others. I groaned as I pushed myself up.

“Next time, we take the elevator,” Lust said groggily as she sat up next to Violet. I looked up in awe. We had fallen into a large open hall filled with what appeared to be maintenance equipment. At the far

end was a large set of double metal doors. A sign above them held the words ***RESIDENTIAL ELEVATOR***. There was no sign of ghouls nearby.

"I think we found a way out of here!" Patch said, bouncing past me before stopping cold in her tracks. I followed her gaze as I realized we were not alone in this room. In front of the elevator doors was a very familiar face. Cranky's red soulless eyes smoldered in the darkness, a savage grin on his face. Parts of his flesh were dripping away, splashing onto the ground below him. The stench of rotting meat assaulted my nose, apparently coming from the contents of his cart.

"Well, kid. You did it," the donkey ghoul said, his gravelly voice echoing across the dark hall. "You made it here. I'm impressed."

"Cranky," I said coldly. The ghoul coughed.

"My name's Sloth, thank you very much," he said.

"So what now? You come here to finish the job yourself?" I snarled. Sloth grinned, his teeth gleaming.

"Soon. But first... I'd like to have a little fun with you. Makes the job more interesting, after all," the donkey said.

"What about Matilda?" Violet interrupted, anger in her voice. "What about your promise to her?" The ghoul growled.

"I told you before, kid. I have no choice in the matter," he replied. "Pride is my master, and I serve her because I have to." He glanced over at Lust. "Although, I hardly expected to see you here, sister."

"I'm here because I owe Pride a world of fucking hurt," the pegasus mare said. "She fucked with all of us, Sloth. Don't you know that? She's responsible for us, why we are the way we are!" Sloth grinned again, nodding.

"I'm aware of this," he said. "Unlike most of our brethren, I actually know what happened to me. I was a ghoul first, and I'm still a ghoul, after all."

"It was the statues, wasn't it?" I said. "She did something to you with them." Lust's eyes widened.

"What? What statues?" she asked. Sloth snorted, interrupting us before I could respond to the mare.

"Yes... you would be correct there," he said. "I made a deal with the statue, and with Pride. I gave my service willingly, for my memories and the promise of my Matilda's return."

"Star?" Lust asked again. "What are you two talking about?" I sighed.

"Lust. I saw... I saw a memory. Pride used these... things. These... statues. She used them to turn you into... well... you," I said. Lust snarled.

"And you didn't think I needed to know this?!" she shouted. "Excuse me, but this is something you should have told me about!"

“Oh, ho... dissension in the ranks,” Sloth interjected, grinning widely. “You've managed to surround yourself with the most interesting characters, kid. I'm impressed.” I shot a glare at the ghoul, then looked back at Lust.

“Lust,” I said calmly. “I'm sorry. I should have told you, but this hardly the time to be discussing this. We need to press forward.” Lust's eyes hardened as I looked up at Sloth. I would have to speak with her, but now was not the time. “As for you... why? Why can't you just see that Pride is playing you? She's holding your Matilda, but she's never going to give her to you!”

“Because I know she will! She promised me!” Sloth barked angrily. I could tell that by now we were hitting a sore spot with the ghoul. He was beginning to become visibly agitated, but he just stayed there, like he was waiting for something to happen. Sloth growled under his breath. “No matter. You won't be going any further. I'm going to put a stop to this, now!” The ghoul opened his mouth, exhaling a blast of Pink Cloud that floated above us. Wasting no time, I lifted Stargazer with my magic, and fired a stream of bullets towards the donkey. Sloth moved to the side, dodging the bullets with relative ease. I blinked. There was no way Cranky should have been able to do that, superpowered upgraded Canterlot Ghoul or not.

“Nice try, Ministry Mare. But you'll have to do better than that to take me down. I haven't forgotten our last encounter by any means,” Sloth snarled. The swirling pink clouds hung above us in the air, preventing those of us that could fly from taking wing. The sucking and growling sounds erupted from all around us, indicating that we were not going to be alone for much longer. The donkey ghoul grinned widely. “Tell you what. If you can make it through the Stable... I'll consider helping you. But I'm not going to make it easy on you.”

“*When* we make it through, Cranky. Not *if*. And when we make it to Pride, we'll help you get Matilda back from her,” I said. Sloth scowled.

“We'll see,” he grumbled quietly. “We'll see.” A swirling column of Pink Cloud surrounded the ghoul, and he disappeared in a flash of pink light. The growling and wheezing noises continued as the first group of ghouls burst into the maintenance room. Violet and I spun about, lifting our respective weapons into the air.

“Nixis! Danish! See if you can't get the elevator doors open! We'll hold them off as long as possible!” I shouted. The hellhound and unicorn nodded, charging to the doors. Nixis began to pick at the terminal connected to the elevator. Danish stood guard in front of him, floating his carbine rifle into the air. I tried to trigger E.S.A.T.S., hoping that the spell would still be active. Fortunately, the familiar slowdown of time came upon me. I queued up multiple shots and released the spell. Stargazer aimed and fired, ripping holes into ghoulflesh. Violet took aim with Thunder Flash, the silver fire of the beam rifle turning several ghouls into sizzling goop on the ground. I glanced over at Patch and Steeljack, the two lovers working in tandem as the familiar ***crack*** of the stallion's rifle was overshadowed by the powerful boom that was Para Bellum's. Patch targeted ghoul after ghoul, ripping into the undead monstrosities with her rifle. As good as we were, as practiced and united, the ghouls kept coming. Stronger ones had begun to appear as well, glowing spots marking their rotting frames.

“Fuck! There's too many of them!” Lust shouted as she pressed up next to Violet and me. She glared at me. “You and I are going to have a talk, later.” I nodded.

“Fine,” I said, turning as another set of ghouls rushed us. Lust snarled and lashed out with her wings,

slicing two of the beasts' heads clean off. I looked back at Danish and Nixis. Despite our best efforts, several ghouls had made it past our barricade. Danish was holding them off as best as he could, but even he was being overrun by the monsters. Nixis snarled, slashing out at the nearest ghoul with his vicious claws. I glanced back over at my other friends. Patch and Steeljack were surrounded on all sides by the slobbering creatures.

There was just too many of them. Cranky had played his cards well enough this time, sending wave after wave of his mindless creations. I noticed that the ghouls were wearing Stable jumpsuits. Cranky was using the inhabitants of Stable 180 against us. How many had died here for his twisted plans? I shuddered at the thought of it.

"Pull back!" I shouted, as I fired into the mess of ghouls again. I flared my horn, knocking ghouls out of my path with a burst of telekinesis. Violet and the others fought their way through the ghouls as we tightened our defensive perimeter around where Nixis and Danish worked.

"Nixis! What's the status on the door?!" I called back.

"Not good, Star!" the hellhound yelled. "The terminal won't respond! And my claws are barely making a dent in the door!" I growled. Ghouls filled the maintenance area, growling and hissing. Glowing ones dotted the swarm, which was slowly filling the space we had just vacated. They didn't seem to be in any hurry, knowing they had us cornered. We were trapped with nowhere to go. I looked over at Violet.

"What do we do?" my love said, fear in her eyes. "What do we do, Star?"

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The Zebra Orb

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My host's body was lean and strong. She felt like a powerful weapon, ready to spring into action at any moment. I realized by my host's size and the way she carried herself that she wasn't a pony. She was a zebra.

My host blinked as she looked across the ruined city of Chicacolt. The light of the morning sun was hidden behind a thick layer of cloud cover as the zebra mare stepped out of an abandoned building. She looked back at her flank. The number **180** was emblazoned on the jumpsuit she wore. She sighed, and turned back towards the city. My host trotted along, a cool breeze flowing across her coat. She stopped after a few steps.

"I know you are there, I can feel your energy in the air," my host said aloud, her voice deep and resonant. A chuckle from behind the mare prompted her to look back. Another zebra mare appeared out of the ruins.

"Evora," The other mare said.

"Sylva," My host replied. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I feel that I've missed some vital missive."

“Evora, my student. I merely wished to see how you were,” the other zebra replied. “You have been... distant as of late.” My host sighed again.

“I’m sorry, Sylva,” she said, breaking the rhyming. “It’s just... all of this. Since we came out of the Stable, things have been... difficult for me.”

“I know what you mean,” Sylva said. “But we must press on. There is much to learn from this world. There is still ancient magic here, if we look hard enough.” My host nodded.

“I can feel that, Sylva. In fact, I can feel the magic in this place stirring. Something is happening, something big,” my host said. “Sylva... if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone. I’ll be back to camp before nightfall, I promise.”

“As you wish,” Sylva said. “Be careful, my dear.” The other mare stepped back, disappearing into the ruins silently. My host turned back and broke into a full gallop into the city. There was no pony in sight as she moved from street to street. Evora grinned widely as she stopped in front of the remains of a building I knew I had seen before. The Ministry of Arcane Sciences. My host silently stalked around the back of the imposing building, stopping in the vacant lot behind it. Her eyes flashed and she twirled about, striking outwards with a hoof. A metal flying star deflected off of her extended hoof, soaring away to clatter harmlessly on the concrete ground. My host grinned.

“You’ll have to do better than that, I fear,” she said. Another projectile flew from seemingly nowhere towards the zebra. Evora moved swiftly with grace and poise, dodging the star easily.

“You’re getting better by the day,” a voice called out from above her. My host glanced upwards, seeing a dark blue alicorn standing on the Ministry building. *Pride*, I thought. *She keeps showing up... what does it mean? But she’s different this time. She doesn’t look the same... is this before she changed?*

“Hello, Diamond,” my host called. The alicorn smiled and stepped off the building, snapping her wings open to soar elegantly into a landing in front of the zebra. I noticed that the zebra was studying every movement the alicorn made with reverence and... a little bit of admiration. It was clear that these two were not only friends, but that my host held something special in her heart for the other mare.

“Well met, Evora. I trust no pony followed you?” She asked. My host nodded.

“No. I believe Sylva might have suspected something, but she did not follow,” the zebra responded with a smile. “So what are we up to today?” Diamond grinned widely.

“Well. I’ve been thinking. Everything I’ve read so far has suggested that the statues are real,” she said. “I think they might even be here.” She motioned up at the looming Ministry building.

“This again? Diamond, I think you’ve been poking your nose too much into those books of yours,” my host said.

“I have not!” The alicorn snorted. “But you can’t deny that these things are worth the search! Can’t you imagine it, Evora? With such magic at our hooves, we could make this city better!”

“And what if they’re not real? What then?” my host said. Diamond sighed, looking away for a

moment.

“What if, Evora? What if they aren’t real? Even if I never find the statues, I’ll still be happy with the life I’ve lead searching for them,” the mare said, tears forming in her eyes. My host placed her hoof on the alicorn's shoulder.

“Diamond. I just... I care about you, you know that right?” My host said. Diamond nodded. “We've been good friends for a while now, and I don't want to see you push yourself deeper into this.”

“I know, I know... I just... I just want to help. I feel like ponies still mistrust the alicorns,” Diamond said. My host smiled.

“But you're not like that anymore. You haven't been for a long time,” the zebra said. “You're a good pony Diamond, and your heart's in the right place... even if your head isn't always there.” My host chuckled, drawing laughter from the alicorn mare.

“Yeah... I suppose you're right,” she said. “I guess... I guess we don't have to worry about the statues today. We could just scavenge like normal.”

“That sounds lovely. By the way, where are Cutter and Lilith?” My host asked. Diamond rolled her eyes.

“Oh, you know those two. They're off somewhere having a party of their own,” she said. “Cutter said something about dinner at the Theater. I figured I shouldn't intrude on their fun.”

“Indeed.” My host chuckled as the two equines made their way in through the docking area of the Ministry hub. The long-dead skeletons of ponies lay strewn about the shipping dock. A long hall extended deep into the abandoned building beyond. My host and the alicorn made their casual way down this hall, picking through the odd locker and trash bin on the way. Evora turned down a second hall, splitting off from her friend. The hallway was barren, ending in a large set of doors marked with a cutie mark that I knew all too well. My host pushed on the doors. Locked. She looked around for any sort of terminal that might control the door. Of course, there was nothing.

“Well, shit,” my host muttered to herself. Looking down at her hoof, she tapped a few buttons on the device strapped around her leg. “Diamond? I found a door I can't hack into. Think you could help?” Static emanated from the radio device.

“Sure, I'll be right there.” The alicorn's voice came out of the radio. My host slumped to her haunches while she waited. Soon enough, Diamond came trotting around the corner. Her eyes widened when she saw the door.

“It's... Twilight Sparkle's office,” she said. “The things that might be in this room... I can't even imagine...”

“Do you think you can get in?” My host said. Diamond studied the door for a few moments. She closed her eyes, igniting her horn. The doors were bathed in the soft blue light of her magic. Grimacing, the alicorn focused harder, intent on ripping the doors from their hinges. The doors bent inward, the metal bowing to the extreme pressure that the mare was placing on them.

“Come on...” Diamond said, growling. Her slender horn flared brighter as the intensity of her magic increased. With a final burst of power, the doors blew completely in. The light from Diamond's horn died down.

“Wow. I'm impressed,” my host said as she trotted past Diamond into the doorway. The office beyond was incredible. The plush velvet carpeting in the room gave the entire office a warm and cozy feeling to it. It appeared that nopony had ever opened the doors since the end of the war. Arcane instruments hung off of every wall, and a massive crystal globe sat at the far end of the room. Centered in the room was a wooden desk, emblazoned with the Ministry of Arcane Science's logo.

“I... I've never seen anything like it,” Diamond said, her eyes wide with wonder. “Can you believe our luck?”

“I know... I've never seen this door here before. But yet, here it was,” my host said as the two friends stepped into the office proper. Diamond moved to the desk, sitting down at the terminal that was there. After a few moments of tapping, her eyes lit up.

“Evora...?” She said. My host glanced over at the alicorn, who motioned for her to come over. Evora trotted to the other mare's side.

“What is it?” My host asked. The alicorn put her hoof up to the terminal screen.

“They're... they're... they're *real*. Everything I've been looking for... it's all here!” She exclaimed. My host's eyes followed her friend's hoof, reading the text on the screen. Her eyes narrowed as she reached the section of text the alicorn had been reading.

“Interesting,” my host said. “I don't know, Diamond... are you sure this is it? This seems like it's too good to be true.” Diamond snorted in response.

“I'm sure of it,” the alicorn said. “In fact, it appears that Twilight kept up a journal of her studies on the statues. I'm going to copy it off here to my PipBuck. It could be useful.”

“Does it say where these things are?” Evora asked. The alicorn stopped dead in her tracks.

“Well... no, it doesn't,” She said dejectedly. Evora sighed.

“Then how do you know they even exist anymore?” The zebra said. “How do you know they weren't destroyed when the bombs dropped?” Diamond silently glared at my host as she began to tap some more at the terminal, copying the files off to her PipBuck. My host continued to poke around the room, looking for anything small that could be salvaged. At the far end of the room, below the crystalline globe, was a silver footlocker. It was adorned with an ornate padlock. The zebra ran her hoof over the lock, feeling the energy pouring from it as she did.

“Diamond?” My host called out. “I think I found something.” The alicorn stood, looking back at where the zebra was hunched over.

“What is it?” She said. Evora motioned to the footlocker.

“Some sort of strange lock... I think it's magical. Can you unlock it with the terminal?” She asked.

Diamond looked back down at the terminal, shaking her head.

“No... there's no access on here for that. I'll have to try it the old fashioned way,” the alicorn mare replied, trotting over to where my host was sitting. She inspected the lock closely. “It's definitely magical in nature. Usually these kinds of locks have a specific sequence of magic that you have to feed into it in order to open them.”

“Interesting... I wonder what the Ministry Mare wanted to hide so badly she stuck it in that kind of protection?” My host said. Diamond shrugged.

“I don't know, but I intend to find out,” she said, a determined look crossing her face.

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The roar of gunfire sounded from Stargazer as I gritted my teeth at the oncoming onslaught of ghouls. We were pinned down with nowhere to go. The elevator doors had refused to budge, and I was beginning to get pissed. I had no idea how much longer we could hold out. I growled loudly, flaring my horn in the only chance I could think of to give my friends any sort of time to keep working on the terminal.

“Everypony stay back!” I shouted, releasing the magic into Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple barrier appeared around us, and immediately the base of my horn began to sear with intense pain. I closed my eyes, trying to force the magic out through the pain.

“Star!” Violet called out. “Are you alright?!” I panted hard for a moment as I tried to get a grip on myself, before finally opening my eyes. I had done it! The barrier stood perfectly, preventing any of the ghouls from getting through to us. I nodded.

“Yeah... I'm alright,” I said breathlessly. “I can't hold this spell for very long, though. See if you can help Nixis and Danish with the door.” My love nodded, rushing back to where the cream colored unicorn and the hellhound were still working away at the door. Violet joined in, connecting her PipBuck to the terminal and frantically poking at it. I turned back to the ghouls, watching them pound furiously on my shield. My horn continued to flare in pain, and I gritted my teeth. I tried to breathe deeply, but I couldn't manage a single full breath between the stabs of pain from my aching horn.

A loud beeping behind me drew my attention away from the shield. Violet sprang into the air as the doors hissed, steam rolling out from between them “Star, I got it!” Violet called, bouncing like a schoolfilly. I grimaced as the doors revealed a dark elevator shaft, extending up and down beyond our current floor. Violet and the others must have realized this as well as they looked up the shaft hopelessly.

“Lust, see if you can start taking the others up the shaft. Try and get to the residential section. I'll hold the shield as long as I possibly can!” I yelled. The black mare glared at me, but finally nodded. She turned to Patch first.

“Come on, greenie. Let's go.” She said flatly. The green mare latched her forelegs around the pegasus' neck. With a blast of her wings, Lust launched herself up the shaft, disappearing from sight. A sharp pain emanated from my horn again, and the shield began to flicker.

“Star!” Violet exclaimed. I waved her off, pushing more magic into my horn. The shield began to reform, albeit a little smaller than it had been before. Several moments passed, the only noise the sucking and slobbering of the ghouls on the other side of the shield. The flutter of wings and clanging sound of a combat pegasus landing heralded Lust’s return.

“It’s like four floors up, but I found the residential section. It’s deserted. Patch is setting up a perimeter in case that donkey fuck tries to strike while we’re split up,” she said. I nodded as the black mare moved to Danish and Nixis. “Alright, I can take Danish, but I’m not sure about you, Nixis. Do you think you can climb up if you follow me?” The hellhound nodded in response.

“I should be able to manage,” he said. Lust grinned, pointing back at Danish.

“Alright then, hold on tight lover boy. Don’t get too frisky with me, or I might have to punish you,” she said, winking and turning away from the stallion. She shook her rump to emphasize her point, grinning widely. Danish rolled his eyes and wrapped his forelegs around her neck. Lust took off, Nixis following quickly behind as he leaped into the shaft, using his claws to dig deep into the metal walls. He began to ascend the shaft after the pegasus. Only Violet and Steeljack were left.

“Like old times, right?” I said jokingly as my horn sparked. I closed my eyes, feeling the pain intensify.

“Old times?” Violet quipped, before her eyes went wide with fear. “Oh no. No no no no.” I grinned as I turned about, reaching out with my telekinesis. I let the shield fall, grinning with pleasure as the pain washed away into a warm glow. The ghouls immediately charged forward, rushing after my retreating form. A spike of pain came when I relit my horn, but I pushed through it. Violet and Steeljack both screamed as they flew into the shaft in the grip of my magic. I opened my wings and leapt in after them, powering upwards and carrying them with me as ghouls poured into the shaft. The ghouls howled and snarled as they streamed in through the open doors, falling down the open shaft. I kept flapping my wings hard, trying to catch sight of Lust and the others. A pale cream colored light flickered above me, indicating an exit. I rushed towards the light, landing inside another drab gray tunnel. Danish’s horn dimmed as I deposited Violet and Steeljack onto the hard floor. I slumped to my haunches, every part of me burning as I held a hoof to my horn.

“Star!!” Violet called out, coming to my side. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. I had experienced magic burnout before, but never this badly. Ever since Spark had left my body, whenever I had used magic in such extremes the burnout had become much worse. Now, even when I wasn’t using magic my horn pulsed with pain on every heartbeat.

“Hurts...” I choked out through the tears. “Horn... magic... hurts like a bitch. Just need... need a moment to collect myself.” Violet nodded, placing her foreleg around my neck. It was just what I needed. Lust sitting down in front of me however... was not something I needed.

“Before we go any further... before I risk my ass for you any more... talk. No more lies,” the black mare said. Violet glared at Lust, death in her eyes.

“Can’t you see she’s in pain, Lust?” My marefriend said. “This is hardly the time.”

“No. It’s the perfect time. I need to know,” Lust said. “I need to know if she knows anything that involves me.” I looked up at Violet, and nodded silently. I lifted a hoof to my eyes, wiping the tears as

best as I could.

“Okay... you want to know? Fine. Gluttony gave me a memory orb. In it, I saw Greed become... well, I saw him become Greed,” I said. “She gave him some statue, that transformed his body. I assume that she did the same to you.”

“That's... that's it?” The pegasus mare asked. I nodded. She sighed, looking troubled. “So there was nothing about me?”

“No,” I lied. I knew in my heart that it was wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her about what Greed was doing, and why. I couldn't tell her about Lilith. Not yet. A little pink pony in the back of my head told me that telling a secret was the fastest way to lose a friend... FOREVEEER. The little orange pony argued with her, telling me that I should pony up and tell the truth. I sighed, deciding that the lie was easier to deal with. “No. It was just Greed and Pride. She had already become... become what she is now.” Lust looked away for a moment, and then let her gaze meet mine.

“Alright,” she said after a few moments of silence, her eyes softening. “I just... I really needed to know.”

“It's okay, Lust. I understand,” I said, wincing in pain. “I know you're trying to do everything you can to remember... just don't force it, alright? You'll remember who you were, trust me.” I stood shakily, Violet supporting me. I smiled down at her.

“I... I'll try, Star,” Lust replied. “Are you feeling better?” I nodded.

“Yeah, I'll be alright,” I said, steadying myself. I took a step forward, feeling a little more stable. “So... where are we?” Danish and Nixis were standing guard further down the gray hall. The cream colored stallion looked back at us.

“It looks like we're near the residential section of the Stable,” Nixis said quietly. “From what I can see in the next hall, we're going to pass through the living quarters.”

“We should ideally make our way to the medical wing,” I said as we began to walk. “In the memory orb that I saw Pride in, that was where she had led Greed. It should be on the other side of the main atrium, if I remember correctly.” Nixis pushed open the door at the end of the hall, revealing another set of gray halls ahead of us. *Somepony at Stable-Tec must have really liked the color gray*, I thought. Granted, there was spots here and there of color in this section of the Stable. Dark bluish doors that led to individual residential quarters lined the walls. Some of them were closed completely, while yet others were halfway open, revealing dirty and dingy rooms beyond their entrances. This area was seemingly devoid of life. I thought of the ghouls that Cranky had used against us down below in the maintenance section. Did he really animate the remains of the Stable ponies? How long ago had the Stable gotten to this point? I felt confused. Gluttony had said he was an original inhabitant of this Stable, so what happened that forced the Stable open? Was it possible that Gluttony was lying to me in order to get me here?

The long and confusing halls were of no help. Without E.F.S. or our automaps, we were flying blind. Every corner we traversed just seemed to result in more gray halls to walk down. I struggled as we walked to remember the path that Pride and Greed had taken while traversing the Stable, but to be honest I couldn't quite remember any of it. After what had felt like hours of walking, everything

around us began to look very similar.

“Shit... are we walking around in a giant circle or something?” I said as we passed by another open residential room. Despite the darkness pervading the hallway and the fact that all of these rooms looked practically the same, this one felt... familiar.

“I don't know,” Violet said, poking her head into the room. “Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?”

“I doubt it,” Danish said quietly. “It's gotta be some sort of trick.” Nixis and Steeljack nodded in agreement.

“Regardless, we've gotta keep going,” I said. “I don't want to be caught by surprise again.”

The next hall over looked exactly the same as the first. More gray walls, more half open doors. More twists, more turns. *How large is this place?! I thought.* After about the sixth time passing by what looked like the same half-open door, I stopped and stomped my hooves like a little filly.

“Dammit!” I shouted. “What in the Sorrel Hells is going on here?!” I growled, slamming my forehoof into the wall. My eyes widened as the wall *shimmered* around my hoof. I dragged my hoof along the wall. The shimmer followed along. “Oh, fuck.”

“What is it?” Patch said as she bounced up to the wall, placing her hoof on it, prompting another round of colorful shimmering. “Ohh... it's a reactive surface. I may be wrong, but none of this is even real. It's a hologram!”

“Pride,” Lust said. “She's running us in circles, trying to slow us down.”

“Okay, so now that we know what it is... how do we get out?” I asked, looking over at Patch. The green mare grinned widely.

“Oh that's easy. I just need to overload the converters in the walls with a focused pulse of electrical energy,” she said. My eyes glazed over at the technical explanation.

“Could you maybe... you know... speak plain Equestrian?” I said. Lust snickered. Patch rolled her eye at me. It was a strange sight to see a one-eyed mare rolling her singular eye. I almost burst into laughter myself.

“Fine...” Patch said, groaning. “I'm gonna blow it up.” I blinked as the earth pony reached into her saddlebags, pulling out a small apple-shaped device. It had a blue ring around its center.

“Erm... isn't that an E.M.P. grenade?” Danish said, his voice shaky. Patch nodded.

“Yep. This'll only take a second,” she said, feeling about on the wall until her hoof hit something protruding from it. Grinning, she pressed the device up against the protrusion. Yanking the stem from the grenade, she turned and yelled. “Alright, everypony! Run!” I turned tail and started booking it down the hall. Violet ran next to me, her eyes wide with fear. We made it just around the corner when the grenade blew. A tingling sensation wriggled its way through my entire body and I stopped cold. Everywhere around us, the walls began to shimmer. One by one, every wall disappeared in a

spectacular blaze of light. The walls finally failed, revealing that we were in a large open hall with two large doors on either end of it. The others were standing a few feet from Violet and me, looking just as confused as I was.

“Well... that was certainly... different,” I said as I shook off the tingling feeling. “Just what was that?”

“Holo-reactor,” Patch said casually. “We had one in my Stable too. We used it for relaxation. It was supposed to help keep us from losing our minds being stuck underground.”

“So... wait... this was all just some big recreational facility?” Violet asked. Patch nodded.

“Obviously... Pride modified the programming for her own use,” the earth mare replied smugly. “But no matter how you wire it... I can fix it!”

“Well, shall we move on then?” Nixis interjected. “Pride's going to figure out soon that we're past here.” I nodded.

“If she hasn't already,” Lust said as we made our way towards the doors at the far end. Like most of the doors that we had found so far, they weren't locked. The locks had probably been disabled when the Stable had failed. On the other side of the large doors lay the Stable's Atrium. The large open-ended lounge area was where the Stable's inhabitants would relax and mingle on off-times. Chairs and tables lay strewn about. In the center of the Atrium was a massive fountain that was long-dry. The fountain had a large alicorn statue in the center of it.

“Wow... I'm impressed,” Danish said. “This must have been one of the larger Stables in the city.”

“It... it was...” Lust said. “I can remember that much... at least.”

“You know... something has been bugging me about this place,” I said. “All those ghouls that attacked us earlier... they were wearing Stable jumpsuits. And granted, this place could be big enough for that many ponies... but that many died here? How many escaped?” Lust sighed.

“I... don't know offhand, Star. I can only remember snippets of this place,” the black mare said.

“Perhaps I can be of some assistance, kid.” A gravelly voice said. From behind the fountain stepped Cranky. The donkey ghoul had a grin on his rotting face.

“Cranky. I was wondering when you would show back up,” I said. A dry chuckle escaped from the ghoul's throat.

“I see you made it past my ghouls,” he said. “Of course... I've been watching you since you escaped. Your little friend there, the green one. She's smart. We're going to have to remedy that.”

“I'd like to see you try it, buster,” Patch said, glaring at the donkey.

“What do you want now, Cranky?” I broke into the conversation angrily. I was beginning to get really sick of these interruptions. “You ready to end this yet?” Sloth's eyes narrowed at me.

“Oh, I'm sure we'll be ending this soon, but not now. I'm more interested in seeing how far you're

willing to go in order to get to Pride,” He said.

“Aren't you afraid she'll take some action against you if you're supposed to be stopping us?” Violet said, cocking her head. Sloth grinned.

“Pride can't be everywhere at once. Unfortunately, she's a little preoccupied at the moment,” he said, glancing over at Lust. “So you want to know more about this place?”

“What do you know?” The pegasus said. “What does it have to do with me?”

“I know more than you could possibly imagine, pegasus. I've lived a long time, seen a lot of bad things in that time. When you're a ghoul, nopony wants anything to do with you. Anyhow, that doesn't have much to do with you, I know,” the ghoul said wistfully. “I met a pony several years ago. She was fresh out of the Goddess, and had just started calling herself Diamond. We nearly killed each other, but both of us are fairly resilient creatures.”

“Pride,” I said coldly. The ghoul nodded.

“Yes, before she became the Pride you know today. When that Goddess-thing died, her memories all came flooding back... at least what she thought was her memories,” he said. I cocked my head.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean that her memories were not her own. They belonged to somepony else. Diamond didn't know what to do. She fled, trying to understand what was happening to her,” he said. “She came here to this city, and I followed her. I didn't know what I was doing, but she needed help. It was here that she met you, and the others. Her memories drew her to Stable 180, where she found the Stable already opened, it's inhabitants having moved into the city. She made her home here, making friends and trying to fight the good fight.”

“But... then... what happened to her?” I said, trying to process it in my head. Pride had been good once? I almost couldn't believe it. She had somehow ended up with somepony else's memories when the Goddess had died. I knew how that felt, personally. Having had Twilight's memories stuck in my head for so long, I was well aware of what it was like to have to live somepony else's life. Sloth chuckled at my question.

“That's all I'm going to tell you... for now,” the donkey said. “Now then. That should be enough time.”

“Enough time for what?” Steeljack echoed. The stallion had been silent until now. Something Cranky had said had piqued his interest.

“Enough time for the automated defenses to start back up. The Protectaponies should be arriving shortly,” Sloth said casually. “Get ready, Radiant Star. It's time to keep up the fight.”

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The Earth Pony Orb

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As the memory filtered in, I immediately took stock of my host. I was a male earth pony, strongly built and very physically imposing. My host was also wearing a pinstriped suit and a fedora. A sharp, almost predatory grin was on his face as he trotted along the metal catwalk. I realized with a sudden familiarity that we were in the MMMM headquarters. The bakery below looked almost just as I remembered it. My host descended the metal stairs, stopping to nod at a few of the donut bakers as he passed them by. He continued forward, pushing open the door that led out of the massive bakery. The sky was thick with clouds, the thin grey light beginning to filter away. A cream-colored unicorn colt stood at attention just outside the door as my host regarded him. Peering closer at the colt, my host grinned again.

“Oy! Danish, what the fuck are ye doing out here at this time of night?” My host said. From behind the mask of my host's mind, I blinked. Danish looked so young! I didn't know that the stallion had grown up with his boss. *No wonder the two were so close*, I thought.

“I... I thought maybe you might show me some more of those cool moves,” the colt replied, falling over his words as he spoke. “Please, Grenadine?”

“Sure thing kid, but not tonight. I gots business to attend to,” my host replied. “Why don't you go run off and see if your buddy Blueberry's busy, aight?” The colt looked a little downtrodden at this. My host chuckled. “Look, I promise. We'll hang out tomorrow. Just got stuff to do tonight.”

“Alright,” Danish said, hanging his head low. He trotted past my host towards the door.

“Hey kid?” My host called to him. The unicorn colt looked back at the earth pony. “Be cool, alright? Smile a little. Everypony's got something to smile about.”

“O-O-Okay,” the colt replied, stuttering. He cracked a little grin as he pulled the door to the bakery open. “Be careful, boss.”

“Sure thing,” my host said, turning back to the ruined streets of the city. He trotted along at a brisk pace, coming across the bustling settlement set off of the Chicacolts Theater. The outside of the theater itself was all lit up, the neon bathing the streets in soft light. My host nodded at the two guards as he entered. The marketplace was bustling as ponies flitted to and fro. At the far end of the theater lobby was the bar that I had met Lucky in. I recognized it immediately as my host made his way through the throng of ponies towards it. My host's eyes narrowed as he let his gaze fall on two ponies sitting at a table in the back of the bar. A white unicorn stallion that I recognized as Cutter, and a black pegasus mare that could only be Lilith were chatting idly amongst themselves. They appeared to be giggling and smiling at each other.

“Oy, you two. Get a room, wouldja?” My host said as he stepped up to the table. It was at this moment that I got a really good look at Lilith. The mare was actually rather lovely. Gone from her wings were the metal that I had gotten used to seeing all the time. Her mane was well groomed, rather than the tattered and curly mane she wore as Lust. She rolled her eyes.

“Oh come on, Grenadine. We're just having a good time,” she said. Cutter sneered at my host.

“Yeah, man. Sit down and join us. We're celebratin'!” The white stallion crowed. My host grinned and pulled out the chair across from the two ponies. He flagged down the waitress, who brought the table

another round of drinks.

“So what's the occasion?” My host said, taking a long draw on his drink. Cutter chuckled.

“It's our one-year,” Lilith said. “Cutter and I. We've been together for a year today. It seems like only yesterday.”

“Ah. Congratulations, you two,” my host said. “I would have figured Diamond and Evora would have been here too, given the happy occasion.” Lilith rolled her eyes again.

“They went off again on another one of Diamond's scavenger hunts,” she said. “I swear, those two. Diamond's got her head buried in the past, and Evora's got hers buried in Diamond's plot.”

“Diamond still doesn't get it, does she?” My host said.

“Nah. She's too busy with that statue business she keeps going on about,” Cutter said. He took a drink from his glass.

“She's still on about that?” My host said. Both Cutter and Lilith nodded.

“All she talks about,” the unicorn said. “She keeps thinking that it's going to help her save this city or something.” My host nodded silently, taking another drink. His ears perked up as the din of the crowd got a little louder. He turned, seeing a group of ponies at the bar arguing with the bartender. Their clothing marked them as raiders, their eyes were wild with anger.

“Come on, give us your fucking booze, you stupid fuck,” the leader, a blue unicorn with a green tinged mohawk of a mane, said. The bartender snarled back.

“And I said no, you fucking jackass. You're drunk and disorderly, and cut off. I'm trying to run a business here!” My host nodded at Cutter. The two friends stood. Lilith's eyes went wide with fear.

“Oh... no sweetheart. Please don't,” She said. Cutter grinned.

“I'll be fine. Don't worry,” He said, floating out a small pistol in his magic. He nodded at my host once more as the two made their way to the bar. My host stepped up and tapped the lead raider on the shoulder blade. He turned, growling.

“What the fuck do you want?” He said. My host shrugged.

“Oh, I dunno. How 'bout you leave poor Horace here alone?” My host's voice said casually. The raider's eyes widened, and he snarled again at my host.

“Fuck off, before I put you under the ground,” he said. “You do not want to fuck with us, prick.” My host sighed.

“Horace, might be time for you to duck, iff'n you get my meaning,” my host said. The bartender tossed a quick salute and dove underneath the bar. The lead raider whipped a small shotgun out on a flare of blue magic, aiming it at my host. As the weapon came to bear, my host dropped under its murderous eye and lashed out with his forehooves. The quick strike took the raider in the throat, leaving the

shotgun to fall unattended as he crumpled to the ground.

Seeing their boss on the floor gasping and clutching his neck, the other three raiders yelled in rage and drew their own weapons.

“Hey,” a voice said casually from behind the four. Cutter had moved behind the group, his compact pistol bobbing along in his magic. A wicked grin split his face. “You guys better run.” The unicorn dropped his aim and pumped two quick rounds into the ground. The surprisingly loud bark of the pistol startled the already unnerved raiders, who then jumped back in disarray. My host was there to meet them, weaving in and out of the raiders in a silent and brutal dance. One by one, the raiders fell to the ground next to their leader in a big ponypile. My host and Cutter stood over the four ponies, grinning.

“If we ever see your faces around here again, we'll do more than just put you on your asses,” my host said. “This here's MMMM territory, and you just got whooped by one of its chief enforcers.” The lead raider snarled, but glared at his companions. He nodded, getting up from where he had been laying. The four raiders trotted out of the bar, giving dirty looks to anypony who stared at them. The bartender, Horace, popped his head out from underneath the counter.

“Thanks, guys. Those fuckers were getting rowdy, couldn't understand what cut off meant.” he said. Cutter snorted.

“Well, they shouldn't bother you anymore,” the unicorn said as Lilith joined us. She smiled brightly at her lover. My host grinned as he tipped his hat towards the bartender as the three friends trotted out of the bar. The memory began to fade to black as they exited the theater...

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“Shit shit shit!” I shouted as I dodged another blast of laser fire. The security drone that had fired on me exploded in a shower of sparks, thanks to a carefully placed shot from Danish's carbine rifle. I spun about, floating Stargazer out. I fired, tearing another two robots to pieces. Lust flew overhead, diving in occasionally to take out a drone or two before pulling back up to draw their fire. Steeljack and Patch worked back to back as they always did, firing in tandem at the approaching enemies. Nixis lurked around the walls, bouncing from drone to drone, slicing with his vicious claws. Violet moved next to me, laying down a thick stream of fire from Thunder Flash.

The Stable Atrium had become a war zone, thanks to Cranky. His little talk with us had been nothing more than a ruse to get us to stand still long enough for the Stable's automated defenses to come online. The donkey ghouls had disappeared once the first of the security drones filtered into the Atrium. I growled as another robot appeared before me, raising its metal hoof and spraying hot red death. I threw up a quick shield, deflecting the beam back at the robot before turning and laying down a stream of gunfire at a large group at the rear of the Atrium.

“Nixis!” I shouted. The hellhound glanced up at me, a drone head in his claws.

“Yes?!” He called back. I grimaced.

“We need an exit! See if you can find us a way out of here!” I exclaimed. Nixis nodded, tossing the robotic head into another robot, knocking it to the ground. The hellhound bounded across the Atrium,

slashing his way to the far end where the doors were. My horn still felt like it was on fire, but having no other choice but to grin and bear it, I lifted Stargazer again and took out another two robots who had come up behind me. Violet stepped up next to me, a grim look on her face as Thunder Flash incinerated a third drone that had approached while I was busy taking care of the other two.

“Thanks,” I said, a true smile showing through my pain. Violet smiled back as she took aim at one of the drones heading towards Nixis. She pulled the trigger, the silvery fire soaring through the air as it sliced through the drone's body. The hellhound appeared to be busy with the door, trying to slice his way through the solid metal. I turned back to Violet. “Alright, let's clean house while Nixis is busy getting us a way out of this damn Atrium.” My marefriend nodded and we entered the fray once more, tearing the security drones apart as we rejoined the others. At the very least the robots in the area were beginning to thin out. I couldn't fathom how many of the damn things existed in a Stable as large as this one was. Steeljack and Patch were like one pony, covering each other with well timed fire from their respective weapons. I smiled. The two lovers were the ultimate tag team, their fighting styles meshing as well as... Nevermind. I felt a blush on my face as I saw Danish swing out from behind the two, providing covering fire with his carbine. The stallion grinned broadly when he saw Violet and me.

“Darlin', just havin' ourselves a little robot demolition derby!” He called out. I couldn't help but giggle. Even with the searing pain still building at the base of my horn, this seemed a little too easy to me. The robots were annoying, yes, but they were far from life threatening. Was Cranky trying to passively help us by just slowing us down? What was his angle in all of this? I couldn't tell. There had to be a reason he kept showing up and just... talking to us! I briefly considered that maybe Cranky was trying to assist us without Pride knowing. Lust dove down from above, giving me a firm smile as she sliced open another drone. The mare had resisted using her missile launcher, even in this open room, for fear that the explosions caused by her choice of ammunition might hurt one of us. Against these surprisingly weak foes, her wingblades let her carve a swath of ruin through the bots.

As we cleared out the last of the drones, I slumped to my haunches, panting. I was tired, and this constant running and fighting and overuse of magic was beginning to get to me. I needed to sit for a moment. I looked down at the far end of the Atrium, where Nixis was working on the door still. The hellhound had managed to carve and pry open the doors just wide enough for us to fit through. I made my painful way to my hooves, and smiled at Nixis as I joined the others.

“Good job,” I said. The hellhound merely bowed as we followed the rest of the group into the next hall.

“Thank you,” he replied. “But... if I may ask... are you feeling alright? You do not look so good.”

“I'm... I'm alright,” I said, waving a hoof. “Just... just a little exhausted from all this running and fighting.” The hellhound nodded.

“I know what you mean. It seems like things have been going non stop since we arrived in this place,” he said. “We must press forward, though.”

“Right, I know... you know, Nixis... I've been doing some thinking...” I started to say. “About what Cranky said... about Pride. About how she was trying to do some good in this place.” The hellhound snorted.

“Pay no heed to the donkey's lies, Star. This... Pride who we have sought, she who twisted the hearts of

so many... do you really believe that she was once a good soul?" He said. I looked at him, and sighed.

"I... I wish I knew what to think. It's just like with Spark. She did all these really bad things, but she was once good. I... I don't know what to do," I said quietly. The hall we were walking down now was just as drab and gray as the rest of the forsaken place. A cursory review of where we had been and where we were heading, and it was determined that we were at least moving in the right direction. A sign had been spotted, pointing us to where the Medical wing was located. Without an automap function, our location remained sketchy and uncertain. As we stalked the hallways, my mind began to wander. I thought about Pride and Spark. Pride had said she had the spirit of Magic under wraps, but I couldn't believe it. I was sure that Spark was here somewhere, just waiting to strike. I sighed. Why couldn't I just choose? Why was I so sure that Spark wasn't redeemable, that she was so evil that she had to be destroyed?

While my mind played thoughts of my inevitable confrontation with the Element of Magic, I noticed that we had passed into a much cleaner portion of the Stable's hallways. By cleaner, I mean that the walls at least were a shinier gray. At the far end of the long hall was a larger sign that stated **MEDICAL**.

"Any of this look familiar, Star?" Violet said. I blinked. My mind had still been reeling with the thoughts of Spark, and I didn't exactly catch what my marefriend had said.

"Come again?" I asked. Violet rolled her eyes.

"I asked if any of this looked familiar," She said. I looked around the hall as we pushed through the door.

"A... a little. I mean, this whole place looks the same, it's kind of hard to tell," I said. Behind the door was a large open lobby, which appeared to be some sort of waiting room. The infirmary lay just behind a large window at the other end of the room. That wasn't all that was in the room, however. Two large security drones stood guard in front of the infirmary's doors. The instant we were in visual range, the drones began to fire their lasers. "Shit!" I shouted as we ducked behind some nearby overturned furniture. The laser fire soared over our heads and struck the metal walls, leaving behind scorch marks. I floated out Stargazer, firing a stream of bullets at the drones. My gunfire struck something seemingly intangible, dissipating around the robot's shells.

"Oh, fuck. They've got shield generators!" Patch called out from the next group of furniture over from us. "We've got to figure out a way to disable them somehow. Otherwise, we're just sitting ducks!"

"How about I just blow through them?" Lust said, grinning. She stood, hopping up into the air as her wings gave her some lift. The Bitch rotated and slid out of its mounting, its rising whine sounding almost eager to fire.

"Wait, Lust! Don't...!" Patch started to shout, but Lust wasn't listening. The Bitch let loose, sending its payload screaming across the lobby. If there wasn't a strong chance of fiery explosive death or this simply not working, it would have been a glorious thing to witness. The missile spiraled elegantly, demure little fins popping out to guide it in its flight. It nestled into the gap between the shields of the two drones almost lovingly, then exploded. The explosion in that confined space was thunder come to earth, reflecting the fury of its mistress. Smoke boiled through the lobby.

“See? Easy-peasy lemon breezy,” Lust crowed. She looked down at us, grinning widely as a beam of laser fire that originated in the smoke struck her in the shoulder. She grimaced as she was pushed to the ground, her power armor protecting her from the most of the damage. The smoke began to clear, revealing that the two... 'super' drones hadn't even been scratched by Lust's attack. They began to move forward, raising their blasters and firing.

“Patch! How do we get past their shields?!” I called from behind my cover. A laser blast struck the sofa we were hiding behind, melting a portion of it into red goop. I stood hastily, scrambling to move over near my friends. Stargazer floated behind me, spraying bullets at the robots as I ran. Patch either hadn't heard me, or she had and had come up with a plan. She was hunched over her tools, poking through them frantically. She had a panicked look on her face, her ears pinned back.

“I can't find it!” She yelled. “I swore I had another E.M.P. Grenade! Ohh where is it?!” She shook her saddlebags violently, rifling through them and pouring out their contents amidst the chaos of laser fire soaring over our heads. A shiny blue apple bounced away from her as it fell out of the side of one of the bags. Her eyes widened as she reached forward, grabbing it in her hoof. She tossed it over, allowing me to catch the grenade in my magic. “There! Give those fucks a swift hoof in the ass with this thing!” I nodded, lifting the grenade and pulling the pin. I levitated the small silvery item across our makeshift barricade, flicking it straight at the two super drones. The grenade struck the shield with a ***thunk***, hitting the ground between the two robots. A bluish light pulsed from it as its electrical field shot forth. The shield crackled with energy as it tried to prevent the grenade from damaging it.

The drones shook for a few moments. The laser fire had stopped, and the shield continued to light up in a blaze of electrical glory. I narrowed my gaze as the two robots finally exploded, showering the entire lobby with sparking parts of hot metal. I stood, grinning as I latched Stargazer onto its harness. I looked over at Lust, who was still sitting on the floor. I walked over, handing out my hoof.

“Hey,” I said. “You alright?” She nodded, taking my hoof and pulling herself up.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little bruised,” she said. There was a scorch mark on her armor where she had been struck, but otherwise she appeared to be alright. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” I said, looking back at the sparking remains of the two drones. Beyond them was a set of large doors that led into the infirmary. “Now, let's see what was so important that they had to guard this room.”

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The Pegasus Orb

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My eyes opened, but I could not see. It was dark wherever my host was. She tried to move, but felt... restrained somehow. I recognized this body from other memory orbs, and I didn't like it. Seeing this would mean more things I had to keep from my friend, more lies. Lilith tried to move again, feeling the restraints around her body tighten. Her wings tried to open, but they too were bound to her. Wherever she was... she was not going anywhere.

“Hello?” She called out to the dark room. No pony answered. “Can anyone hear me? I need... I need

somepony, please? Help!” Her cries began to escalate in volume, fear shaking her wings and hooves as she realized that she was alone. “Please, somepony help!” Lilith struggled, managing to somehow reorient herself so that she could see the rest of the room. The room was dirty and dingy, appearing to be some sort of bedroom. My host was stuffed in the corner. She was tied down with a strong rope, binding both her legs and wings. The bed in the center of the room was broken down, its legs on one side completely gone. The mattress was soiled and wet. In the other corner near the door was an old rocking chair.

“Please... somepony help me!” My host called out again. She tried again to move her legs, but that proved to be worthless. Craning her neck, the pegasus snapped at her bonds with her teeth, hoping to break them. Unfortunately, she was unable to even reach them. The mare sighed as she hung her head. She was trapped, and there was nopony who was going to save her. Thoughts charged through my host's mind like a freight train. She was never going to see her friends again. She was never going to see Cutter again.

Cutter. He had to have known she was here, right? I mean, there was no way he would just abandon her here. I realized however... that he did know. That was why he was off, trying to decide whether to slaughter an entire village for the mare that he loved. Lilith's voice grew hoarse as she continued to cry out for help. After what felt like an eternity, her cries stopped entirely. She couldn't think of anything else to say. A shuffling noise sounded from the other side of the door. The door suddenly opened, letting in a stream of light across the dark room. My host's eyes widened as a pony stepped inside. It was one of the raiders from the bar. In fact, it was the lead raider. A wicked grin covered his face.

“Well, you're a bit of a screamer, aren't you?” He said. My host's eyes narrowed at him.

“Who... who are you?” She said quietly. The raider snorted and stepped up to the pegasus mare. He lazily flicked a hoof out, striking my host in the face. A sense of warmth dribbled down the side of the mare's cheek.

“Shut up,” he said. “You don't get to talk.” My host went quiet, her face stinging with pain. “Better. Need to save that energy in case that buckfriend of yours doesn't pull through on his end of the deal.” The raider turned away for a second, grinning.

“What did you do to Cutter?” My host said. The raider growled, spinning about and kicking the mare in the side, forcing her silence again.

“You don't listen too well, do you? That fucking son of a bitch, he thought he could just humiliate us? Well now look at him. He's gonna do a little work for us,” the raider said. “And if he does a good job, we'll let you go. But if he doesn't...” A soft chuckle emanated from the raider's mouth. He ran his hoof over my host's cheek. The mare snarled, trying to move away. The raider grabbed her, forcing her face to the floor.

“Don't even think about it. You're going to lie here like a good little filly. Now then, I'm gonna go get things ready for your fuckbuddy,” he said, turning and leaving the room. The door slammed, bathing the bedroom in darkness once more. My host shifted herself so that she wasn't lying on the side where the raider had kicked her. Pain shot through every part of her body. A shine in the room drew her attention. A mirror was lying on its side against the side of the wall. My host shuffled herself over to the mirror, seeing her reflection within. She was dirty, and a little blood oozed from a cut where the raider had struck her. She sighed.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... please... Why... I just... I just want to see him again... please..." the mare pleaded with the mirror. Tears formed in her eyes as she laid her head on the floor. Sleep overtook the mare, giving her a brief reprieve from the events that she had just experienced.

A hard kick in the side woke the mare from her slumber, forcing a gasp from her throat.

"Get up." A harsh voice from above said. Lilith coughed, trying to breathe. Her eyes drifted upwards, seeing the raider from before standing there. His eyes spoke of death. "It's been a day, and your friend hasn't returned yet. Looks like he's reneged on his part of the bargain after all."

"What...?" Lilith said quietly. "Cutter..."

"There, there..." the raider said, grinning widely as he patted the mare on the head. "I'll make you feel all better... and then I'll gut you like a fucking fish." His horn flared, enveloping the mare in the soft glow of his magic. My host struggled against his hold, but was unable to do anything as he lifted her. He set her on the dirty bed, stepping forward to run his hoof along the trembling mare's side. "Oh... you're scared. You were such a screamer when you woke up... let's see if you we can make you scream some more."

"Get off... please... please stop!" My host shouted as the raider stallion pressed himself against her, nearly crushing her with his weight.

"Oh yes... keep screaming little one. Nopony's coming to save you," he said as he reached down with his muzzle, extending his tongue to run it along the mare's cheek. My host whimpered beneath him. I almost wished that I could have ended the memory right then and there. I did not want to see this... thing defile my friend. But the memory continued, ignoring my pleas to stop. Lilith screamed as the stallion pressed her down into the soiled mattress. She almost didn't hear the gunshot echo from beyond the doorway. The raider, however, did hear it. The pressure being applied to my host was instantly removed, the stallion climbing away from the bed and back onto his legs.

"What the fuck was that?" The raider said, moving towards the door. Before he could get there, the wooden door slammed open hard enough to rip it off its hinges. Standing in the hall was a white unicorn stallion with a black mane. An evil look of glee was written all over his face. The raider's eyes widened. "You... you fuck! What the fuck are you doing here, huh? We had a deal!" The other unicorn snarled.

"Deal's off, jackass," the other unicorn said. His eyes gleamed in the darkness. The raider stallion floated out a pistol, pointing it at the white unicorn. My host struggled as she watched the white unicorn step into the light, revealing it to be Cutter. The raider fired, the bullet striking him directly in the face. Cutter fell backwards, hitting the ground with a ***thud***.

"Cutter!" My host shouted, tears forming in her eyes. The raider chuckled.

"That's right, you stupid fuck! Thought you got the drop on us, didja?" He shouted, looking over at my host. An evil grin appeared on his face as he turned. "Now... where were we?"

"We were at the part where you die," a voice from behind the raider said. The stallion spun around only to receive a rock-solid hoof to the face, sending him spiraling to the floor. My host looked up,

seeing Cutter standing there. No bullet hole graced his face. He wasn't even bleeding. Cutter snarled, launching himself at the other stallion.

“Fuck!” The raider shouted as he tried to bring up his pistol again. Cutter swatted the firearm out of the air, knocking it to the ground as he pinned down the raider. His hoof came down, striking the other stallion in the head. It came down again and again, until the raider was silent. Blood stained Cutter's hooves as it poured from the body of the dead raider. My host whimpered as her lover sat there, panting hard.

“C-C-C-Cutter?” She finally said. The unicorn turned, regarding my host. A sharp grin appeared on his face.

“Hey sweetheart,” he said. My blood ran cold as I stared into the face of Greed. “It's gonna be alright. I'm here, now.”

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“Where are they?” I said to myself, opening cabinet after cabinet. The medical bay was just as I had remembered in Greed's memory orb, but after several minutes of searching, we had found nothing. No statues, nothing of any importance whatsoever. I was beginning to get very frustrated. Granted, there were no more drones around, which I found sort of strange. It was almost as if Pride didn't care that we were here. And despite what Cranky said, I felt that he wasn't exactly putting his all into trying to kill us. What was his angle? He was pushing us somewhere... was it here in this Medical Bay? What was he trying to show us? My mind swam with all of these thoughts as I rifled through another set of cabinets. Behind me, the others were going through the rest of the cabinets in the Infirmary.

“Anypony find anything of use?” Violet said as she opened another empty cabinet.

“Nothing here,” Steeljack called from the opposite side of the room.

“Same,” Lust said. “Whole place has been picked clean. No medical supplies at all, not even bandages.”

“Great,” Violet said. “Star, there's nothing here. What are we looking for?” I sighed.

“This is the same place that Pride brought Greed to when she converted him. The statues were *here*,” I said angrily, slamming my hoof against a nearby cabinet. Violet trotted up to me, placing her hoof on my shoulder.

“Were, sweetie, were. That memory had to have been long enough ago that Pride would have moved them by now,” she said softly. I hung my head, nodding.

“I know, I know... But then... why are we here? Where the hell is Pride? I don't get it. I thought she would have been on our tails already,” I said. “This all seems too... too easy, Violet.”

“I agree,” Lust said. “Pride's never been one to hesitate. Something isn't adding up here.” Violet sighed, propping herself up against one of the walls. A soft hissing noise was heard from behind her as she nearly fell over. The wall behind her had slid silently and swiftly slid sideways, revealing a hidden entrance.

“What the...?” She said as she righted herself. My eyes widened.

“There's another room,” I said quietly. “Of course... there would have to be...” I stepped up to the entrance, nuzzling Violet as I stepped past her. The room beyond was small and simple. At the far end the wall was covered with medical equipment and computers, all of them blinking and beeping with each other. It was all very impressive, but it was nothing compared to the sole occupant of the room.

“Umm... holy shit... Star... is that...?” Violet said from my side. I could barely respond, my mouth hanging open. In the center of the room was a large tube-like structure. It was clear, and it's mechanisms appeared to be hooked up to the computer equipment on the wall. Suspended in the center of the tube was the body of an equine. It wasn't a pony. It was... a donkey.

“Matilda...” I uttered. “It's... it's Matilda.”

“Umm, question here for those of us who aren't in the know... but who the hell's Matilda?” Danish chimed in.

“My love...” A gravelly voice said from the corner of the room. My eyes darted over to the shadows, seeing the red smoldering orbs that belonged to Cranky. Somehow this room was large enough to contain the donkey and his cart. “I've been alive a long time, kid. She was my one and only.”

“Cranky,” I said. “Matilda is right here. We can help you...” Cranky sighed.

“I've done told you kid, you're not going to be able to help me. Pride has her sealed up good in there. You can certainly try, but it's not going to do any good,” he said. I glared at him as I stepped into the room towards the tube. The others filtered into the small room behind me, keeping their eyes trained on the ghoul. Lust looked away from Cranky. I could only imagine what was going on inside her head about all of this.

“No funny business,” I said, keeping my eyes on the ghoul.

“Sure thing, kid. Knock yourself out,” Cranky replied. I stopped next to the tube and peered in at Matilda. The female donkey looked old, almost as if she had been perfectly preserved since the day the bombs had fallen. I looked down at the equipment attached to the device, focusing on the terminal with my magic. As soon as the arcane energies touched the device, a screaming pain shot through my forehead, forcing me back and to the ground in front of the tube. I put my hoof up to my horn. It was on fire.

“What the...?” I hissed through the pain.

“Told you, kid. Pride's got a psychic lock set up on her stasis machine. Only she's allowed into it,” Cranky said, a twinge of sadness in his voice. I rubbed my head where my horn was. It still felt like it was burning up.

“Why didn't you say something?” Violet said as she rushed up to me. Cranky's rotting face turned into a semblance of a grin, some of his flesh dripping to the cold metal floor with a sickening ***plop***.

“Would that have stopped her? Doubtful. She doesn't know when to take a hint,” He said. “It's her

own fault she wanted to try so badly.”

“He's right. I can't break through this kind of lock. Not without Pride,” I said, looking at the others and then back to Cranky. “So what now? You try to kill us? You've had all sorts of perfect opportunities here, Cranky. But you haven't taken them. Why? What are you playing at?” A dry chuckle escaped from the ghoul's mouth.

“Kid. It's been so long since I held my Matilda,” Cranky paused, heaving a deep sigh. When he resumed speaking, his voice was intense, harder than I had ever heard him. “If there's even a remote chance that I can get her back, I'll take it in a heartbeat. I miss her so much...” Cranky trailed off. I kept looking between the ghoul and the stasis tube. “Anyway, kid... If you can survive the Stable, I'll help you deal with Pride. You should head over to the Armory. There's something there that you will need to see for yourself. It's... *They* are important for when you face Pride.”

“You sound as if you think we're going to beat your little games,” I said angrily. Cranky grinned again.

“That depends on you, kid. That depends on you,” He said as the wall behind him opened up. *Another entrance?* I thought as the donkey sank back into the wall, disappearing from sight. The wall reappeared, leaving us alone with the stasis tube. I looked back down at the female donkey inside.

“I'm... I'm so sorry, Matilda,” I said softly. “I wish that things had turned out differently for him.” A hoof grasped my shoulder. I looked down to see Violet, tears forming in her soft green eyes.

“We'll find a way to get her out of here, Star. I just know we will,” she said. I nodded, turning to the others.

“I know that we're here to find Pride, but all of this... running will only wear us out in the long run. We need to rest, if only briefly. This infirmary appears to be a solid defense in case any drones do decide to come and attack us,” I said.

“We'll be ready for them if they do come,” Steeljack said in agreement. Danish and Nixis nodded as well. Lust, however, appeared to be unnerved. While the others began to set up a defensible camp, I moved over to the mare, smiling.

“Are you alright?” I asked. She shook her head as her eyes met mine.

“I keep getting flashes...” she said. “There's this... this stallion. I don't recognize his face or his voice, but he's telling me how much he loves me.” She looked away from me again. “I... I don't know who I was, Star. I don't know why, but I wish I did.”

“I know... it's hard, not knowing who you really are,” I said. It was true for me, of course. I had spent so long with Spark and Twilight's memories inside my skull, that at some point I had begun to lose who I was. My own memories from before all of this were sketchy at best now. I found that Twilight's memories would inevitably float to the forefront of my mind, no matter what I did. “But you have to keep moving forward, Lust. You have to believe in yourself.” Lust sighed.

“I... I know, but I just wish I could remember. I'm tired of not having my memories,” she said.

“Lust... you will remember. But you need to do it gradually, like I keep telling you. If you remember

too much at once, it could be very bad. And Pride might use that to force you to do something you might not want to do,” I said. “Just... please trust me?” The mare nodded.

“Thanks... I'll try my best,” she said, turning to go join the others. I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to tell her, to speak the words. *I killed your lover*, I thought to myself. I couldn't do it. I truly didn't know how she would react. Would Pride use her anger over Greed's death to force Lust into attacking us? I knew that the alicorn wouldn't let something so sweet pass through her hooves that easily. She would readily exploit it, especially if she could get Lust to attempt to kill Cranky at the same time. A precarious game was being played here, it seemed. One that could end up in pain for all involved. I just wondered... who would get the most of it? Lust? Me? I turned to Violet and sat next to her, opting to stay in the room with Matilda. It was... creepy to say the least, but I felt that the old donkey mare needed some company. After all, it would give me some opportunity to try and study the psychic lock that Pride had placed on her stasis chamber.

As Violet rested next to me, I peered out at my other friends. No pony was actually sleeping. We were all still on alert, and with good reason. We needed to rest our muscles and our minds, but still keep enough of ourselves to move and fight if we had to. Our circumstances dictated it. I returned my gaze to the stasis tube, and Matilda. I wondered what it would be like for her if she were to ever be released. Would she remember Cranky? Would she even care what he looked like now? How would she react to knowing that everypony she ever cared about, everypony she ever knew other than Cranky... was dead?

As I studied the stasis tube, I noticed something etched onto the side. It looked like... a cutie mark? A very familiar one at that. Three stylized balloons were engraved into the metal. I reached out, tracing the mark with my magic. It had almost become instinctual at this point. The engraving lit up in hues of pink, blue, and yellow as a shimmer appeared in front of the stasis tube. The hologram coalesced into a bright pink earth pony mare. Despite the gray in her hair, her smile was wide and her eyes were bright. Beside me, Violet gasped.

“Star... are you... are you seeing this?” She said. I looked to her and back to the hologram.

“You can see it?” I said, cocking my head in confusion. My love nodded mutely. The hologram, unlike the others that I had seen, seemed to take notice of us and began to speak.

“Hey there! My name's Pinkie Pie, and you're Radiant Star and Violet Iris!” The holographic mare said. I blinked. It wasn't just noticing us... it was *talking* to us.

“Umm... what?” I said. The pink mare bounced up and down in place.

“Oh don't worry, only you two can see me. I figured it would be easier this way,” she said.

“Just how are you talking to us? This is just a hologram,” I pointed out. The hologram grinned and nodded.

“I know, cool ain't it? I recorded this message so long ago, that I forgot why I recorded it! I think it was supposed to be a message for Twilight, but somehow your names came up, and well here we are!” Pinkie said. She looked down at the stasis tube next to her. *“Ohhh... it's Matilda! Hi Matilda! Oh Matilda looks like she's sleeping. Wait... if Matilda is here, where's Cranky at? Don't tell me he's abandoned poor Matilda.”*

“Umm... no, he hasn't. In fact you just missed him,” I said, trying to process what was even happening to us. I didn't spend much time trying to figure it out however. Pinkie Pie *was* Pinkie Pie after all. This could almost be considered par for the course for the pink mare. Pinkie smiled widely again.

“Okay! I'll just have to catch him later then. Anyways... I know why you're here, Star. You and your friends have an important task ahead of you,” she said. I narrowed my eyes.

“You're talking about Spark?” Violet said. The pink mare nodded excitedly.

“Yup! You're a smart one, Violet!” She said. *“I know it's hard, but you have to do your best to help the Element of Magic. She really is good inside, and I can guarantee that everything will turn out alright. After all, things always turn out alright when you're with your friends!”*

“Do you really think that Spark can be redeemed?” I asked. Pinkie grinned.

“I do. She's not bad, she just made some bad decisions! She just needs a push in the right direction,” She said. *“Now... I suppose I should actually leave the message I was supposed to be recording... where is it...?”* The mare yanked a piece of paper out of thin air. *“Oh, there it is! Now, Radiant Star and Violet Iris: be good, and let your friendship strengthen you.”* The mare's lifelike image reverted to a simple hologram as she began to talk once more.

“Twilight,

It's me... it's your bestest friend, Pinkie. I know things got bad between us, but I want you to know that I don't blame you. I know you only ever had my best interests at heart.

If you're seeing this... it means that I'm long gone, and I failed. I failed you, I failed Equestria. I failed my friends. But I'm not giving up. No sir! I'm going to make sure that this all ends in sunshine and rainbows! That's how good endings are supposed to go, after all!

Signing off for good, your bestest of bestest friends... Pinkie Pie.”

The hologram disappeared into thin air, leaving us alone with Matilda once more. I sighed, hanging my head. Despite her enthusiasm about it, Pinkie Pie's words had left me feeling more confused than ever. Did I want to save Spark? Did I truly want to redeem her? Was there anything worth redeeming, or was I wrong? I looked over at Violet, and smiled.

“Feeling better?” She asked.

“Physically... yes. Mentally, I'm still a little scrambled. But I'll be fine. We should get going to the Armory,” I said. “We have no more time to spare.”

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The Unicorn Orb

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My host was running, panting hard as his hooves touched down on hard concrete. I recognized my

host's body as I had already seen a memory through his eyes once before. Thankfully, it was Cutter's body and not the insane power-mad Greed. Gunfire echoed behind the stallion as he pounded down the street. A pistol floated along in the air next to the unicorn as he turned on a dime and started down the next corner. My host glanced back, seeing several earth pony stallions behind him. Their haphazard weaponry, slick leather jackets, and insane glee-filled faces marked them as members of the Hellraisers.

"Fuck!" My host shouted, spinning his pistol about with his magic. He fired several rounds, but they went wide and completely missed the charging raiders. He snarled, ducking as they returned fire. The bullets soared over the unicorn's head, barely missing him as he tucked in and rolled behind a nearby trash dumpster.

"Shit, shit, shit!" My host exclaimed as bullets pinged off the sides of the dumpster. He looked down at his pistol. It was nearly out of ammunition. He growled as the first Hellraiser rounded the dumpster, lifting its hunting rifle. My host lifted the pistol, firing point blank before the stallion could get a shot off. The Hellraiser's eye exploded in a shower of gore. A click from behind my host caught the unicorn by surprise. He spun about to see a hunting rifle leveled directly at his face. The raider behind it grinned, speaking in a language even my host couldn't quite understand due to the stallion's foaming mouth and frantic speech.

"Fuck you," my host said. The hunting rifle made another click, ready to fire. Then, just as suddenly the rifle was drawn away as the raider turned tail. My host cocked his head in confusion as a black mass slammed into the stallion's back, sending him sailing to the ground. It was a pegasus mare, sprawled out on top of the unconscious Hellraiser. She grunted as she stood.

"Get down!" A rough voice from behind the unicorn shouted. The mare grabbed onto my host, pushing him down to the ground. Gunfire erupted above the two ponies as they huddled together. The mare grinned sheepishly at my host.

"Are you alright?" She said, her voice only barely audible above the gunfire. My host nodded.

"Just peachy, thanks," he said. Out of the corner of my host's eye, I could see another Hellraiser approaching, his assault rifle pointed at the prone mare. My host snarled, levitating his pistol and firing, striking the other stallion in the leg before he could pull the trigger. The gunfire ceased, and the ground beneath the two shook as another form loomed over the two. My host spun, bringing his pistol about.

"Whoa, there, partner," a voice said as a hoof came down, stopping the pistol in midair. A light tan earth pony with a sharp pinstripe suit and fedora was standing above my host. "I just saved your life, buddy. Show a little gratitude, wouldja?" My host blinked for a moment, and finally let his magic on the pistol drop. He stood, feeling the mare behind him grasp onto his side to get her bearings. The earth pony merely grinned.

"Thanks," my host said. "I guess I owe you two. Name's Cutter."

"I'm Grenadine Rose, and this here's Lilith," the earth pony replied. My host turned and looked upon the pegasus mare fully. I could feel the heat coming off of his cheeks as he stared at her.

"Hi..." my host said. Lilith giggled and held out her hoof.

“Hiya,” she replied. My host extended his hoof, taking hers in a friendly hoofshake. Grenadine grinned.

“Oh, get a room.” he said, snorting. Lilith dropped my host's hoof immediately, a fierce blush arising on her face.

“Grenadine!” She shouted angrily, fluttering her wings. The earth pony rolled his eyes, turning to my host.

“Say, whatcha doin' out here by yourself pal? These streets ain't exactly the nicest, what with those Maricones all over the place,” he said. My host sighed.

“I was... until recently mind you... a courier. You know, free for hire type job. But somepony decided it would be fun to try and have me send a message to those Mexicoltan bastards,” the unicorn replied as the trio walked out from behind the metal dumpster. “Unfortunately, they didn't like the message too much.” Grenadine pointed at one of the nearby alleys.

“Well then, I think perhaps you might wish to seek other employment, my friend,” he said, chuckling. “Tell ya what. If you help me out a bit, I can give you a place to stay.” My host's eyes widened.

“Really? Well... umm... alright. Where are we headed?” He asked.

“You familiar with Theater?” Grenadine said. My host shook his head. Grenadine nodded and continued. “Well, it's a settlement ran by the MMMM. We could use a buck like you. Help defend it, hang around a bit, and you're guaranteed a place there.” My host pondered this for a brief moment before nodding excitedly at the prospect of steady employment. Grenadine grinned as he pulled ahead of the other two, taking point. My host fell back, trotting alongside the mare, who seemed to be lost in her own little world.

“So... how do you two know each other?” My host asked finally. The pegasus smiled softly.

“He saved my life. Much like he did yours,” she said. “I uh... used to live up above.”

“Enclave?” My host said. “I mean... I've heard stories and all, just never really seen one.” The mare shook her head.

“No. Civilian. Got lucky getting out too, without them sticking their damned mark on me. You do *not* want to know what I had to do to pull that off,” Lilith replied, giggling. “Ever since I left, I've been a scavenger. Been around a bit, met a few crazy ponies. Grenadine pulled me out of a pretty bad spot, and I've been hanging around him ever since.”

“You two... you know...?” My host ventured. The mare blushed again, shaking her head. Grenadine was a bit further ahead now, the streets still and silent save for the soft clopping of their hooves against the concrete.

“Oh, no no. We're just friends, that's all,” she said. My host grinned at this. “Oh, when we get back to Theater I'll have to introduce you to some of our other friends.”

“Others?” My host said.

“Yeah. like Evora! Evora's a zebra, she's pretty cool,” Lilith said.

“Err... right,” my host replied. “Sounds... fun.” Grenadine stopped up ahead and allowed the two to catch up to him. A sharp grin was written all over his face.

“Alright, kiddo. Welcome to Theater,” he said, motioning at the large building across the street. The lights were dim in the light of the day, but I recognized Theater nonetheless. My host stared up in awe at the building.

“This is the place?” He said quietly. Grenadine nodded.

“So... you want in?” The earth pony asked. My host smiled and looked back at Lilith, who offered her own smile in return.

“I'm in.”

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The hallway was of course... gray. *As is every hallway in this Celestia-forsaken place*, I thought as we trotted along. We were skirting around the Atrium, moving in the halls and trying to find the Armory that Cranky had mentioned to us. We stayed silent, keeping a close eye on any doors or empty halls we came upon. We had experienced several close calls with more of the 'super drones', barely escaping with our lives each time as we moved closer and closer to where we hoped the Armory was located. I was still thinking about Pinkie Pie's words. Spark had done so many bad things, made so many bad decisions. Could she just be forgiven, just like that? I glanced over at Violet. She had a determined look on her face, but I could see through the cracks. She was still thinking about it as well. I nudged her softly, getting her attention.

“Hey,” I said. “You alright?”

“I'm... No... Not really. I keep thinking about... that hologram. Is that really what you've been seeing all this time?” She said. I had shared with Violet the stories about the other holograms I had seen since we had been in Chicacolt. I nodded.

“More or less,” I said. “That's the first time one of them has ever actually spoken to me directly, or been able to be seen by anypony else, though.”

“What do you think that meant?” Violet said quietly. I shrugged.

“I think, if anything... it just meant that it was Pinkie Pie. It's pretty hard to force any sort of logic to apply to that mare, dead or alive,” I said, laughing softly. “Seriously though... I... I'm not sure what do, Violet. I mean, Spark hurt you badly. How do I just let that slide?”

“I'm not sure I'm the best one to be asking that question to,” my marefriend replied. “If it were me... I'd want to make sure she suffered.” I sighed.

“But there has to be something there... something I'm missing. Why else would Pride have not joined

with her?" I said as we rounded the next corner.

"Maybe Pride thinks she can accomplish her goals without her help? I don't really know," Violet said casually. The hallway ahead of us was just as drab as the rest of them were. *These walls could really use something... like a mural maybe, that would really make it look nice*, I thought. At the far end of the hall stood a series of doors leading to other portions of the Stable. I was busy with my own thoughts as we stepped into the clearing, not really paying much attention to the others. My mind swam, thinking about Pride, Spark, and everything in between. Despite getting some rest, I still felt really tired. The quiet and nervous chatter of my friends slowly filtered away and I stopped in my tracks, realizing that I was suddenly... alone.

"Hello...?" I said, turning around in a circle. There was no pony. "Where is everyone? What's going on?" There was no way that they would just leave me alone like that. Cranky had to be behind this somehow. I pushed open one of the doors, wondering if maybe they had gone through and I just hadn't noticed. Nothing. I looked at my E.F.S. again, but it still wasn't working. "Violet? Patch? Nixis? Where are you guys?"

A cold breeze whipped across my sides. I shivered. *That's... that's weird. It's not supposed to be cold... or windy for that matter*, I thought, pushing open the door that the breeze had come from. My eyes widened as I gazed upon the scene before me.

"No... No no no no no!" I shouted, tears welling up in my eyes. Blood stained the drab gray flooring in front of me, dripping from a familiar green foreleg that was lying in the center of the hall. Beside the leg, a green body that belonged to none other than Violet. Her eyes were closed, blood pooling under her cold and lifeless form. Beyond her, two other bloody bodies were lying. One of them was missing a head. My eyes widened further. It was Steeljack. His head lay just a few feet away, along with his spinal cord. Patch's body was next to his, her body torn open by some sort of shredder. I shrieked and screamed, slumping to my haunches in front of the macabre scene.

"Violet!!!" I screamed. "Steeljack... Patch!!! No!!!" All sense of logic flew out the window, and I began to blubber like a foal. *How?! How did this happen?! My mind yelled. They were just with me... what happened?! My mind was reeling. None of this made any sense. I should have heard them... I should have been faster, should have been able to save them. I realized that my worst fears had come true. I was living it. My friends were dead, and I wasn't able to even save them. Where were the others then? What happened to Lust, to Danish, to Nixis? I blinked, stopping to think for a moment. Where was Lust and the others of my group? Why was it only Violet, Steeljack, and Patch? I had always considered those three to be my closest friends, so was that why it was only them? Was Pride doing something to me?*

"Star!" I heard a voice shout from beyond my peripheral vision. I turned my head away from the broken forms of my friends.

"Hello?" I said. The voice continued to shout, but I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. I stood, trying to understand what was happening to me. I growled. "Who's there? Pride? Is that you?" A soft chuckle emanated from behind me. I turned back towards the bloody scene. A dark blue alicorn stood above the bodies, grinning.

"You would have to figure it out, wouldn't you?" Pride said. "And I was having so much fun, too."

“You rotten, evil... bitch!” I shouted. Pride yawned.

“Really, now. Name-calling? Is that what we're resorting to now?” She said. “I told you that I wouldn't make this easy for you.” She motioned to the bodies below her. “Like it? It's a little something I cooked up. Forces you to see your worst nightmare. Your friends are all experiencing their own nightmares right now. Looks like yours is losing those pretty little friends of yours. Don't worry though... that one I can make come true.”

“Pride... enough of these games, already! Show yourself! Let's end this, now!” I shouted. Pride tittered at my angry ranting.

“Pish, posh. You and I will have our time, soon enough. For now... I'd prefer to let Cranky wear you down first,” the midnight blue alicorn replied.

“Cranky will never fully serve you. I will make sure of that,” I snarled. “Now, let. ME. **GO!!!**” My magic, even though this was just a dream state, seemed to serve just fine to amplify my voice. A magical wave emanated from my mouth, knocking Pride back. The other alicorn disappeared into nothingness. I shuddered as her dream magic began to fail around me, the backlash of energy slamming me against the floor.

“Star...?” A voice from next to me said. I looked up, seeing Violet sitting next to me. She had a tired smile on her face. I groaned and pushed myself up.

“What's... what's going on? Are you guys alright?” I asked. The others appeared much in the same fashion. They all had tired, worn looks on their faces.

“What happened to us?” Patch said. “I feel like I've been hit by a freight train.”

“It was Pride...” I said, rubbing my neck. “She cast some sort of spell on us, forced us to view our worst nightmares. It was intended to tire us out, not kill us.”

“Is that why I feel like this?” Lust said, pushing herself off the floor. She cracked her neck, looking immensely more relieved. I nodded.

“It's time we moved on,” I said. “Pride definitely knows we're here now, so we need to move fast.” I pushed open the next door, revealing another drab gray hall. *Of course*, I thought. *Always more gray*. We started forward into the maze of tunnels, keeping a close eye on everything around us. I almost found myself missing Cranky's rotting face. At the very least, it would be some color other than gray. I sidled up next to Violet, giving her a quick nuzzle as we walked. I could tell that Pride's magic had taken a lot out of my marefriend. “Are you alright?” I asked as we fell back to the rear of the group.

“I... I saw... oh... Star it was so bad. You were with... with another...” she replied quietly, her head hanging low. My eyes widened. Violet's worst fear was losing me to another lover? I gave her another nuzzle, smiling as brightly as I could.

“Hey. You don't need to ever worry about that, you know that right? It was just a dream,” I said. “I'm never going to leave you.”

“It was just... so realistic. All I could do was watch...” Violet said, nodding. “I had no idea Pride could

do something like that... what are we up against, Star?"

"Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you. Any of you. If I have to..." I replied. I knew in my heart, that I would do anything to protect her, to protect the others. I would even give my life if I knew that it would save them. Violet smiled softly. A cough from ahead of us alerted me to Danish. I glared at him. He always seemed to be the one interrupting my private time with Violet.

"You might wanna see this," he said. "We're here." I looked down at Violet, and then back to the cream-colored unicorn. I stepped past him and the others, peering around the corner. A large set of double metal doors lay just beyond in the small clearing. A sign above the doors said **ARMORY**. I moved into the clearing, ready as ever to face what was next as I levitated out Stargazer.

That was when the turrets mounted in the ceiling lowered and began to fire.

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The Minotaur Orb

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This was a new experience. I was definitely not in a body that was equine at all. My host looked down, and I saw a three clawed hand clench into a fist before spreading out, cloven feet beyond it. *What in the Sorrel Hells am I?* I thought, before I remembered the sigil that had been on the memory orb. I was a minotaur... but I didn't feel like any of the minotaurs I had seen at Colter Field. My host was smaller, more lithe. It was an interesting feeling.

My host looked about, and I realized I had definitely been here before. It was Colter Field, but it looked... fresher. Newer and smaller. As my host walked, I noticed that the slave pens that had once littered the back area of the old stadium were missing. The minotaur guards didn't wear power armor. In fact... there was none of the insanity that we had witnessed while we were prisoners here. My host stepped into the throng of minotaurs that was milling through the large hall. At the far end there stood a large setup of wooden benches and a statue of a grinning golden minotaur. In front of the statue stood an older minotaur, clad in blood red robes. His eyes gleamed as he regarded my host.

"Scribe Bronze Fist," the minotaur spoke, nodding. My host knelt before the older beast.

"Honored Elder," my host said. "What is it that you wish of me?"

"Our order has had been honored this evening, young one. We have a visitor," the elder said, motioning behind him. My host glanced up past the old minotaur, seeing a dark blue pony. It had a horn and wings. I realized that it was Pride, but she looked nothing like the Pride I had seen before. It looked more like Diamond. The alicorn stepped forward, bowing her head.

"Scribe Bronze Fist," she began to speak softly. "My name is Diamond Night. I understand that you are the keeper of lore for the Cult of Iron Will?" My host nodded excitedly.

"Yes, I am. What brings you to our humble dwelling? It is not every day we receive such a blessing as a visit from one of your kind," he said. The alicorn blushed fiercely.

“You are too kind, loremaster,” she said. “Alas, I am here for business. I am seeking several documents that might contain some information on a few of the Ministry buildings located in the city.” My host grinned, motioning for the mare to follow him. The alicorn stepped behind the minotaur as he led her through the halls of Colter Field. Eventually we arrived at what appeared to be a library in an old locker room. Books were stuffed into lockers all over, the final result a mess of paper patiently awaiting its chance to fall out of its precarious position. The alicorn smiled as she stepped up to one row, examining the reams of paper contained within.

“My apologies for the mess, honored guest. I am still in the middle of organizing this,” my host said. The alicorn smiled softly.

“No worries, my friend. So... tell me, how does one with the name Bronze Fist become a book keeper?” She replied.

“My passion has always been for the teachings of the great Iron Will,” my host said. “His work is a testament to the strength we carry inside of ourselves. We can all be great, if we wish it.”

“And what of those within your order who think strength comes from conviction? From imposing one's will on others?” The mare casually asked as she pulled out a large book from one of the lockers with her magic.

“That is not how one strengthens one's life, my friend. True strength... comes from within,” my host said, motioning to his own heart. “We must live each day head on, and strength will come.”

“Well spoken, loremaster,” Diamond said. “I have a proposition for you then. I am seeking some items I found referenced in texts long thought gone to the world of today. I located them in an old mall, near Canterlot. I would ask if you might consider helping me.”

“Why me, honored guest? As you said, I am but a book keeper. A dogmatic practitioner, nothing more,” my host said. Diamond's eyes gleamed as she looked back at me.

“Because, I believe that your true strength will one day show you the true path to enlightenment, and you will share that message with the Wasteland. What I am seeking... may be the most important find that will ever be found in this hellish pit we call life,” she said, a grin on her face. The alicorn motioned to my host to come closer. My host hesitated for a moment, and then stepped closer to the mare.

“You believe that I will be the one sharing the message of the Cult?” My host asked, his voice shaking.

“Indeed, I do. I believe you will show the Wasteland what true strength really is,” the mare replied. My host pondered the alicorn's words for several moments, before finally nodding.

“Show me what you have discovered,” my host said. The alicorn grinned, levitating out several scrolls. My host began poring through them, taking in their information. As best as I could tell they were schematics, detailing some kind of holding facility for historical artifacts. There were pictures of what appeared to be the statues that we had seen in the Museum. “So... these statues... they're supposed to be magical emitters?” The alicorn nodded excitedly.

“Yes. They enhance magic, make it stronger. With them, I can do so much. We could finally get into

Filly's Tower, take control of the Minotaur's broadcasting station and actually do some good in this city!" She said. My host looked over the papers once more, cocking his head.

"But... these papers don't say anything about where these statues even are," my host said. The mare's eyes narrowed.

"No. They don't," she replied. "That's where you come in. I was hoping that you might be able to research these scrolls, and assist in locating and accessing the artifacts."

"I... I'm not sure that I can..." my host said. The alicorn grinned, putting her hoof around my host's shoulder.

"You can do it. I know you can. I have faith in you," she said. "And when you do... you will be the most recognized spiritual leader the Cult of Iron Will has ever had. You will save this city."

"I... I'll do it," my host said. Diamond's eyes flashed in the light.

"Excellent," she said.

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I leaped around, dodging the red hot death that was spewing forth from the turrets. I growled, turning Stargazer about and firing wildly. The bullets flew through the air, melting as the laser fire struck them and continued onward to hit the ground at my hooves. A blast of silver raced past my head as Violet leaped out from behind the corner, aiming Thunder Flash at the nearest turret. The gun immediately spun about, firing a volley of lasers that deflected the beam rifle's fire.

"Shit! They're tracking our gunfire!" I shouted, throwing up a shield as another beam came my way. The laser fire sizzled as it struck the shield, dissipating but taking a serious toll on the strength of the barrier. A second shot hit, destroying the shield completely. A third shot soared past my head, singeing a few hairs off my mane. I barely missed getting a hole blown in my side from the fourth shot as I leaped to the side, firing another volley at the turret. The shots went wide, zooming past the turret and causing it to spin around to deflect them. As it spun, the laser blasts struck the other turret, causing the device to explode violently. "Violet, now!" I called to my love. Before the turret could return to firing upon us, Violet's blast of silver fire met my fresh round of bullets and destroyed the turret. With one down, we were able to overwhelm the other. Violet was the one to get the kill shot, a blast from her weapon flashing past the active defenses to melt the final turret into slag.

"Got it," Violet said, grinning as she replaced Thunder Flash on its harness. The others stepped out from behind the corner.

"Couldn't help?" I said sarcastically. Steeljack simply chuckled, rubbing the back of his head with his hoof.

"Umm, well you see... there really wasn't enough room for all of us," Patch interjected. I looked around, blinking. Sure enough, the space wasn't really that wide enough to fit all seven of us.

"Ah, so there isn't," I replied, turning to the door. I pushed on it with magic, forcing it open. Beyond, a musty smell greeted our noses. No pony had been in here in quite a long time it seemed. Rows upon

rows of shelving extended into the darkened armory, filled to the brim with security lockers. As we entered, a series of lights began to illuminate, making the rest of the room visible. At the far end of the armory was a long row of terminals. I stepped deeper inside, keeping an eye out for any drones or more turrets. Instead I heard a foul sucking sound that I knew all too well. The first ghoul to appear dove off the top of a shelving unit, snarling and howling. A quick blast of magic knocked it away, and it gathered itself to charge. A sharp retort erupted from beside me and the ghoul's head exploded in a shower of rotting flesh. Patch crowed as she lifted Para Bellum, firing on a second ghoul that had leaped out from behind a row of lockers.

“Everypony, scatter and take them down!” I called out, floating out Stargazer. Two ghouls crept out of the nearest row as my friends moved into position. I took aim and fired, splattering brains against the cold hard metal floor. I was beginning to get really sick of not having a working E.F.S. It was just plain annoying to get snuck up on all the time. From deep within the massive room, I heard the familiar ***crack*** of Steeljack's rifle. I growled as I blew a hole in another ghoul's body, putting it to the ground instantly. I stalked down to the next row, wondering what it was that Cranky wanted us to find here. Was this just another trap? Was Cranky just using this as an excuse to slow us down even further? The sounds of my friends went quiet as I made my way back to the center of the armory. I saw Violet first, floating Thunder Flash along in her magic.

“Was that all of them?” She asked. I shrugged, looking again at my E.F.S. It was still non-functional.

“I doubt it, knowing Cranky,” I replied, motioning to the row of computers at the far end. “Let's check out the terminals, see if we can find any information on this place.” I trotted down the middle of the rows, stopping at the terminals. I tapped on the keyboard, the screen flickering to life and coming up to a password prompt. My friends stood guard, keeping an eye out for any more ghouls. I connected my PipBuck and fired up the password breaker. As I searched for the password, my eyes began to glaze over at the millions of lines of code on the screen. Finally I hit upon the phrase *Chicacoltagogo* and grinned. I input it into the password field and the main screen appeared. The only options to speak of were related to the armory itself, such as locker release and the main lighting systems. I began to poke around, trying to break past the main functions with my PipBuck. Nothing seemed to be working. I flicked a button, opening the lockers in the armory. A hissing sound from behind me indicated that the option had at least worked.

“See what you can round up from the lockers,” I said. “Keep an eye out though. Cranky could just be waiting to spring a trap on us.” I turned my attention back to the screen, noticing a flashing icon at the bottom left of it. I tapped the key to select it, bringing up what appeared to be some sort of radio application. A sharp gravelly voice emanated from the terminal's speaker.

“Took you long enough to get here, kid,” it said.

“Cranky,” I replied. “Would have been here sooner, if not for your little welcome party.” A dry chuckle came out of the radio.

“Well, I had to make it hard on you,” the ghoulish voice replied. “You understand.”

“Right. Down to business then. What is so damn important here?” I asked. “Why the armory?”

“Because there's something there you need to see, I just need to give you the right access,” Cranky said. “Hold on one second...” The screen began to scramble and shift before it was finally replaced with a

more standard Stable terminal interface. The radio application was still open, but now there were numerous more options available, including a map of the Stable. "There you go. There's an option there for a locker that is located in the wall. Press it." I shrugged through the menus, searching for the locker option. After several minutes of hunting, I finally found it. I pressed it, hearing a hiss from the wall across from me.

"Got it," I said, noticing that my friends had returned. Violet stepped up next to me as Cranky spoke again.

"Take care when viewing them. You'll see things that you may not wish to know," he said. "See you soon, kid." The radio application closed on its own, beeping softly as the terminal returned to the standard interface.

"Was that... Cranky?" She said. I nodded.

"Yeah. Did you guys find anything good?" I asked. The green mare shook her head.

"There was some small firearms in some of the lockers. No ammunition, and the rest of them were pretty much picked clean," she said. I looked over at the locker that had extended from the wall. I strode over to it, pulling it open with my magic. My eyes widened as a soft glow emanated from inside the locker. I reached inside, lifting the small case out of the locker and setting it on the nearest flat surface.

"Are those what I think they are?" Lust said, narrowing her gaze at the seven glass orbs in the case. I nodded quietly. Inside of the small case were seven memory orbs, each one marked with a sigil belonging to a specific race. Zebra, Earth Pony, Pegasus, Unicorn, Minotaur, Donkey, and Alicorn.

"They're memory orbs..." I said. This is what Cranky wanted me to find? I was pretty sure I knew whose memories these orbs belonged to. They had to belong to Pride and the others. I shuddered when my eyes drifted upon the orb marked with the sigil of the Pegasus. *Lust*, I thought. How many more of her secrets would I learn here? Could I be honest with her about it, and tell her what I would see? Would she be able to handle it? I realized I had fallen back on an old habit of mine, where I had stopped paying attention to anything else going on around me, as I felt somepony poking me in the side. I blinked, looking over at Violet.

"Star?" She said. "You alright?"

"Y-Y-Yeah... I'm fine," I said. "Sorry, just... lost in thought."

"Star..." A voice behind me said. I turned around, seeing Lust standing there. She was glaring at me. "Those symbols. Those orbs... they belong to us, don't they?" I sighed.

"Yes," I said quietly. "Yes, they do."

"What do you mean, darlin?" Danish interjected. "You mean one of these orbs was a memory that belong to Gluttony? And another belongs to Lust here?" I nodded.

"That's correct. The symbols match up perfectly. This is what Cranky wanted me to see. He wanted me to see the memories," I said. "He said that I would need to see them... to understand Pride better."

Lust continued to glare at me.

“And what about my memories? Are you going to tell me what you see there?” She said. I met her gaze with my own cold stare.

“I promise,” I said simply. I looked back down at the glowing orbs.

“If you're going to view them, I would make it quick, Star,” Nixis' soft voice came from next to Danish. “We will do what we can to ensure you are safe, but I fear that this Sloth character will not let us stay here for long. I can smell rot from beyond the walls.” I nodded grimly and turned to the orbs. My eyes drifted to the first orb, the one marked with the sigil of the Zebra. I reached out with my magic, and let my world fall away into nothingness.

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The Donkey Orb

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As the memory filtered in, I immediately took an assessment of what I was. I was equine, for sure this time, but I wasn't a normal equine. I was a donkey. Not only that, my host's body felt old. It was wracked with intense pain that shot all the way from his hooves to his ears, or at least what was left of his ears. Rot and ichor dropped from my host's body as he stalked the streets of the darkened city. My host sighed, and turned down the next street. Dragging behind the old ghoul was a large wooden cart, filled with metal trinkets and doodads.

My host stopped as he looked up at the nearest building. It was the outside of Theater. The two guards at the front of the club stepped forward, narrowing their gaze at my host. Their weapons were held loftily in the air, pointed at the donkey.

“No funny business, or we'll put you out of your misery,” one of the guards called out. My host sighed slowly, before chuckling.

“Kid, you don't know how much misery there even is to put me out of,” my host's voice stated, the gravelly tone echoing across the street. “Besides... if I had wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead. No... I'm here to trade.”

“Trade? What do you have to trade, old timer?” The other guard said.

“A little bit of this, a little bit of that,” my host replied. “Hold on a second, let me get myself unhooked.” He turned back, hitting a button on his harness, which released the ghoul from the cart. “Ahh... that's better.”

“I suppose there's nothing wrong with a little friendly trade,” the first guard said, turning to the other. “Go get Grenadine would ya?” The other guard nodded and headed into the Theater. A few seconds later, he emerged again with a large earth pony wearing a pinstriped suit. He wore the same confident grin I had seen him with in another memory orb.

“Howdy,” he said as he trotted up to my host, who was busy yanking bits and bobs from the back of his

cart. "Name's Grenadine. Boys tell me you wanna do some trade." My host nodded silently. "What's your name? Don't recall ever seeing you in these parts before."

"I travel. All over, actually. Name's Cranky," my host replied, motioning to the small table he'd set up. Grenadine moved to the table and began perusing the wares that my host had set out. He picked up what appeared to be a black head band with a socket in it.

"What's this?" he asked. My host chuckled.

"That, young man... is what they call a Recollector. It lets ponies of non-magical nature like pegasi and earth ponies view memory orbs," the donkey ghouel said. "It's an old pre-war thing. Some ponies think that Pinkie Pie herself invented them to be able to watch memories of ponies they interrogated."

"Oh? And what do you think about that?" Grenadine said. My host shrugged, his ancient shoulder blades grating against each other loudly.

"I think some ponies spend more time theorizing about the past instead of paying attention to the here and now," my host said. "And the here and now has me wondering if you want that little device or not."

"Heh," Grenadine chuckled. "I suppose it might be something interesting to give to Diamond. She might have some use for it."

"Diamond?" My host said, cocking his head. Grenadine nodded.

"Friend of mine. She's a mite reclusive, but she's a good pony. She's one of them alicorns," he said. My host narrowed his eyes at the earth pony.

"I tell you what, kid. You can have that thing, if you can set me up a meeting with this Diamond," my host replied casually.

"I suppose I can do that," Grenadine said. "But why do you want to meet her?" My host coughed dryly.

"Let's just say... we're old acquaintances," my host said. The earth pony grinned.

"Deal," he said, sliding the recollector into his jacket. My host smiled as he began to pile the rest of his stuff into the cart. Grenadine motioned to the ghouel. "Follow me. She doesn't live too far away from here." The donkey nodded, hitching himself back up to his cart. The two walked in complete silence as they moved through the abandoned streets away from Theater. A small ruined bank came into view. My host unhitched himself from the cart, following the earth pony into the abandoned building. Despite the bleak darkness inside, my host could clearly see the debris and rubble strewn about.

"Diamond?" Grenadine called out to the dark building. "You here?" A flapping of wings greeted the two, and a dark blue alicorn suddenly appeared in front of earth pony. He looked up, his eyes widening as he fell back on his haunches in shock. "Geez, Diamond! Don't do that!" The alicorn tittered.

"Oh, come on Grenadine. You know how much I like it when ---" she started to say as she caught the eyes of my host. Her eyes narrowed in fear and hatred. "You. What are you doing here?"

“Well, gee kid. Is that any way to greet an old friend?” My host grated. Diamond snarled, igniting her horn and grabbing Grenadine with her magic.

“Hey what's the big idea!?” The earth pony shouted as he found himself moved to the side. Diamond glared at him.

“Get out of here. Leave this place, now!” She yelled. Grenadine stood shakily and ran, dropping the recollector to the ground as he did. The alicorn's gaze returned to my host. “What do you want with me? If you're here to kill me, then just get it over with. Luna knows I deserve it for the things I did.” My host chuckled as he turned to the side, picking up the recollector that the earth pony had dropped in his teeth. He dropped it at the alicorn's hooves.

“Not here to kill you, kid,” my host said. “Besides... you know I wouldn't have given you any warning if I was.” The alicorn took a step back, looking down at the recollector.

“Indeed. And my name is Diamond, not kid,” she said, continuing to glare at the donkey. “I'd have thought you'd know that by now.”

“When you're as old as I am... everypony's a kid to you,” my host replied. He looked around the debris ridden bank. “Nice place you got here. See you've got yourself some friends. That's good.”

“Yes... friends. They've been... very helpful to me,” the alicorn said. “And what brings you to the city of Chicacolt? Last I saw you... we were in Canterlot, and I was still a monster.”

“Travel, trade. Got out of the whole wanna-be hero business ages ago,” my host said, chuckling. “What about you? Why are you here?” The alicorn sighed, turning away for a moment.

“When... when my memories came back, I felt... drawn to here for some reason. Like there was some part of me that needed to be here,” she said. “I have these thoughts... I'm not sure where they come from.” My host nodded, sitting creakily down next to the dark alicorn.

“I know what you mean,” the donkey replied wistfully. “Been this way for so long now... it's kind of hard to remember what it was like...”

“What was it like, anyways? I've always wondered...” Diamond said.

“It was... nice. Regardless of what anypony said about the war, before all that everything was pretty good actually,” My host said. “I had friends. I had a good mare that I loved dearly. I looked for her for a long time after I died... never found out what happened to her.”

“Really? Never?” The alicorn said. My host nodded.

“Maybe one of these days,” he said. “But enough about that. That buck who brought me here... what was his name... Grenadine? He brought me here in exchange for giving you this recollector.” My host motioned to the device. The mare nodded, lifting the device with her magic.

“Looks as pristine as ever. I'm assuming that you have more trade?” She said. My host grinned, and nodded again. “Excellent. Show me to thine wares, old friend. We shall make trade this day, and

perhaps... you can stay a while.”

“I... I'd like that,” my host replied, a slow smile making its way onto his face.

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My eyes flashed open as I looked away from the memory orb that had belonged to Cranky. The donkey was right about one thing that I had taken away from these memories thus far... every time I'd seen Pride she hadn't seemed to be evil. What had happened that had pushed her so far? Was she truly so desperate for validation from the others that she had taken the easy route? I didn't know. I looked down at the case of memory orbs, my eyes widening when I realized that one of them was missing. I had spent the better part of the last hour viewing each memory, telling the others that I would speak with them regarding their contents once I finished viewing all seven. I looked up across the row and gasped.

“No,” I said softly. Sitting across the row, with a black metal recollector strapped to her forehead... was Lust. The memory orb with the pegasus sigil on it sat snugly in the socket of the device. Danish and Nixis stood guard over her. Violet and the others stood in the middle of the row, keeping an eye on both of us. I stood frantically. “What happened?” I said. Violet looked up at me, fear showing in her soft green eyes.

“We couldn't... couldn't stop her. She forced her way through us and started watching it,” She said. “It's... it's not good is it, Star?” I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. That was the memory that had most vividly stuck out in my head. The poor mare had nearly been raped and murdered, but was eventually saved by a pony who would go on to become an even worse threat to the Wasteland. A pony who would convert her to a soulless killing machine. As I moved to shut off the Recollector, Lust's eyes snapped open. Fear and anger glowed in her eyes as she yanked the Recollector off of her head. She snarled, glaring hatred at me.

“You...” she said angrily. “You lied... you lied to me!!” The black mare stood up, shoving Danish and Nixis back with a swift flap of her armored wings. I glanced over at the others.

“Get down!” I shouted before turning back to Lust. “Lust. You need to calm down. It's not what you think!” Patch and Steeljack dove into the rows of shelves, Patch holding Para Bellum out. Despite the shouting, she seemed hesitant.

“Oh? Then what is it?” The mare said, pressing a button on her side. The Bitch cycled out from it's container. The persistent whine of the missile launcher emanated from the device. “Is it about how you lied to me? You knew, didn't you? I can see it on your face! Before you even saw... that. You knew about him! And you fucking killed him!”

“Lust. Calm thyself,” I said forcefully. Lust growled loudly.

“No. I will not be calm!” The black mare shouted. “I... I hate you! You took him away from me! Before I could even remember who he was!”

“That's not true!” I shouted back. “Who you saw in your memory, that was not Cutter. That was Greed. Pride's fucking with you, can't you see that? Everything in this place has been designed to screw with our heads!”

“Pride was right! Everypony else... they don't understand us. They hate us! If anything, it's been your fault all along!” Lust replied. “You brought me back to this place, just to show me that you killed the stallion that I loved... Well, I'll fucking kill you, instead!” She leaped forward in a blur, slashing with her wicked bladed wings. One of them grazed me, drawing a thin line of blood from my side. I snarled in pain as I jumped back.

“Lust, stop! I don't want to fight you!” I exclaimed. “Just calm down! We can sit down and talk about this, just trust me!”

“Trust you? Trust you?! I did that... and look where it got me,” Lust said angrily. “No more talk. No more trusting. No more you!” She flexed her wings, launching at me with wild abandon. I lifted Stargazer as quickly as I could out of my harness, raising it to block the mare's strike. The wing blades hit hard, forcing the gun backwards into my chest. I gritted my teeth as I ignited my horn, quickly raising a shield to deflect the next strike. I expanded the barrier, forcing it out at the mare, knocking her into a row of metal shelving. The metal lockers buckled under the impact of the power-armor clad pegasus, resulting in a huge dent in them. Lust stood shakily, growling loudly as she turned about, aiming right at me with the Bitch. It began to whine as it cycled in a missile.

“Star!” Violet shouted as she dove in, slamming into Lust with all the force she could muster. Lust fell to the floor with a loud ***thud***.

“Violet! Get back. Let me handle this,” I said. Lust snarled, pushing herself up quickly.

“Yeah, little miss Violet...” she said, panting hard. “You're just as much to blame. After all, you're the one who actually killed him.” She moved to strike at Violet with her wings. I reached out with my magic, halting the metal wings in midair. Lust's eyes widened as I picked her up with my telekinesis, tossing her out of the metal rows and into the open clearing of the armory. I trotted forward, stopping in front of the prone mare.

“That's enough, Lust. Stop this, and let's sit down and talk about this like civilized ponies,” I said. Lust groaned, pushing herself to her hooves. Her eyes were filled with hatred and anger as she glared up at me.

“Fuck you and your civilized pony ways. I'm just a weapon. That's all I ever was made to be,” she said angrily.

“You're more than that. Lust – I mean... Lilith, you have to believe me. I never meant to hurt you like this. Please stop this!” I said, tears filling my eyes. Lust's wings flared.

“Don't use that name around me. I'm not Lilith anymore. I'm Lust. And I'm going to rip your lying face off,” she said. The Bitch whined again as a missile ripped from its barrel. Lust's visor dropped down across her face. My eyes widened as I called upon my magic again. Shining Armor's shield spell shimmered into existence just as the missile struck, exploding in a violent blaze of color. The barrier rippled as it dispersed the energy released by the explosion, and my horn seared in pain. I looked beyond the purple glow of the shield, noticing that the blast had only scorched the immediate area in front of me. Lust stood across the room. As her visor lifted, I caught sight of her eyes. They were filled with frantic rage. The mare was completely undamaged from her own attack, despite her proximity when she had fired the missile.

Lust snarled as she launched herself at me, slashing like a wild animal at my shield. Each strike was brutal, the attack of a gifted fighter at the top of her game. I could feel the shield spell fading under her attack. At this rate, I wasn't going to be able to hold it more than a few seconds at most. Sure enough, the shield began to fade as my horn released the last of the magic held aside for it. I dodged to the side, narrowly missing another wicked slice from Lust's wing blades.

"Lust, stop this!" I shouted, dancing about as I dodged another strike. "I'm... I'm sorry! But no matter what I did, I still believe in you! You can be better. I just know it. But you have to trust me. Let me explain what else I saw. You only saw a snippet, a small piece of what you are."

"I don't care!" Lust snarled, lunging forward and reaching out with her wings. I ducked as they soared over my head. "You know nothing about me! Not really! I'm just a weapon, a tool! Lilith... she never existed!" I was about to respond, before I heard hoofsteps behind me. Patch stepped out from the row of lockers, tears flowing from her good eye. She stopped in front of the raging mare, silently dropping to her haunches. Lust stopped in her tracks, unwilling or unable to press her attack through the green earth pony. Behind me, the others had stepped out, brandishing their weapons. I glared at them, motioning to hold back.

"You're wrong. Celestia, can't you see it?" Patch said, sobbing as she tried to choke out the words. "You're not just a weapon. You're... you're my friend, Lust. And Star never meant to hurt you. She was trying to protect you... Please listen to me..."

"P-P-Patch..." Lust uttered. Her eyes widened as she took a few steps back. She lifted her forehoof to her head, her entire body shaking. I cocked my head. Despite her anger, the mare's attitude had changed from one of rage to one of fear in the span of a moment. It was as if the sight of her friend had stopped her rampage cold.

"Lust, please calm down. We're not here to hurt you," Steeljack said. Lust shook her head almost as if she was trying to get something out of her ear.

"No... No... please... get out... get out of my head!!!" Lust stepped back, turning towards the door to the armory. The Bitch whined again, and a missile shot over our heads to obliterate the door to the armory. Lust leaped over us and soared towards the door.

"Wait!" I shouted. Lust stopped in the doorway, turning back with a gleam in her eyes.

"Oh, Ministry Mare... come and get her," a voice that was clearly not her own called from the mare's mouth. "She'll be waiting for you..."

"Pride?" I said aloud, realizing what was going on. Lust's eyes flashed red, and she fled into the hallway. I looked down at Patch. The green pony looked just as confused as the others did. Without thinking I shot past her and through the doorway. "Come on, we have to go after her!" I called back as I flared my wings, gliding into the hallway outside of the armory. Lust was near the far end of the long drab hall, already galloping hard. I heard hooves and paws behind me, and I began to run, trying to keep the black mare in sight as she rounded the corner. The boring sameness of the Stable flew by as my other friends tried to keep up.

I pushed forward, using my wings as best as I could to keep up speed in the cramped hallway. I turned

the next corner, finding myself in the Atrium of the Stable. Lust had stopped just ahead. The black mare stood facing away from us.

“Lust!” I shouted. Lust turned around, a mad look on her face.

“Ministry Mare,” the mare said. I could tell immediately that it wasn't her. It was still Pride. I growled.

“Pride. Let her go,” I said. Lust laughed coldly as my friends fanned out on each side of me. They looked unsure of what to do.

“Why? You never seemed to care this much for her before now. It was her moment of weakness, Ministry Mare. I've been inside her head since she stepped in here, but it was you who gave me the opening I needed. And now Lust is mine completely,” the black mare said.

“Why?” I growled. “Why do this to her?”

“Because the bitch deserved it. It was a mistake on my part, I suppose, to let her think she could be free of my mind control,” she replied, fluttering her metal wings. “Now, then. I'm going to make her attack you. I'm going to force you to kill her.” Patch gasped from my side.

“No!” She shouted. “Let her go! She never did anything to you!”

“She did **EVERYTHING** to me!” Lust yelled, glaring at me. “You once asked me if I loved him. Of course I did. And I hated him. I hated him so much for wanting to share my gift with her. So I wiped her memory when I turned her. I made her my willing slave, my weapon.”

“You... you monster,” Patch replied, brandishing Para Bellum. “Give her back!” My hoof shot out, cutting off the green mare.

“Enough, Pride. Let Lilith go,” I said. The other mare chuckled.

“Nah, this is much more fun anyways,” she said, the visor in her power armor closing. The Bitch began to whine as she flapped her metal wings, rising into the air. “Now... let's begin shall we?” The missile ejected from the launcher, streaking across the Atrium.

“Everypony, scatter!” I shouted, taking to the air myself as I reached out with telekinesis. I grabbed the missile, pushing the slippery projectile into the walls of the Atrium. It exploded violently, ripping off a chunk of gray wall. Lust used the opportunity to soar straight at me, slashing out with her wicked wings. I dodged, almost evading her attack. A thin line of blood marked my coat on her wingblade. I roared in pain as gunfire erupted from below us. Curiously enough, the gunfire wasn't directed at Lust. I looked down for a brief moment, seeing more of those security drones entering the Atrium. Lust cackled wildly in her armor.

“It's just you and me, Ministry Mare. It's amazing. You should really feel how much this pegasus hates you,” she said. “After all, you killed the stallion she loved so dearly. What did you see, when you watched her memory? Did you see her pain and suffering?”

“I saw a good mare. One who deserves a second chance to be whoever she wants to be,” I said coldly.

“Now... **LET. HER. GO!**” I surged forward, catching Lust by surprise as I slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground in front of the fountain. I dropped down, landing on top of the black mare. She was attempting to push herself back up. I pushed down hard with my forehooves, holding her down. “Time for you to go, Pride. Get out of my friend's head, before I make you get out.” The mare beneath me laughed wildly.

“Fuck you, she's mine,” she said. I growled angrily, and Lust laughed as the Bitch began to whine.

“Your funeral,” I said, reaching out with my magic and grabbing onto the mare's helmet. With a grunt of effort that hurt my horn like hell, the helmet wrenched loose, revealing the black mare beneath. I knew that Pride was controlling her mind, so the only logical place I could think of to expel the alicorn was from within Lust's waking dreams. The mind dive spell activated, and I fell away to nothingness.

I blinked. I was in a dark room, one that I recognized all too well. The dark bedroom where I had watched Lust's memory of her capture by the raiders. In the corner of the room, curled up and shaking in fear, was a black pegasus. She looked up at me, tears showing in her dark eyes.

“Who... who are you?” She said, her voice tinny and small. I realized that the voice belonged to the real mare, the one that I had truly gotten to know in her time with us. The real Lust. Lilith.

“It's... it's okay,” I said softly, stepping up to her. “I'm your friend. Lilith... it's me, Star. Do you understand?” The mare nodded slowly.

“Why?” She said. “Why didn't you tell me...?” I sighed.

“I should have. I messed up. I'm a horrible friend. I should have told you about Cutter as soon as I knew,” I said, slumping down to my haunches in front of her. “And for that... I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.” The mare looked away for a moment and then back to me. Her eyes flashed red.

“No!” She shouted. “You lied to me! You fucking lied about Cutter! You told me you didn't know anything!”

“I was going to tell you,” I said. “I just... I wanted to protect you. I wanted to help you remember on your own.”

“Fat lot of good that did, didn't it?” Lilith spat. “You wanted to protect me? From what? My own mind? My own memories? They're *my* memories, Star. You should have told me!”

“I know,” I said, pinning my ears back. Lilith's eyes flashed again. She snarled, striking my face with her hoof. I pulled away, rubbing my cheek. Even in this dream world, I could feel pain.

“I hate you,” Lilith hissed. “I hate you so much. You took him away from me. You lied about it, too. You probably acted like some big fucking hero too, didn't you? The Great and Powerful Radiant Star. See how she ruins lives, and destroys ponies hearts!”

“Lilith, I never meant it. I swear I didn't,” I said hurriedly. The black mare's eyes flashed again. Something wasn't right here. Was this really Lilith? Or was Pride playing me, like she had before?

"Believe me, I truly want you to be happy. You deserve a second chance!"

"I don't want your second chances," the mare growled. "I want Cutter back! I want my love! And you had to go and fuck that up!" I shook my head in fear. I wasn't getting through to her! *Luna, grant me the strength to help her!* My mind screamed as I reached out towards Lilith.

"Please, Lilith. Let me help you," I begged. "Pride's still inside you, and she's making you do this. She's making you say these things!"

"No, Star. Pride isn't making me do anything. She's shown me the truth of things," she replied, batting my hoof away. "She's shown me how fucked up you really are. How you claim to help, and how you destroy lives in the process!"

"Lilith, snap out of it!" I shouted. "I know you are angry, and I know I messed up. But you have to trust me! I know what happened to Cutter was bad. I was there. I saw him die with my own eyes. He wasn't the stallion I saw in those memories, Lilith. The stallion in those memories was a good pony. He loved you very much, and he wouldn't want you to give yourself up like this."

"And yet you killed him," Lilith said quietly. "How do you justify that?"

"I can't, Lilith. But what you don't understand is that Cutter wasn't really Cutter when we fought. He was Greed. Pride fucked him up, turned him into her own little personal slave because she loved him too. Don't you get it? Pride has been playing you two since the very beginning!" I said. "She turned you into Lust because she wanted you under her hoof while she got what she wanted the most." Lilith stopped cold at my words. Her eyes gleamed in the darkness, flashing that same sinister red they had been the entire conversation. She smiled after a few moments.

"Well played, Ministry Mare," she said, a sinister laugh echoing from behind her. Lilith's eyes flashed again, the red leaving them for good as the laughter subsided. When Lilith looked up again, it was really her. I breathed a sigh of relief. The mare still had an expression of hurt on her face.

"Lilith," I began. "I know things got out of control. And I thought about what would happen if I had told you. Would you have reacted any different? Would you have forgiven me so easily?"

"No..." Lilith said. "I probably wouldn't have. Why does that change anything between us?"

"Because we're friends, Lilith. Friends disagree. Friends get angry at each other. What you're feeling isn't anger, Lilith. It's hatred. And that's not you. That's not what the mare I saw in those memories would do," I said. "That's Pride's influence. She was still using you, trying to force you back into her service." Lilith's ears pinned back as she looked down at her hooves. She was silent for a good amount of time before she looked back up at me.

"I messed up, didn't I? I let *her* in," she said. I nodded. "So how are you here, then? I don't get it."

"Something I learned from a friend. Mind diving, spirit linking, call it what you will, I'm inside your mind. And we have to get you out of here," I said. "To do that, I'm going to need your help."

"What can I do against her?" Lilith said. "She's too strong, Star. I can't fight her." I shook my head fiercely.

"No. You can do it, Lilith. You are stronger than you think. And you have something she doesn't," I said, smiling.

"What's that?" The mare asked.

"You have friends. Me, Violet, Patch... even Danish. We're all here for you," I said, reaching out towards the mare with my forehooves. She shied away for a second. "Look... I know what I did was unforgivable... and I don't deserve your friendship at all, but I want to help you. I've seen the real you, and she's a glorious, magnificent mare who's truly loving and warm." Lilith looked up at me, and lunged forward into my embrace.

"I... I forgive you," She said, tears spilling out of her eyes. She held me like that for a few moments, before pulling back and wiping her face off. "Now then. You said something about getting out of here?"

"That's my girl," I said, pushing myself up off my haunches. I was helping Lilith up when I heard a cold voice come from behind us.

"Oh, I don't think you're leaving," Pride said. I turned around, glaring at the midnight colored alicorn that was now standing in the doorway. "After all, the fun is just beginning." I started to speak, but was cut off by the black mare beside me.

"No!" Lilith shouted. "I am through with you, Pride. I'm not your puppet any longer!"

"Pssh, Lust. You never stopped being a puppet. You just traded one set of strings for another," the alicorn tittered. Lilith stepped forward, flaring her wings.

"That's shit, Pride, and you know it. Star may be an idiot and a liar -"

"Hey now!"

"Hush, Star." Lilith said, shooting me a glare. She winked then, before turning back to Pride. "But Star never tried to control me. She tried to protect me! Protect me from things like **YOU!**" Lilith shouted. The mindscape stretched and warped with the force of her anger, pulling Pride's alicorn form closer.

"And another thing. My name is **Lilith!**" She shouted, surging forward at the dark alicorn. "Now get the fuck out of my head!" Pride snarled as she disappeared and Lilith flew out the door. I followed behind, keeping close as we stepped into the dark hallway. The long hall extended out in both directions endlessly. It almost reminded me of Twilight's crazy mind dreams. Pride's laughter echoed all around us.

"I'm impressed. You're trying to be assertive. It's rather... cute," the disembodied voice said. "And you forgave the very mare who killed your lover. I'm surprised. I thought you hated her." Lilith looked over at me and smiled before turning back to the empty hall. We began to walk along, hoping to find some form of exit.

"I don't hate her," she said. "I'm... I'm mad at her still for lying to me, but I can get over that. What's

more important is what you did to Cutter and me.”

“Yes... I gave you a gift. Don't you see how important that gift was?” Pride replied.

“A gift? You made her into a mindless killer,” I snarled. “You call that a gift?” Lilith nodded.

“Why, Pride? Why did you do this to me? Why did you do it to Cutter?” The black mare pleaded. “I know that you secretly wanted him. Is that it? Was I such a threat to you?” Pride never responded. Her presence lifted from the air as quickly as it had appeared. I looked down at Lilith as we finally came to the end of the hallway. A large white door hung waiting.

“And it all comes down to Cutter,” Lilith said. “I had him. Pride wanted him, and you just wanted to stop him from hurting others.”

I sat, and nervously stretched out a hoof to rest on Lilith’s shoulders. She looked up at me with a warm smile. “I still miss him, Star. But at least I know who’s to blame for his fate.”

“Pride.”

“Yes. Let’s do this, Radiant Star. My friend.”

And we embraced, a quick hug before we turned to face the pure white double doors.

“So I guess I'll be seeing you back on the other side?” I said. The other mare grinned.

“I guess so. Thank you, Star. For everything,” She said. I smiled brightly as the connection between our minds severed, and I fell back into the void once more.

My eyes flittered open as I felt a hoof shaking my shoulder. I looked up, seeing the familiar black pegasus sitting next to me. She had a soft smile on her face.

“Hi,” she said softly. “You... you alright?” I nodded as I pushed myself up and looked around. We were still in the Atrium. My friends had destroyed the security drones. Violet sat on my other side, a concerned look on her face. Patch and Steeljack hovered next to Lust, the former with her foreleg around her friend's neck. Nixis and Danish were off in the far end of the Atrium, keeping an eye out for any more drones.

“I'm... I'm fine,” I said. I was lying of course. My horn still seared in intense pain, and now my body felt like it had been tossed through the wringer as well. I looked over at the pegasus. “And you?” She grinned, and nodded.

“I'm fine. In fact, I've never felt better,” she said. “She's gone. For the first time, in a long time, she's gone, Star. I'm free.”

“That's good to hear, Lust,” I said. “Or would you prefer... Lilith?” I grinned, remembering what the pegasus in her mind had shouted at Pride.

"I think... Lilith will do. I may be a Lilith without a Cutter, but I'm still her. And I know... I know that you two didn't intentionally kill Cutter. Cutter died when Pride turned him into Greed," the black mare said. Patch leaned in, pulling her friend closer into a hug. Lilith grinned widely at me. "And I owe that bitch a world of pain."

"You and me both, kid," a voice from behind us said. I scrambled to get up as I looked back. On top of the ruined fountain, stood Cranky. The donkey ghoul grinned, his rotting jaw showing through the heavy flaps of dead skin. "And you'll get your chance, too."

"Cranky," I said, cocking my head. "What do you mean?"

"All this time, I've only been trying to slow you down so you'd have some damn time to think," The donkey replied angrily. "You saw the orbs. You saw what we were, and you know what she did to us. What she did to me."

"But... Matilda..." Violet said. Cranky shook his head.

"Pride never did have the power to save her. That's something I'm going to have to find out on my own. You were right... she lied to me. But I know something she doesn't know," he said.

"And what's that?" Patch said.

"Do you remember the swamp? Specifically, do you remember when I left you?" The donkey said whimsically. I nodded.

"It was right after you hit me with your pink cloud," I said. "But why...?"

"It was a test. I had a hunch, and I was right," Cranky replied. "By turning me into this... thing. This monster... she sealed her fate. She gave me the power to kill her."

"The pink cloud," I said. Cranky nodded. "Of course. It hurt me. So it would stand to reason it would hurt her too."

"So what now?" Steeljack said as Danish and Nixis rejoined the group.

"I think perhaps, we should be findin' this Pride bitch, and puttin' her six feet under," the cream-colored unicorn said. Cranky chuckled, a dry cough erupting from his rotting mouth.

"You'll find her in a hidden sanctum, below the Overmare's Office. She'll know we're coming. She always knows," he said. "But first, there's one more thing you need to see." His hoof shot out, a silvery orb held upon it. The orb held the sigil of the one memory I had failed to see before Pride had attacked Lilith's mind. The sigil of the alicorn.

"Pride's memory?" I said. "I'm not sure I want to see it now."

"I think... I think you should," Lilith spoke. "If it's going to help us in the fight against Pride, after all." I sighed and looked at my friends. They nodded encouragingly and Violet nuzzled my neck softly.

"It'll be alright. We'll keep watch over you while you're in the memory," she said. I looked down at the

silvery orb, and latched onto it with my magic, letting the world fall away once more.

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The Alicorn Orb

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I knew immediately that I was in the body of Pride, but even I could tell that this wasn't the Pride I knew. It was the mare I had seen in all the other memories. Diamond Night. The alicorn had a wide smile on her face she tapped at the brightly lit terminal in front of her. A cursory glance around revealed that she was sitting in the office that she and Evora had discovered in the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub. Lines of code scrolled down the screen as my host scanned the screen.

"Come on... what are you hiding in there?" She muttered to herself, tapping another key. She looked back at the footlocker sitting behind her. Nothing. My host sighed and returned her gaze to the terminal. "I don't get it. I've tried everything. Nothing opens this damn thing." My host groaned, turning away from the keyboard and staring back at the locker. Her horn lit up, reaching out to take hold of the magical device attached to the lock on the chest. The lock began to glow fiercely, surging with power. My host grunted as the magical feedback from the device began to devour her energy. It was a defense mechanism to prevent the lock from being opened with simple telekinesis. A stray thought floated through my host's mind. She had tried this already and had failed. But there was nothing else. Nothing else had worked on the lock. Whatever was in the chest was so important that Twilight Sparkle had made it impossible to open.

"Impossible is for the weak," my host snarled, gritting her teeth as she poured more magic into her horn, trying to overpower the magical feedback. A vivid pain seared my host's forehead as her horn glowed brightly, illuminating the room with a soft blue light. "Come on, come on, come on!" Power surged out of the device, trying to keep up with the alicorn's magic. The color on the lock changed from a blue to a deep and angry red. My host's eyes widened as the lock exploded violently, knocking the dark alicorn to the ground. Everything went to black for a few moments.

"Ugh... my head," my host said as things came back into focus. She sat up, rubbing the back of her head. Smoke drifted from beyond the desk where the chest had sat. My host stood, trotting over to the smoldering remains. The chest was the source of the smoke, now smoldering wreckage surrounding its original location. My host's eyes widened. Seven blue statues stood on the metal floor. They looked as if they were intact, undamaged by the explosion. My host's gaze drifted down to the first statue, one of an alicorn. Instinctively my host reached out, touching the statue with her hoof.

Oh... somepony awakens me after all this time? A voice said in my host's head.

"What? Who's... who's there?" My host said aloud.

An alicorn? My, how the times have changed. Tell me, young one, what year is it? The voice replied.

"Y-y-year? It's... it's around 200 some-odd years since the end of the War," my host said. "Who are you?"

The war ended? Who won? The voice asked.

“Nopony won. The world lost. Since then, we've had a hellish radioactive Wasteland that's become our homes,” my host said. The voice chuckled.

No doubt that it was pretty Princess Luna who caused the end of the war. I'm not surprised. And now, after all this time, my essence is awakened, the voice said. *I am grateful for this. I feel as though I should be... gracious and give you a gift.*

“A gift? What kind of gift? Are you in the statue?” My host said, looking with incredulous eyes at the object still in her hooves.

I can see your deepest desire, young one. You wish to be important. You want everypony to worship you. You want power. You want to rise above all, the voice said. *I can give you this, and more.*

“Why? How could you know these things? What do you get out of this?” My host questioned, feeling frightened by the disembodied voice.

Because you freed me. And for that I shall bestow the power I once wielded upon you. The power to enter minds, to influence dreams, to manipulate, the voice said as a dark blue energy began to pour out of the statue, engulfing the alicorn mare. Lightning arced over her body as the energy began to seep into her skin. Thoughts and images seared into the mare's mind, along with emotions. My own mind cringed at this. The emotions were among the most powerful, most negative things I had ever felt in my life. They tore at my host's mind, enhancing it and at the same time... corrupting it. After several moments of pain and torture, my host opened her eyes.

“I... I can feel it. Such power, such amazing power. I can see it all so clearly now,” she said. I shuddered at the sound of her voice. This was Pride, in all of her corrupt glory. “I shall seek vengeance for what the world has done to us, and the entire Wasteland shall know me as their true Goddess.”

Excellent... my loving subject. I expect no less, the voice said. My host made to stand, gathering up the statues in her magic and setting them in her saddlebags. As she turned, another voice, this one real, stopped her.

“Diamond?” The small voice said. My host looked across the room, seeing the zebra Evora standing there. Her eyes were filled with tears. It was the first look I had gotten at the zebra from outside her head. Her eyes were a vivid blue, and her body was lithe and strong. A black and white curly mane extended from her forebrow down her neck. “Are you alright? I was on my way to see you. You weren't at your home, so I figured you'd be here, but then I heard an explosion.” My host smiled.

“I'm fine, Evora. I finally got that chest open!” My host said, her voice returning to her normal tone. “You'll never believe it!” The zebra's expression changed to that of surprise.

“You... you did?” She said. My host nodded as the other mare trotted over. “That's great! What was inside?” My host smiled, opening up her saddlebags to reveal the statues inside. Evora's eyes widened.

“You mean... they're real? All that work we've been doing, and they were actually real?” She said. My host grinned.

“Yes. And once I'm done studying them, we'll be able to save the Wasteland,” the alicorn said. “It's all we ever dreamed of, Evora.” The zebra leaned in, hooking her hoof around the alicorn's neck.

“I'm... I'm so happy for you, Diamond. I knew you were right. I just knew it,” she said. My host shook off the affectionate behavior and stepped back from the zebra, prompting an expression of confusion. “Diamond? What's wrong?”

“Nothing, Evora. I already told you this,” my host said, raising one of the statues out of the bag. It was the one of the zebra. “In fact, I appreciate your friendship so much, that I want you to have this.” Evora cocked her head.

“Are you... are you sure?” She said. My host nodded.

“Of course. What sort of friend would I be if I didn't? You've spent so much time helping me, after all,” The alicorn replied. Evora chuckled nervously.

“Well, you see... that's because... well... oh geez how do I say this...” the zebra stumbled over herself as she stared into my host's eyes. “I... I really like you, Diamond. I... I love you even.” My host remained silent. “I know that you probably don't feel the same way, but you deserve to know. That's why I was coming to see you tonight.”

“I... I see,” the alicorn said. “I had no idea. I... You're my best friend, Evora. I don't know that I...” Evora hung her head silently.

“I get it. I really do. You're not interested. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up,” she said. Her eyes drifted up to the statue. “You can keep it. I don't deserve a nice gift like that.” My host grinned again.

“On the contrary my dear friend, you deserve it more than anypony else,” my host said. “Please. I insist.” The zebra reached out, hesitant at first, but decided that the reassuring look on my host's face was enough. She touched the statue, the dark energy pouring out of it as she did. Her expression quickly changed to that of fear.

“Diamond, what...? What is this?” She started to say as the energy engulfed her body. Lightning and power seared across the zebra mare. She howled in pain, falling to the ground. My host smiled as she stood over the zebra.

“Yes... give her your blessing. Your gift. Share it with her...” my host said. The voice in the back of her head cackled wildly as the energy finally lifted from the zebra mare. Arcane symbols glowed upon the surface of her skin, disappearing as she began to stir. Her eyes fluttered open, the bright vivid blue replaced by the familiar green that I knew her for. She stood, and I could tell that she was no longer Evora by the way she carried herself. A savage grin flashed across her face.

“I am at your bidding, my queen,” she said, bowing deeply before the alicorn mare. My host smiled widely.

“Your devotion is admirable. Now... we have much work to do, to spread our message across the Wasteland. But we cannot do it alone. We must share our blessing with those like us,” my host said.

“From this day forward, I am no longer Diamond Night. No... Diamond is dead, as is Evora. We must forge new names for ourselves, ones that better represent our blessings.”

“I will do whatever you ask,” the zebra replied.

“Excellent. From this day forward, you shall be known as... Envy,” my host said. “For within your green eyes hides the soul of the jealous ones.”

“Thank you, my queen. And what shall I call you?” Envy said as she looked up at my host.

“Pride.”

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I came out of the memory feeling groggy, but rested. My mind buzzed with thoughts over what I had seen. Pride really was a victim. A victim of something that felt... *evil* in the most basic of ways. Something had lived in those statues, and had taken her over, forcing her to share this so-called 'blessing' with those closest to her. I had thought originally that Greed was the first one that Diamond had converted, but now I knew that Envy was the first. She had forced a mare who had loved her truly into servitude. Why then, had Envy left her mistress's side? Was she like the others? Had she started to remember who she was, and what Pride had done to her? I realized that Pride's control over them must have been very tenuous. Perhaps it was the fact that she had split her blessing up in so many ways.

“Star? You alright?” A voice beside me broke me out my thoughts. I looked over, seeing Violet. She had Thunder Flash out, and had been cleaning it. I smiled.

“Yeah... Yeah I'm alright,” I said, pulling myself to my haunches. I looked back over at the fountain, seeing Cranky and Lilith sitting there. “I need to speak to Cranky.” I stood, trotting over to the two. Cranky's red eyes seemed to drift upward as I approached.

“Kid,” he said.

“Cranky,” I replied. “So... there was something behind those statues. Something that was even controlling and corrupting Pride. She was just as much a victim as you and the others were.” The donkey ghoul nodded.

“Diamond was obsessed with those things. She knew that they existed somehow. I keep thinking that maybe whatever it was, was pulling her to them. Like it wanted her to find them,” he said. “I doubt that there's any piece of her left.”

“I will be the judge of that,” I said. “I... I have an idea. If I can knock Pride out enough to perform a mind dive spell on her...”

“That would be incredibly dangerous,” Cranky said. “Pride is a master of mind manipulation. She could force your mind out of its body.”

“Good. Because I haven't had that happen to me at all,” I said sarcastically. “Been there, done that. Got the horseshoes.” Cranky raised a brow suspiciously. “Long story. Don't ask. I'm done with

waiting and planning. It's time for action.” I looked over at Violet. She nodded as she began to pack away her things. Nixis and Danish stood nearby, ready to go as ever. On the other side of Lilith were Steeljack and Patch. The two lovers had determined grins on their faces.

“We're ready,” the grey earth pony stallion said. I nodded, latching Stargazer onto its harness. Cranky stood, and took up the front position to lead us to the Overmare's Office. We stepped into the far hallway, walking silently through the dark grey halls of the Stable. As we walked I thought about everything that had led up to this point. I thought about Spark, Pride, Lucky. My mind soared over thoughts of Cranky, Lilith, Evora, Grenadine, and even Cutter. Even the bookish minotaur, Bronze Fist tumbled over in my mind. I knew deeply that I had to do something for them. I thought about my friends. Would they survive this? I had to do everything in my power to make sure that they did. I had to stop Pride, but what would I do once I got inside her mind? Was there still a piece of Diamond Night, the kind and confused alicorn that I had seen within their memories? And what was I going to do about Spark, once I finally confronted her? I still had no clue.

“We're here,” Cranky's gravelly voice grated over the quiet. We stood in front of a simple door, marked **OVERMARE**. I snorted. It didn't totally surprise me that Pride would place herself in a place where she was above everypony else. The donkey ghoul pushed the door open and we stepped inside. The office was bare for the most part, filled only with a simple desk, a terminal, and a wall locker. Cranky moved to the far end of the office, stopping in front of the locker. He tapped a few buttons on its lock, causing it to recess into the wall and open. A large spiral staircase appeared from beyond the secret entrance, curling away into the darkness.

“Pride keeps her sanctum down below. We should be prepared for anything,” Cranky said. “I will try take her by surprise. You will only have a few moments to knock her out.” I nodded.

“Everypony else, hold your fire unless she tries something. I want her alive,” I said to the others. They nodded in agreement. “As far as Spark is concerned, Pride has her under lock. If everything works out with Pride, I'll be able to take care of Spark afterwards.”

“And if it doesn't?” Patch asked quietly. Violet shuddered against my side.

“I don't know. Stop Pride, stop Spark.”

In silence we moved single file down the ancient metal staircase. As we descended, the metal changed to stonework, a soft light emanating from below.

“A long time ago, before Chicacolt was built... there was an ancient civilization that lived here,” Cranky explained as we walked down the stairs. “At least that's what the history books said. They built the city on top of the ruins, never knowing what lay below the surface. Stable-Tec built this Stable underneath the city, including an access to the ruins in case anypony needed to go further underground to escape the death from the skies above.”

“And just what was this Stable's experiment?” I asked quietly, my curiosity piqued now. “From one of the memories, Evora had a Stable jumpsuit.”

“The Stable's experiment was rather simple”, the donkey said. “Multiculturalism, just like the city above that supported it. Every race had a place in this Stable. That's why it was so big. Pride described it to me out of Evora's memories.”

“The point was to promote working together?” Violet said. Cranky nodded as we continued down the stairs. It seemed like they went on forever. The light from below began to grow in intensity, until finally it was bright as day. Torches lined the walls as we reached what appeared to be a stone landing. At the far end of the landing was a set of large stone doors. Two massive torches sat on each side of the doors. I stepped forward and pressed upon the stonework with my magic, forcing them open. We moved into the darkness, ready for anything. The room beyond was enormous. Bowls of fire ringed the circular room. In the center was a large stone disk surrounded by giant pillars. My eyes were drawn however, to what was above the center of the room. Floating high in the air were two ponies. They appeared to be unconscious, gleaming purple chains holding them in place. One was an alicorn with a black mane and purple coat. The other... was a pony with wings and a horn. One that I knew quite well.

“Lucky? Spark?” I said quietly, my eyes widening. My gaze drifted from the two spectral mares down to the pony in the center of the stone. A midnight colored alicorn waited for us as we stepped forward. Her eyes were closed. As I pulled myself up onto the disk, they flashed open.

“Welcome, Ministry Mare. Welcome, to your death,” Pride said, her wings flaring out.

“Pride,” I said coldly. I nodded to my friends, as they fanned out behind me. Cranky nodded as he began to move into place.

“We meet for the last time,” the alicorn said. “Ah, and I see you've brought the slut and the donkey with you. Sloth, I am surprised that you would turn on me so quickly.”

“I'm not doing this for the Ministry Mare, Pride. I'm doing this for Matilda. You never could release her,” the donkey said. “Now, I will give you no quarter. You are finished!” Cranky surged forward, expelling a violent blast of pink substance from his mouth at the alicorn. Pride snarled and unleashed a wave of magic, deflecting the cloud to the ground. I looked up at Lucky and Spark. They would have to wait. I leaped towards the mare, unlatching Stargazer and taking aim. I fired a torrent of bullets, beating my wings as Pride looked up. She raised a shield, dissolving the bullets into nothing. I pressed on, crashing into the mare and forcing her to the ground. I locked eyes with the sinister mare as I focused on my mind dive spell.

“Well, you think you have the upper hoof, do you?” Pride said, grinning. Her horn flared to life, picking me up in her magic and tossing me aside into one of the pillars. I hit hard, coughing up blood as pain flowed up and down my body. I pushed myself up in time to see Cranky moving on Pride's other side. He pawed at the ground, spewing forth more Pink Cloud at the alicorn. Pride grinned as she slid aside, ushering the corrosive Cloud past with a flicker of magic. Gunfire echoed across the room as Patch and Steeljack made their move. Their shots were intended to distract, not wound or kill. Pride snarled, firing two blasts of concentrated magic at the two earth ponies. The blasts hit quickly, knocking the two to the ground with grunts of pain.

“Steeljack! Patch!” I shouted as I flared my horn, teleporting next to the two. Patch waved me off as I appeared.

“We're fine. You worry about her,” she said. I nodded, turning my attention to Pride and Cranky. Lilith soared in on metal wings, taking aim with the Bitch. The missile launcher's whine was hungry as she fired. Pride looked up and latched onto the projectile with her magic. It exploded before it ever

reached her, knocking Lilith out of the air into one of the pillars. I flared my wings, pushing myself forward. I landed next to the other alicorn, striking her across the face with my forehoof.

“Enough of these games, Pride. Release Lucky, and let me deal with the other one,” I said angrily. Pride laughed as she whipped around, hitting me in the chest with one of her back legs. I grunted in pain.

“The so-called Spark of Magic? I will see that she is properly taken care of,” she said. “As for the other one, she's nothing. She died once because of your failure, and she'll do it again just fine.” I growled, whipping Stargazer around and slamming it into her stupid lying face. The blow sent Pride to the ground, howling as she struggled to get up. Before she could move, I straddled her, grinding her face into the ground with the business end of Stargazer.

“This game is over, Pride,” I said. My horn ignited with fury as I cast it, holding Pride as the connection between our minds was made.

The sanctum reappeared, except that instead of my friends and Cranky, I stood alone with Pride and the two prisoners. They were at ground level in here, though. Their purple chains glinted more than the flickering firelight could account for.

Pride growled as she shoved me off of her, making her way to her feet. Stargazer hadn't come in with me, more's the pity.

“I knew it would come down to this,” Pride grumped. “You and me. We're the same, you know. We want the same things.”

“No, Pride. We don't,” I said coldly, turning my attention away from the prone mare for a second. “Lucky, can you hear me? Are you alright?” The green mare nodded from her confinement. Her expression was one of sadness.

“I'm... I'm alright. But I'm so sorry, I... I messed up,” she said. I shook my head.

“No... you didn't. You only did what you thought was right. If you hadn't followed Spark, if you hadn't met the Smooze... if you hadn't left me your gift, I would have been broken,” I said. “I wouldn't have made it this far. Thank you, my friend.” I glared over at Spark. “And you? What about you, Spark? Sad that you finally met your match?” The black-maned alicorn scoffed.

“Please. As soon as I'm out of here, I'm going to find a much better host,” she said scornfully. “Or at least one who knows how to treat an honored guest.” The Spark of Magic said, rattling her purple chains. I had to stifle a completely inappropriate giggle as I turned back to Pride.

“Now then. I've seen your memories, and of the those you corrupted. So tell me this... where is Diamond?” I said. Pride was standing now, looking more confident and powerful.

“Diamond? That mare is dead. She was a coward. A freak, filled with memories that were never hers. I killed her, and took her place,” she said.

“No. There's still some piece of you that belonged to her. Otherwise, you wouldn't have wanted to hurt Lilith as badly as you tried to. Diamond, listen to me. You can stop this. You can stop all of it,” I said, holding out my hoof. Pride slapped my hoof away, snarling.

“There's nothing that you can do to help me now, Ministry Mare,” she said, flaring her horn. A blast of energy shot forth from it, soaring past me and striking Spark's chain. The arcane bond shattered, freeing the dark alicorn. She dropped to the stone ground, stretching her wings and grinning widely. Pride glared at the Element. “Time for you to make good on your promise, Spark. You wanted my body? Well, I'm giving it to you.” Spark grinned as she stepped forward.

“No!” I shouted, turning back to the Element of Magic. “I cannot allow that to happen. Diamond, please... if you're in there... please listen. You cannot let Spark have your body. You will be under her complete control, no mind of your own. It will only be her.”

“And what if that's what I want?!” Pride growled back at me. “I want her power. I want Diamond Night to disappear forever!” Spark moved out of the corner of my eye faster than I could think. I knew I couldn't keep track of both of them. Pride cackled wildly. I expected Spark to be there, to take over. A burst of magic behind me caught my attention and I spun about. Standing there, holding a vivid green blade in her magic, was Lucky. Spark was on the ground in front of her, having been knocked down by the mare's sword.

“I'll hold her off!” Lucky shouted. “You take care of what you need to do. I'll keep this one under control.”

“L-L-Lucky?” I said, flabbergasted as Spark began to stand again. She snarled at the green mare, lunging forward, only to meet the flat of Lucky's magical blade. Spark reeled at the strike, stumbling away with little grace. The alicorn lifted herself off the ground, forming her own blade.

“I'll be fine, you take care of Pride!” Lucky called back. She surged forward, slashing at Spark with her blade wildly. I turned about, nearly catching a hoof in my face as Pride struck. I leaped back. I wasn't sure how much control I had in this dream world. I had to trust that Lucky could take care of herself, after all. There were more immediate concerns to deal with. I focused on my magic, forming my own magical blade.

“Diamond. Please, you still have a chance to stop this,” I said. Pride snarled, summoning her own blade.

“No. What's done is done. Diamond is gone. There is only Pride now. And Pride will be your downfall!” The mare shouted, rushing forward. I lifted my blade, deflecting her strike. The alicorn pressed on, pounding at me with her own sword. Her horn flared, trying to trip me by pulling on my legs. I pushed back, slashing down to break her focus. Her blade came up, blocking it easily. The sounds of battle behind me indicated that Lucky and Spark were still fighting. I dodged to the side as another strike came my way, barely missing me. I responded with a counter-slash, slapping away Pride's blade. I fired a blast of energy from my horn, hitting a shield conjured up by the blue alicorn. She scowled, bringing her blade back up.

“Why do you persist, Ministry Mare?” she asked, lunging forward with a thrust.

“Because I know that there is some good in you, Pride. Diamond is still there, somewhere,” I said,

deflecting the strike. "Your memories showed me that much. I know what it's like to not know who you are sometimes. I've been living Twilight Sparkle's memories now for so long, I can barely remember who or what I am."

"You have no idea what I felt like... when the Goddess died my memories didn't come back like yours. Mine were a jumble of multiple personalities. There never was a pony named Diamond Night. I made her up, thinking that I could find semblance of sanity in this fucked up world!" Pride replied angrily. She was keeping back, waiting to find an opening in my defenses.

"That's not what I saw," I said. "I saw a mare who wanted nothing more than to help this world. She wanted to be kind, and she had friends. She was also loved," I said. "But you were deceived. That thing inside of you took that away from you!" Pride laughed madly.

"No, Ministry Mare," she said, slashing at my side with the magical sword. "It gave me what I wanted. It gave me the power I needed to take what I desired. I desired Cutter, and so I had him. I desired to turn Lilith into a simpering, groveling little bitch, and I did it!" I brought my blade around, matching hers blow for blow as we danced back and forth.

"You're wrong," I said, swinging my sword around and locking it into a fierce grapple with Pride's own. "You *loved* Cutter. You couldn't stand the fact that he didn't love you. And so you gave in to temptation. You let yourself be corrupted!"

"Fuck you. I did what I had to, which is what I'm doing now," the alicorn replied, trying to shift her blade out of the grapple. I growled, flaring my horn and holding my own sword steady. I knew that Diamond was still in there somewhere. I just had to reach her. I had to get rid of the corrupting influence there. I had to do something, and fast. I summoned what magic I could and struck hard at the mare, pulling her legs out from under her and putting her headfirst into the stone. She groaned as she passed out. The form of the world around us began to start shimmering away as I stepped over her. This was Pride's dream world after all. It wouldn't last too long if she was out cold.

"I'm not going to kill you. No... I can't. That wouldn't be my style, after all," I said simply as I looked down at the dream mare. "After having seen what I have, I know that there's something else there... something else that was controlling your actions. And now I'm going to end it." My horn flared and I reached deep inside, searching for something, anything that was out of the ordinary. I found it easily enough. The dark energy that had come from the statue radiated throughout the mare's mind like a parasite. I snarled as I overloaded with magic, feeling intense pain rolling from my horn as I tried to eradicate the darkness. It wasn't working. The darkness fought back, attacking me with vicious fury. *No! I will stop you!* I thought, as I pushed back. A sinister voice growled at me from within the darkness.

You think you can stop me? Pathetic fool, it said. *I am darkness incarnate.*

Come on... Diamond, I know you're there. Please help me stop this! I thought. *Think about Evora! About Grenadine, Cutter, Lilith, and Cranky! Think about Bronze Fist! Think about your friends! They stood behind you once, let them be the source of your strength!* I howled, trying to keep the darkness from pushing me out.

E-E-Evora? A different voice rang out in my mind. It was a timid voice, filled with fear. *I... I remember them. All I ever wanted was to help them all.*

You foal, the darkness replied. You are mine, and mine alone. You only live at my whim.

Diamond, listen to me. You can help them, like you wanted. But you have to help me! Help me beat this thing, and I promise you that you'll see them again! I thought.

I... I can't, she's too strong! Diamond's voice said. *I'm too weak.*

No! You're not weak! Feel the strength of your friends, Diamond. Feel my strength. Let it help you! I thought. *Please!* I groaned under the stress of the spell. My horn began to shimmer, and I could feel my magic fading, along with the dreamworld. Before it did though, I felt Diamond's presence begin to bolster it. The mare was fighting back! The magic began to flow once more, and I gritted my teeth. *That's it! Keep going, Diamond! You can do it!*

What are you doing? The dark voice said, the fear evident in its tone. *Stop that! Stop!*

You've controlled my life for too long! Diamond shouted, her voice more confident. *And now I want you out!!!* Light poured out of every part of Pride, finally expelling the dark power. A scream tore a path through my mind as the darkness left the mare's body. I shuddered as I fell backwards, hitting the ground hard. My eyes closed for a brief moment.

"Star!" I heard Lucky shout. I opened my eyes and looked up, seeing the green mare holding her blade against that of Spark's. "Get up! You can't give up now!" Every inch of me hurt, but I still tried to stand. Finally I managed to get onto my hooves, and I looked down at Pride. She was out cold it seemed. I ran over her with my magic, looking for any trace of the dark energy that had consumed her. There was nothing left. I turned my attention back to Spark, who grinned, her form a concrete point of reference in the wavering mush of a faltering dreamscape. *One more thing to take care of,* I thought, groaning.

"Oh. Too bad. I guess that means I won't be joining with her after all," She said. "Too bad, too. I liked her. She was my kind of evil."

"Spark," I said shakily. "We've been through a lot, you and I. I was told that once I confronted you, I would have to make a decision. A very important decision, that would affect everything. I was going to have to decide whether to kill you or save you."

"You never could make a decision to save your own life, Radiant Star," the black-maned alicorn chided. "Besides... you don't have it in you to kill me." I nodded as Lucky watched the two of us talk, her magic blade at the ready.

"You're right," I said. "I don't have it in me to kill you. That's why there's only one thing left to do. I've taken care of Pride. This mental construct of hers is breaking down, and we'll soon be back in the real world. Spark... you're just as much a victim as she was. She never deserved this life, and neither did you. You were twisted by Nightmare. That was never your fault."

"Yes, but it did happen, didn't it? And the others, they never stopped to think if I needed their help or not. They tried to murder me, in cold blood," Spark spat.

"Maybe so... but that doesn't excuse your actions. You tried to hurt everypony. You destroyed

Twilight's life, her brother, everything, just to gain immortality," I said. "And I think I've finally figured out what I'm going to do about it."

"And what's that? Pout? Whine? Cry about it?" The alicorn replied.

"No. I'm going to let you merge with me," I said. Lucky's eyes shot wide open.

"You're going to *WHAT?!'*" She shouted. I nodded. Spark grinned widely.

"Really, now? Just like that?" The dark mare said. "I must admit. I am surprised."

"Star, you can't do that. Remember what happened last time? This won't work like that. She'll take over completely!" Lucky said frantically. I nodded.

"I know. But I have to do this. I have to try and save her. To redeem her," I said. "Equestria needs the Element of Magic. They need Spark." Spark chuckled.

"Yes... you see the truth of it now, don't you?" The alicorn said, pushing past Lucky and stepping right up to me. I gazed into her cold eyes, nodding.

"Promise me one thing," I said, prompting the mare to cock her head.

"And what's that?" Spark asked.

"Leave Violet and the others alone when this is all over. I want you to go where nopony can find us," I said. Spark considered this for a moment. She finally nodded.

"Of course. I will leave your marefriend alone, as you request," she said, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

"No," a voice from behind her said. Lucky surged forward, tackling the dark alicorn to the ground. "Star, I can't let you do this! You'd be sacrificing yourself for nothing! You're letting her win!"

"Lucky, don't you see? She's my responsibility! I let her out into the world. I have to try to help her. I have to purge the corruption from her," I said. Lucky sighed.

"Take me," she said softly, looking down at Spark. "Take me instead."

"What?!" I shouted. "No... no you can't. You don't even know what that will do!"

"I know it will save you, and that's all I care about," Lucky said. She glanced over at me and smiled. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. After all, you don't owe me anything anymore."

"Yes I do! I promised you! I promised that I would get your body back!" I exclaimed. Lucky shook her head.

"You don't need to do that, Star. Let go, and everything will be alright," she said. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"I can't! I can't do it, Lucky!" I said, choking the words out through my tears. "I... I failed you! I let you die! It was my fault!"

"Star... you silly filly," Lucky said softly. "You want to know why I joined you in that Ministry hub? Why I was in that bar that night we met? Because I was destined to. A long time ago, a wise pony told me that one day... one day I would meet a purple mare who was like me, but not like me. She also told me very clearly that she would need me when it mattered the most. Well it matters now, Star. You need to live. I don't. I've been stuck as this non-pony for too long. It's time for me to be free." She looked back down at Spark, allowing the mare to stand. "Do it, quickly before I change my mind." Spark glanced over at me first, and then nodded. Her horn ignited, ensnaring the green mare in her magic.

"Let it begin, then," she said, grinning. "Not what I expected, but whatever. At this point, I'll take what I can get." I stepped forward, intending to stop the two, but ran face first into a dark purple shield. Spark tittered. "Sorry, Star. But you can't stop this. We'll have our confrontation soon, I promise."

"And I will still choose to save you," I said angrily. "If you hurt her though, I might change my mind."

"She will not come to harm," the dark alicorn replied. "That I will promise you." She turned to Lucky, flaring her horn and grabbing a hold of her shoulder. A brilliant light emanated between the two as both ponies disappeared. White light began to boil through the rolling fabric of the sanctum. The world finally broke apart, and my connection to Pride's mind finally severed.

My eyes opened with a flash of white as a bright light erupted in the air above me. I heard my friends calling out for me, but I could only focus on one thing. Lucky and Spark were still floating in the air, but they were now overlaid against each other. The two spectral ponies began to shimmer as they merged together. Gasps from my friends indicated that they could see them as well.

"Lucky!" I shouted. The green mare looked down at me, and smiled as she faded into Spark's magic. Flesh and blood began to seep into the spectral image, coalescing into a green alicorn mare with a jet black mane. Her eyes glowed an unnatural white as she regarded me.

"Radiant Star," the new pony said, grinning. "This new form is one that suits me well. I half-expected to be a spectral pony like your friend."

"Spark?" I said, cocking my head. The mare nodded. I shuddered. What had I done? Why did I let Lucky take my place? I had just given Spark physical form!

"And Lucky too," the mare replied. "We're both here. I'm... not totally sure how that works, but it is what it is. And now, it's time for me to leave. I have things to do, after all. Should you wish to seek me out, find me where it all began. I shall be waiting for you." The mare shimmered in place, disappearing into thin air.

"Lucky!!! Spark!!!" I shouted. It was no use. They were gone. I felt a hoof on my shoulder. I looked down, seeing Violet standing there.

“What do we do now?” She said. I shook my head, looking down at the ground.

“I don't know, Violet. I don't know.”

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Maximum Level reached!

Quest Perk! The Life of a Sinner – You've seen the memories of the Sins, giving you a better understanding of their lives. Your Perception has been increased by +1 and you get a +10% increase to all Perception checks.

New Perk! Luck and Spark – Your magic has increased to incredible levels, thanks to your experience with Lucky and Spark. Your magical capability is increased by 20%, and you get a +10% increase to hit a target with magical spells.

New Spell! Mind Dive (Rank 2) – You can now use the mind dive spell in combat!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Quests Completed!

Pride of Chicacolt

Lucky's Lament

Chapter 21: Deconstruction

With all due respect, Princess Celestia, how could you bring Discord here?!

Sin. What is sin, really? Is it some all powerful evil that corrupts a pony's soul, or is it something far simpler? We all know of sin as our transgressions against others, but what of those sins that are so foul, they even carry names? Lust, Greed, Gluttony, Wrath, Pride, Sloth, and Envy. I looked into the hearts and memories of the seven who carried these names, and found that while their sins were great, the creatures behind them were just like any other normal being. They lived, they laughed, they loved and hated... and they sinned. They each became forces of great power in the broken city of Chicacolt.

But yet, somehow... some of them remembered who they were, and what it meant to be cleansed of their sins. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to the ponies during the war if they had remembered their own sins and sought forgiveness. Would we still have ended up with this hellish land we call home? Or would ponykind have taken a different route, and looked for peace with the zebras?

I think about Twilight, and about her own sins. The mare who would one day rest in the Goddess, watching helplessly as her own progeny spilled innocent blood in the name of Unity. What would have happened to her and Spark? Would I even be here to tell this tale?

I slumped to my haunches in utter defeat. Despite everything I had struggled for I had failed once more. I looked up at the space where Lucky and Spark had been. I couldn't even begin to form words over what had happened. The being that had left us was Spark given physical form, the Element of Magic herself unleashed upon the Wasteland. I thought about the riddle she had left. Finding her where it all began? What did she mean by that? Where was she going? What were her plans?

My mind swam with these thoughts and more. The reality of Lucky's sacrifice weighed heavy on my heart. Why did she have to do that? She deserved better! She deserved to live her own life, not one twisted by the corrupted Element. I hung my head low, tears flowing freely as I struggled to figure out what to do next. Thankfully, a groan from nearby stole my attention away. I looked over at Pride. The dark alicorn's eyes were fluttering open as she tried to push herself up. I shook my tears away and stood. I strode over to the mare, towering over her as her gaze drifted upwards. Her eyes, once filled with contempt and hatred, were now filled with fear. I felt Violet step up next to me, her hoof resting on my shoulder blade.

“P-p-please...” The alicorn at my feet whispered. The others had gathered around me. I stole a glance at Patch and Steeljack. The two were supporting each other, but they appeared to be fine otherwise. Nixis and Danish stood next to them, the cream colored unicorn sporting a wry smile on his face. Beyond them, Cranky and Lilith sat apart from the group. They were conversing quietly, keeping their eyes on Pride at all times.

“Pride,” I said. I shook my head, forcing myself to focus on the situation. There would be time for dealing with Spark later. First, I had to deal with the here and now.

“Please...” The mare said quietly. She cowered beneath me, shivering as she tried to scramble away. “I

never... never meant..." I dropped to my haunches immediately, realizing that I had somehow succeeded inside Pride's mind. I had managed to dispel whatever was inside of her. Was it completely gone now? I let my cold expression fall, a soft smile emerging upon my lips.

"Hey... Diamond, right?" I said. The mare nodded slowly.

"I never... I never meant to hurt anyone. I only... only wanted..." she said quietly.

"You only wanted to help," a grating voice said from behind me. Cranky had finally taken interest in the situation. Lilith stood at his side. Diamond's eyes went wide.

"No, I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry..." she said. "Please... it was that... that thing..."

"Thing?" Lilith said, cocking her head. "What thing?"

"There was something inside of those statues, wasn't there, Diamond?" I said. "Something that made you do those things." Diamond nodded again silently.

"It... it told me that I was serving a greater purpose... that I was going to be the Queen that the world needed," she said. "First it just pushed, suggested and prodded... but then it took over. I was always in the background after that, watching as it..."

"It took your only friends away from you," I said. "I saw. I saw your memory, and I felt that thing inside your head. But you beat it, Diamond. You did. I felt your power. You had it in you all along."

"That means I'm responsible," Diamond replied. "I let her do those terrible... horrific things. I let her destroy my friends. I deserve whatever punishment you have to exact over me." Silence filled the air. I looked up at Lilith and Cranky. The ancient ghoul nodded slowly. I smiled and turned back, reaching a hoof out. I rested it on Diamond's shoulder, causing her to shiver at my touch.

"I'm not... no... *we're* not going to punish you, Diamond. You deserve better. You deserve a second chance, just like everypony else does," I said. "And you can start by helping us. Where are the statues?"

"Why do you...?" The alicorn asked. "Why do you need to know where they are?"

"Because I intend to get rid of them. They're dangerous, and whatever is inside of them should be destroyed," I proclaimed. I stood. "Now then, will you help us?" Diamond looked away for a few moments and then nodded shakily.

"You have to understand... I never meant to hurt anypony," she said quietly as she pulled herself up into a standing position. I smiled softly.

"I know you didn't. And now I'm going to help you end it," I said. "For you, and your friends." Diamond hung her head, and finally tossed her head at a corner of the room.

"Follow me," she said. She trotted past the others, struggling to not look at them as she moved towards the far stone wall. I followed behind her, Violet right next to me. She looked up at me with concern in her eyes.

“Star? What happened to you?” She said. “What happened to Spark?”

“Lucky... she... she let Spark merge with her. That... thing you saw was them,” I said. “She's gone though. The plan still stands. Deal with Pride, deal with Spark.”

“Sure, love - that's for the future, and I'm with you all the way. But what happens now?” Violet asked, leaning warmly against my flank.

“We'll destroy the statues and get the hell out of this place. Regroup somewhere safe, and then try and figure out where to go next,” I said quietly. The far wall opened silently at Diamond's approach, revealing a great hall lined in stone. Diamond plodded down it, glancing back occasionally as if to make sure we were still there.

“It's not far,” she said. I smiled reassuringly at her, and glanced back at the others.

“Alright, you guys keep watch. Violet and Lilith, you're with us,” I said. The two mares nodded as the others moved back down the hall to keep watch. The four of us rounded the next corner, the flames of the torches giving way to an unholy blue light. In the center of the small chamber was a large pedestal. Arranged on top of the stone were seven statues. Earth pony, Pegasus, Unicorn, Donkey, Minotaur, Zebra... and Alicorn. They glowed brightly in the darkness, pulsing with energy as we drew near. It felt like they were waiting for us. As we stepped forward, I felt the air grow cold. I glanced over at Diamond. She waited with anticipation over what was to come.

“I'm going to need your help for this, Diamond. Violet, you too,” I said. “If something goes wrong, I want you to take Thunder Flash and melt them down into slag.” Violet nodded, levitating out her beam rifle. “Diamond. You and I are going to try and trap this thing inside the statues.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Diamond replied. I grinned widely.

“Trust me,” I said. “We can do it.” I looked down at the statues. I knew that whatever this thing was, it was dangerous. Before I could do anything, I felt a hoof on my shoulder. I glanced back, seeing Diamond.

“T-T-Thank you. I don't know why you're doing this. I don't... I don't deserve this...” she said. I smiled softly. From beside the alicorn, Lilith appeared.

“Diamond,” the black mare said. “None of us blame you. But you *have* to fix this. I've accepted that Cutter is long gone, but we can't let his death be in vain. You can do this.” Diamond shuddered as Lilith reached out, pulling her into a hug.

“But... I... I took him away from you... I was so selfish...” she said. The pegasus smiled softly.

“You were. But that's the best thing about second chances. Everypony deserves them,” Lilith replied, glancing over at me and winking. I smiled knowingly. I knew it was a good idea to bring Lilith along. Diamond nodded in silence before turning back to me.

“OK... I'm ready, I guess. What do we do?” She asked.

“Focus your magic on the statues. I’ll be right here with you, and we’ll try and snare it. We’ll force it back in and then lock up the statues for good,” I said. Diamond nodded and began to flare her horn. I joined in, focusing on the pedestal and the statues. The energy between us intensified, and I felt a tug in the back of my mind. I found myself hearing Diamond’s thoughts. As expected, the mare was terrified of what she had done. I tried to push a smile at her, projecting my own thoughts to let her know that everything was going to work out in the end.

Diamond looked back at me, her eyes and horn glowing with magic and determination. A darkness curled between us suddenly, a wisp of black energy from the statues. I growled under my breath, and a soft chuckle stroked the fringes of my and Diamond’s shared mind.

Well, well... you sure didn't waste any time, did you Diamond? The dark voice echoed through our minds. And I see you've brought your new friend too. Such a delectable little plaything, she is. Now then... be a good girl and let me back in. You still have plenty of unfinished work to do.

No! I heard Diamond's voice in my head shout. I won't give in to you! You made me do horrible things to my friends! To so many others!

If I recall correctly, my little pony, you gave in to me quite readily. You accepted your place in life, as my servant, the voice replied.

She's not yours anymore, I interrupted, packing all the disdain I could into my voice. *She's her own pony, free just like she was meant to be!*

Ahh... the so-called Ministry Mare finally speaks. You know, I knew the real Twilight Sparkle... once. You are nothing compared to her, the voice said. *As for the other, she's nothing more than a pawn. A means to an end.*

You're wrong, I thought. I was beginning to get seriously annoyed with this thing's insistence. Diamond was silent. That couldn't be good.

Ohh... am I now? I am pretty sure that she was my willing slave, the voice said. *Besides... she will never find anypony like me.*

I'm her friend, I thought. *She has me, and even after your foul influence, she has Lilith, and the others.*

Pish, the voice replied, chuckling madly. *If you're so willing to be her friend, why not take her place then? It's the sacrifice your broken little green friend made for you.*

Never, I thought. *I'm fine right where I am.*

Oh, but I will have you. I will have all of you in the end. I am your worst Nightmare, Radiant Star! The voice growled.

I don't care what you are, I'm going to put you back where belong so that nopony else will ever find you! I thought angrily, focusing my magic on the statues. Through the haze of power pouring from myself and Diamond, I saw a deep blue smoke pouring out of the statues. The smoke coiled onto the ground and bulked into a massive cloud of pure threat. I drew breath to redouble my efforts, but was shocked into a gasp when the cloud puffed into a pony-shaped form.

Have it your way, Ministry Mare. I will show you true power, the voice said as the form stepped delicately out of the last wisps of smoke. It was a tall slender alicorn mare, with a coat of dark blue smoke. Shadows played across her coat with the flexing of her legs. Her eyes shot open, revealing snakelike orbs glowing with arcane power. The thing's wings flared open as it dove towards Diamond and I. Violet snarled, firing a blast of silver fire at the vaguely pony-esque thing. The fire passed through the thing as if it wasn't even there.

"Shit! My fire passes right through it!" The green mare shouted as she pulled Thunder Flash back to her. The close quarters meant that any other fire was likely to hit somepony else. The creature landed on the pedestal with a ***crash***, slamming into Diamond. The blue mare hit the ground hard, grunting in pain as her horn sputtered out. I spun around, lashing out with a forehoof. The dark creature turned, blocking my strike and sending me sliding back into the dark stone hall. I groaned as I came to a halt. My own magic dissipated and I felt my grip on the statues loosen.

"Well, Radiant Star? Do you wish to give in, to become one with the darkness, become one with Nightmare?" The monster shouted as it stalked towards me.

"Never!" I called back, pushing myself off the ground. The dark pony-shaped monster chuckled.

"Your friends will die this day," it said. "When I stand before you on a pile of their corpses, when all that is left is me, you will. You will join with me and I will wreak my just and terrible vengeance on the pathetic pony race!"

"You're very melodramatic, you know that, right?" I quipped. Where was Diamond? Why hadn't she joined me yet? I needed her help to contain this thing, I wasn't feeling too good about my chances of pulling it off on my own. "So, tell me something. What are you, really?"

"What am I? I am the thing that feeds on your despair. I am a creature forged in the blackest of nights," the thing crowed. *Yep... definitely heavily on the melodramatic side,* I thought as the creature actually *posed*, flaring its wings and rearing. "And I am your Eternal Queen."

"Well, I don't remember voting for you," I joked, ducking to the side to look past the creature. *Come on, Diamond...* I thought. *Hurry up!*

"Waiting for that waste of space?" The creature said. "She's not going to be much help to you." A thick blue tendril erupted from the side of the thing. It reached back into the chamber. Diamond appeared on the other end of the tendril, writhing in agony as she tried to pull herself out of the tentacle's embrace. A second tendril popped out, grabbing Violet as well. My eyes widened.

"Violet!" I yelled. "Put her down!"

"Star!" I heard shouts from behind me. I glanced back, seeing the others gathered behind me. I growled under my breath. This was not good. I couldn't let this thing get past me. I had to stop it here.

"Everypony, stay back!" I called out. "This thing can't be hurt by normal means!" I turned around, facing the beast once more. Diamond was flailing in the embrace of the smoke, howling as she tried to free herself. "Diamond, Violet, stay calm! I'm gonna get you guys out of there!"

"I don't think so. These pathetic wretches are coming with me. After all, I still need a host," the monster replied, waving Diamond and Violet about in the air.

"Put. THEM. **DOWN**," I said angrily, using my magic to emphasize my point. The creature snarled, rushing forward at me. Tentacles poured from its sides, lashing out at me. I flared my horn, batting at the tendrils with blasts of telekinesis. The monstrous thing chuckled wildly as it broke free. Violet struggled, her horn lighting up as she tried to get free of the creature's grip. Thunder Flash whipped about in the air, firing down at one of the tentacles. The silver fire burned it away, dropping the green mare to the ground with a grunt of pain. I cocked my head in confusion. *Didn't those shots go right through it before?* I thought. Pushing the thought out of my head, I called out for my love. "Violet!"

"I'm alright!" She called back, leaping out of the way of a second tendril. "Lilith! Get me out of here!" The black mare streaked through the fight, snatching Violet up and carrying her back to the others. I sighed. That was one thing taken care of. The monster's eyes flared as it lifted Diamond up next to her.

"No matter. This one will do just fine," it said. Its mouth opened wide as it began to pull the other alicorn closer.

"Diamond!" I shouted, flaring my horn once more. A blast of magic erupted from it, hitting the tendril. It severed completely, dropping Diamond unceremoniously to the ground below. "Enough of this. I don't care what you are. You are not going to possess her again."

"I don't recall asking your permission," the thing said. It sprouted new tendrils, reaching for Diamond with half a dozen smokey extrusions.

"Diamond! You have to get up! I can't do this without you," I said.

"It's... it's too strong..." Diamond wheezed. She was trying to push herself up as another tendril wrapped itself around her barrel. The mare yelped as she was lifted into the air once more. Her horn tried to spark, but it was weak and fizzled out immediately. "Star... you have to trust me. You have to go... just leave me..."

"No, Diamond. I won't leave you! You don't deserve this!" I shouted. Diamond smiled weakly as she was lifted into the air by the grinning beast.

"It will be okay, Star. This is the way it has to be." Diamond said. As her body rotated momentarily to face away from the monster, she winked at me.

"Yes... give in. See how powerful you can be," it said. "Give in to me, and be free!"

"No... never. Never again. I'll bury you before that happens!" Diamond replied, flaring her horn brightly. It simmered down a second later. "There. It's done. Star... hit it with everything you got. Don't worry about sealing it into the statues, just force us back into the statue chamber!"

"But... what do you mean 'it's done'?" I asked cautiously.

"The self-destruct sequence! I activated the Stable's self-destruct sequence! You don't have much time, so force us in there and I'll seal the door. I'll bury this fucking thing here, and it will never hurt anypony else again!" The blue mare caroled. My eyes widened.

“You did *WHAT?!*” I shouted. The thing holding her snarled as it surged forward, trying to get past me. I ignited my horn again, putting up the best shield I could possibly think of. Shining Armor's shield spell flared into existence, stopping the beast cold in its tracks. My horn seared with pain, and I grunted as I forced the shield forward, pushing the pony-shaped monster back down the hall. I gritted my teeth, feeling the shield begin to falter as I finally managed to get the two into the statue chamber. Diamond grinned as her own horn flared.

“I'll take it from here, Star. Thank you... so so much. You freed me from this... thing,” she said softly. “I wish we had more time to get to know each other, the right way. But one cannot change fate. The Nightmare's grip on me was my doom, and my grip will be hers! Now GIT, you silly pony!” I put up a hoof as the door slammed shut and my shield disappeared. A rumble echoed from above me somewhere.

“Diamond!!” I shrieked, pounding on the stone door as hard as I could. “Diamond, no! You can't do this! Please!”

You don't have much time, Radiant Star... Diamond's voice echoed in the back of my head. I've seen what the spirit of Magic wants for this world, and it's not pretty. You are the only one who can stop her. You have to stop her! Please... this is what I want...

I sighed, tears streaming out of my eyes. I couldn't just leave her! I couldn't –

There's no time, GO!!! Diamond shouted in my mind. Without thinking, I spun on one hoof, turning tail and running towards my friends.

“WegottagoStable'sgonnablowlupokaybye!” I shouted as I ran past. My friends looked at each other with wide eyes and pelted after me.

She had done it. She had activated the self-destruct sequence just to keep that thing... whatever it was... from escaping into the Wasteland. Thoughts of Diamond and her sacrifice whirled in my head as I ran. They drove me forward through the Stable as it began to come apart all around us. They gave me hope that we would get out alive.

Rumbling noises filled the air above us as we ran. The dull gray walls of the Stable began to shift and grind under the pressure of the explosions that were ripping the underground complex to pieces. We had managed to make it out of the Overmare's office and into the Atrium. The large hall was in shambles. Chunks of cement and metal pipe had fallen into the center of the room. At the far end, a massive amount of debris blocked our passage into the next hall.

“What?!” I yelled, my voice fraught with panic. I reached out with telekinesis, trying to move the debris out of the way, but there was just too much. I frantically began to move multiple pieces at once. The hall shuddered as a large slab of cement ceiling came loose from the ceiling above.

“Star!” Nixis roared, slamming into me and pushing me out of the way. The cement struck the ground, exploding into a thousand pieces. I pushed myself up, groaning. The hellhound lay next to me, whimpering in pain. Several pieces of cement were embedded in his side. Blood pooled beneath his

body.

My heart sunk to my stomach and my blood went cold. I had already lost Diamond, I was not about to lose another friend.

“Nixis!” I exclaimed, reaching over to hold onto him. He smiled.

“Are... are you alright?” He said, wincing as he spoke. I nodded. “Good.”

“Nixis... stay with me... stay with me!!!” I cried as he closed his eyes. “I can't... I can't lose another... please...” The hellhound's eyes fluttered open, and he smiled.

“It's... it's alright. I managed to do some good,” the hellhound whispered. Violet was next to us in a flash, her horn bright with magic.

“No, you're going to be just fine, Nixis,” my love said, anger in her voice as she began to work. The pieces of cement began to glow, a soft green light emanating from them. The shrapnel disintegrated into fine dust. Violet's eyes flared with determination and power as she poured magic into the wounds, doing the best she could to close them up. “Danish! I need bandages and a healing potion, quick!” The cream-colored unicorn scrambled over to us, floating out the medical supplies. Violet took them, pushing the healing potion over to me. I glanced over at the others. They were looking out for any more falling debris. Another explosion ripped into the complex far above us somewhere, the room shaking and grinding. The dust settled, and I wondered just how long it would take for this whole thing to end. Diamond hadn't exactly specified a time limit, after all.

I looked down at Nixis, floating out the healing potion and tipping it up so that he could drink. As I watched Violet work, I couldn't help but be impressed. She was so incredible. Her eyes flashed fiercely and a realization washed over me in that moment. This was what she lived for. Filing that in the back of my head for later, I tried my best to keep Nixis calm under her ministrations. The hellhound beneath us sputtered as Violet finished bandaging up his wounds. It wasn't pretty, but it would have to do until we got out of this hellish place.

“Can you stand?” I asked. Nixis nodded, pushing himself up. He smiled as he winced and held his side.

“I'll be fine, Ministry Mare. This is one friend that won't be leaving you anytime soon. Let's get out of here,” he said. I grinned.

“I couldn't agree more,” I said, looking back at the others. “This way's blocked off. Anypony got any ideas?”

“We should probably follow him,” Lilith said, pointing at the next hall over from the Atrium. A flash of pink substance was trailing down it. My eyes widened. *Cranky? Oh no... you're not going where I think you're...* I thought, dreading the answer that I already knew. Of course the donkey wasn't going to leave this place without Matilda.

“Alright, everypony. I'm going after Cranky. Violet, you're with me. Everypony else, find a way to get topside,” I said. “There has to be an elevator, or something that will take us up.”

“Umm... wouldn't it be better if we stuck together?” Patch said, cocking her head. Steeljack and Danish nodded in agreement.

“Normally, I'd say yes. But if he's planning on doing what I think he's gonna do, he's gonna need my help to do it. Don't worry, we'll be right behind you,” I said.

“Hurry up then, Star. We'll hold the door,” Lilith replied, grinning. I flashed her a grin myself and glanced down at Violet.

“Ready to go?” I said. She nodded and we took off down the hall, following after Cranky. The rumbling above us was getting louder now. I could only imagine how long it was going to take to completely destroy a Stable this large. I prayed to Luna that there was a way out that was still open. The shifting and grinding halls gave new meaning to the word 'death trap' as we galloped hard, trying to stay in Cranky's tracks. Before too long, we arrived at the medical wing. The ghoul had ripped open the metal doors to the infirmary, leaving them lying on the ground.

“Cranky!” I called out, stepping into the medical bay. The secret door to Matilda's room was open. Cranky was inside, sobbing as he held onto the stasis tube. I moved into the bay. Violet stayed at the door, waiting for me.

“I... I can't move her. Not without turning the machine off,” he said under his breath. “She won't survive the shock.” I looked down at the donkey in the tube. She looked... peaceful amidst the shaking and rumbling going on above. I hadn't had a chance to ask Diamond if she knew how to disable the lock. I reached out with my magic, taking hold of the device. My mind screamed as I tried to piece together how to open the tube. Eventually it was too much. I fell to the ground, grunting in pain, my horn searing.

“Ouch...” I said, putting my hoof up to my horn. Violet was at my side within moments.

“Star,” she said. “Are you alright?” I shook my head.

“I can't open it,” I said. “It's too much. I can't break past the psychic lock.” I looked up at Cranky. “Cranky...” The donkey ghoul was silent.

“Just go then, kid,” he finally spoke. My eyes widened.

“What? No... no Cranky. I can't do that,” I said. Cranky sighed.

“Kid. We don't have time. This place is coming down all around us,” he said. “Now you need to go. You need to find that thing, and *you* need to live.”

“So do you!” I shouted angrily, tears in my eyes. “You deserve to live too!”

“You call *THIS* living?!!!” The ghoul roared. He was shaking now. “Have you seen me? I've lived for centuries. I saw the end of my world, the end of everything! All I want... All I *NEED*... is to be with my Matilda. One last time.” I stared hard at the donkey.

“I...” I started to say before Cranky spun around, his red orbs smoldering with intense anger.

“GO!!! Leave me! You don't have the time. You need to get out of here!” He growled. Violet tugged on me.

“He's right, Star. We need to catch up with the others,” she said, glancing up at Cranky. He nodded. I stood shakily with her help.

“I... I can't. I need to help...” I said, panting as I reached out again with my magic. Fire seared in my mind once more as the lock began to attack my senses. I fell to the ground again as the room began to shake and rumble violently. My love grabbed onto me, and I felt the sensation of her magic washing over me. I grunted as I was pulled out of the bay. Cranky smiled at me as I looked up at him, tears making my vision hazy.

“Kid, I gotta thank you. You made me see what was really important. I'll never forget you. Matilda won't either,” he said, turning back to the stasis tube. I heard him mutter 'I'm here now, my love' under his breath as the medical bay shook again with intense force. Several large chunks of ceiling fell in front of the doorway, sealing the donkey ghoul and his soul mate away forever. I screamed loudly as Violet dragged me away.

“Star!” She yelled. “Get a hold of yourself! If we don't get our asses in gear, we're going to be buried too!” I wasn't listening. I pulled free, trying to move the rocks away. Violet grabbed me, spinning me about to face her and planted her lips on mine. I melted into the kiss. It was forceful, angry, and electrifying. Violet pulled away, leaving me panting hard. My eyes widened.

“Violet?” I said, shaking hard. Tears filled my eyes. “I... I don't know what to do...” Violet simply smiled.

“We get out of here. We move on. We find Spark, and we stop her, remember?” She said. I nodded mutely. “Alright then, now let's get going. We need to find the others.” I stood, Violet helping me as I glanced at my E.F.S. I had a map now! Whatever had been blocking it was now gone. A green blip was right next to me, and on the other side of the piled rubble... two green blips. I sighed.

“Violet... do you see it?” I said, shaking the tears away. She nodded. “Let's find the others. We're getting out of this hellhole.” I moved forward on autopilot, my love right at my side. I couldn't stop thinking about Cranky. The donkey had sacrificed himself and his chance at happiness to see me safe. Any second spent inside the medical bay further, and we'd have been trapped inside with him and Matilda. I prayed to Luna as we ran, hoping that he and his long-lost love would find each other in the afterlife. They certainly deserved that much.

The Atrium was still in shambles as we moved through it, heading in what we hoped was the right direction. I kept looking at my E.F.S., hoping to see if the others would show up. They weren't appearing yet. We galloped into the next hallway, panting hard. Thankfully, there was no obstructions in our path. The Stable continued to shake and rumble all around us. Gray halls flew by, and I barely even registered where we were. All I could think about was getting us out of this hellhole. My brain was running on autopilot. A second glance at my E.F.S. showed several green blips up ahead.

“Violet,” I said, breathing heavily as we rounded the next corner. “I see them.” My love nodded, her expression firm and fierce. Shouting from down the hall brought me out of my thoughts. The hallway opened up, and we came upon the others. They were standing in front of what looked like a large set of elevator doors. Steeljack was trying to force the doors open. Lilith spun around. Her eyes went dark.

“Cranky?” She said. I hung my head low. Violet stepped forward, answering for me.

“He... he stayed behind. We couldn't get Matilda out in time,” she said. Lilith frowned and nodded.

“I... I see,” the black mare replied. “Well, while you were gone we found this door. We've been trying to get through it.” Patch stood by Nixis, who was sitting on the ground, while Danish was hanging back near Lilith. The hellhound looked better, but he wasn't out of the clear yet. He was still going to need medical attention, and soon.

“Steeljack,” I said calmly, drawing the attention of the gray earth pony. “Stand back. I will deal with this.” He started to protest, but nodded and stepped away. I reached out with my magic, battering away at the door with strike after strike of force. The door buckled underneath the telekinesis, finally giving way. The elevator inside looked old and decrepit, and there was no telling where it went, but it was worth a shot. I watched silently as the others entered the ancient elevator. I stepped in, glaring at the roof with a sigh. I focused my magic, intending to rip a hole in the ceiling to allow our escape. Violet poked me in the side.

“The power's on.” She said in wonder. I looked. Sure enough, the little sign displaying the floor was lit. I pressed the button for the top floor, marked ‘E’ for entrance. The button obligingly lit, and the metal box began to rise. I breathed a sigh of relief and then felt panic. Would this thing even go where we wanted it to?

We moved up for what felt like forever. I could hear the Stable ripping itself to pieces. The explosions were getting louder now, the elevator bouncing and shaking. The car suddenly lurched to a halt, grinding as a large ***BOOM*** echoed from below.

“What happened?!” Violet yelled. Patch bounded over to the control panel, ripping it off to look at the boards inside. Her eyes went wide with fear.

“We lost power,” she said. “We're not moving!” She began pounding at the panel in anger. I put my hoof on her shoulder.

“Patch. If there's no power, there's nothing we can do. We're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way,” I said, flaring my horn. I extended my magic to the elevator's frame, trying to push it upward. It lurched again, knocking me to the side. My telekinesis dissipated, and I grunted angrily. Another set of explosions erupted from somewhere below us. They were getting closer. Steeljack had grabbed onto Patch, holding onto her as she cried into his shoulder. Danish was praying, to whom I couldn't hear. Lilith looked angry, but determined to not let her fear show. Nixis seemed to be at peace, a smile on his face. Violet appeared to be scared, tears filling her eyes.

“We got so far... and now we're going to die...” she said under her breath. I hung my head. I couldn't let this happen. I still had things to take care of. Spark. Lucky. I couldn't let my friends die! I couldn't let Violet die! I couldn't let Cranky and Diamond's sacrifices be for nothing!

“No!!” I roared. “No! We're not going to die here! We're getting out of here!!” I reached back into my mind, feeling around for some memory of Twilight's that might help us. A stray thought brought a small smile to my lips. I knew exactly what spell to use. My horn ignited once I had figured out the specifics, the magic taking hold of the elevator once more. The metal box suddenly began to rise at an

accelerated rate. It shuddered as it sped up the shaft, groaning and whining against the metal.

“What's going on?!!!” Steeljack shouted as the elevator picked up speed and we began to float in the center of it. I grinned widely.

“Gravity spell!” I called back. I had to hoof it to the Ministry Mare. Twilight really knew her stuff when it came to magic. The elevator shot up the shaft like a rocket, showing no signs of stopping. *How far up does it go?!* I thought frantically. The explosions that were wracking the Stable had begun to diminish. The only sound now was the shriek of the elevator flying along its track. It was overpowering.

“Star!!” Violet yelled. “Why are we still going up?!”

“I don't know!!” I shouted. I tapped my horn, trying to cut off the spell. It wouldn't stop. My eyes widened as I realized there was a very real chance that the elevator was going to crash. Why wouldn't the spell stop? I had to cast it, I should have been able to stop it! “Shit! I can't stop it! We're going to ---”

CRASH

The elevator hit the top of its shaft with a catastrophic smash. The floor came up as the car deformed, squirting us out into the lobby. As I flew through the air holding my poor aching horn in my hooves, the last thing I saw was Violet flying butt-first out of the elevator, screaming. Then my head hit, and darkness.

I groaned, looking down the dark hallway. The white doors lined it just as they always had. I didn't want to be here! I wanted to be back with my friends! I sighed, waiting for the door to open. A simple ***fwoosh*** sounded from down the hall, and a door made a violent ***creak*** in response. I pulled myself from the hard wood. I trudged towards the door, not wanting to really hear which of Twilight's memories or emotions I was going to be made to see. I pushed open the wooden door.

I blinked. It was some sort of temple. It reminded me of the Followers temples in Fort Knowledge. Sunlight filtered into the room through the stained glass windows. Standing at the far end on the dais was three ponies. They were alicorns, one green, one blue, and one purple. They all shared the same cutie mark – Twilight's cutie mark. I stepped forward nervously.

“Radiant Star,” the three alicorns said as one. This was going to be one of *those* dream sequences I guessed. “We are Unity.”

“Unity? What kind of fucked up part of Twilight is Unity?” I said.

“We are a part of Twilight that came from her time during the Goddess,” the three said. “We who have watched you for some time, now.”

“Why? Why me?” I replied.

“Because you are special, Radiant Star. We come with a message from the One. She wishes for you to

keep moving forward. Spark must be stopped,” they said. I glared at the three alicorns.

“Oh, so she wants me to stop her now, does she? What happened to making a choice?” I growled.

“Circumstances have changed. You failed in containing her. She is free to walk the outer world,” the alicorns said in their eerie synchrony.

“I’m... I’m dealing with that,” I said. “I’m going to find her, and I’m going to save her. The world still needs her!” I was frustrated beyond belief. Twilight wanted me to kill Spark? It just didn’t sound right at all.

“Spark is dangerous. She will threaten all of creation. The One cannot intervene directly in this. Thus, she has chosen you to be her hoof in the outer world, and us to be her emissary to you,” the alicorns said impassively. That was the last straw. Between Nightmare and these three, I’d had enough of overdramatic alicorns.

“You listen to me. Tell Twilight that I’m not going to kill her. You hear me? I won’t do it. Not while... not while Lucky’s in there too,” I said, tears filling my eyes. “I won’t kill them!”

“Spark may not give you a choice,” the three said. “Thou must remain vigilant, Radiant Star. The One only wishes to rectify her mistakes.”

“By making me pay for those mistakes?!” I shouted at the alicorns. “It’s Twilight’s fault Spark is the way she is.”

“The One recognizes your concerns,” the alicorns said.

“Make sure she recognizes this, then,” I said, turning away. “I’m going to *save* her. You got that? Lucky, Spark... whatever they are now... I’m going to give them a chance. And then... well Twilight and I are going to have a talk. A real talk. Not through this proxy bullshit that she keeps pulling on me.”

“The One looks forward to talking with you,” the three replied. I growled under my breath. *Yeah, I bet she does*, I thought as I stalked back out into the hallway. Things had just gotten a lot more complicated, it seemed. The weight of everything that had happened had suddenly begun to pile onto my mind. I had lost Diamond and Cranky, and had nearly lost the others in the process. Diamond had sacrificed herself to save us, to save the Wasteland from Nightmare. Cranky had chosen to stay with his Matilda, together for the first time in countless years.

I sighed, hanging my head low. I thought about what Unity had said. I was going to have to face Spark again, and I was going to have to be ready to save her, no matter what. Darkness began to overtake me once more, and I waited for whatever was going to happen next.

I groaned, feeling a hoof on my side as I awoke. My horn ached, a dull throbbing with crispy spikes of agony mixed in. I grumbled into the pain as I opened my eyes. Violet was sitting next to me, resting against my side. A closer look revealed that she had been crying. I sighed.

“Hey,” I said, reaching up and nuzzling her close. Her eyes widened as she pulled me into a fierce hug.

“Star! I was so worried!” She shouted. “You didn’t... wake up, and we were all so scared...”

“Shh... it’s alright, sweetheart. I’m here,” I said softly. Violet nodded, pulling back. The others appeared to be sleeping soundly around us. A glance around me revealed that we were in some sort of office lobby. The dull gray walls of the Stable were gone, replaced by black onyx pillars and shades of blue. The lobby was spotless. No debris, no rubble, except what had been made by the elevator’s violent ascent. No skeletons, even. “Where are we?”

“I think... I think we’re in Filly’s Tower. It’s definitely not the Stable,” Violet replied. The ground beneath us was still rumbling. “That’s been going on now for hours. That place must have been huge.” I nodded mutely, pulling myself into a sitting position. The experience with Unity had certainly taken a lot out of me. I still had a searing headache.

“I... I don’t know what to do, Violet,” I finally said. “I... I wish I knew. I wish I could fix everything. I could have saved Matilda, I know I could have.” I hung my head, feeling pretty piss poor about myself. I felt a hoof wrap around my neck. “Come on, Vi... not even that is gonna make me – mmmph!” My head shot up and I felt Violet’s lips press against mine once more. It was a fierce and passionate kiss, one filled with all the love I was sorely missing. Violet pulled back, and smiled.

“It’s okay. We’ll figure it out. In the end, Cranky got what he wanted. He only wanted to be with her. I’d have done the same, if it were you,” she said. I shook my head furiously.

“But I failed! I let Diamond sacrifice herself, I nearly let Nixis die, and Cranky...” I said, my eyes beginning to water. “I even let Lucky sacrifice herself for me... I was ready... I was ready to let Spark take me...”

“You... you were going to just let her?” Violet said. I nodded.

“But then Lucky intervened. She told me that it was her destiny. That she was supposed to help me when I would need it the most. I keep running it through my head, Violet. I should have been stronger, I should have been able to stop her,” I said frantically.

“I’m glad you didn’t...” Violet breathed. “Star... we can deal with Spark. We’ll do what we have to do, but we need you to do it. I need you. Did you even think about how it would have affected me?”

“I... I did,” I said softly. “I know that you would have been hurt... and I felt horrible for even considering it... but I didn’t see any other choice. But now, she’s free... and all I can do is chase after her again.” Violet smiled and pulled me close into another embrace.

“I know. It’ll be fine, Star. You just have to trust me,” she said. “We’ll get through this.” I sighed, trying to bury my fears in the security of Violet’s embrace. I couldn’t do it, but I wasn’t about to let her know that. I decided to change the subject. It was logical, and there was something I had been meaning to tell her.

“You know... I wanted to tell you that I was very impressed with what you did with Nixis,” I said softly. “You saved his life. I couldn’t do anything but panic.” Violet sighed.

“Thanks. I just sort of... ran on autopilot I guess... I felt like I had to... I had to save him,” she said.

"I've never felt anything like that before." I smiled.

"I know," I said, pointing to my love's flank. "If I had to guess... I'd say it has to do something with your cutie mark." Violet looked back at the eye, wreathed in flames.

"My cutie mark? What do you mean?" She said.

"I think I know what it means. You told me once that you stared into the eyes of a fierce dragon. That's what you do for your friends, Violet. For those you love, you would face down dragon's fire," I said. I had a lot of time to work through this, and I knew I was right. "Your talent is protecting the ones you love." Violet's eyes widened as the realization hit her. She began to tear up, and I pulled her close yet again. Quiet descended upon us, and I took a moment to glance about. The others were still asleep. Violet, in her infinite love for her friends, had forgone her own sleep to watch over them. My love cleared her tears and pulled herself away into a sitting position.

"We should probably wake the others. Figure out how the hell we're getting out of this place," she said. I nodded, and pushed myself up. I shook out, feeling rather rested but still uneasy. We were still in danger. Filly's Tower was an unknown, other than the Minotaur. If the stories were to be believed, the Tower itself was haunted. Violet went around our camp, gently prodding the others to awaken. I smiled gently at Steeljack and Patch as they got up and began packing up our gear. Lilith and Danish it seemed had somehow found themselves close together in their sleep and were now blushing profusely. I giggled, prompting the black mare to roll her eyes at me. Last but not least was Nixis, standing triumphantly. The bandages wrapped around his midsection were dirty, but unbloodied. Still, against all odds, he had survived. Violet had apparently been performing more healing spells on him since I was out, as he looked far better than he had down in the Stable. I stood before him and bowed my head.

"I owe you my life, and an apology," I said softly. The hellhound coughed and smiled.

"You do not owe me anything, Star. I did what I had to do. You once called me friend, did you not?" He said. I nodded slowly. "Then accept what has happened, as a gesture of that friendship."

"I... I will," I said. "Nixis?" The hellhound raised his ears. "I fear what comes next. Spark's out there, biding her time. I don't even know what she plans to do, or where she's going. I'm frightened." Nixis flashed a toothy grin and placed a paw on my shoulder.

"Fear not for the future, Radiant Star. Too much time spent on such thoughts will place great stress upon you. It is better to take your fear and channel it into focus. Focus your will, my friend. You will see this through, I know you will. And I will do my best to help you in your quest," he said. I nodded, pondering the hellhound's words. I freely admitted that Spark's freedom, her physical form, what Twilight wanted me to do... it all frightened me. I was scared out of my wits over what the corrupted Element of Magic's plans were. All she had left me was a clue to find her where it all began. I didn't even know what that meant! A cough from behind us brought me out of my thoughts. I turned back, seeing Violet. She had Thunder Flash hanging in its harness, and her beautiful face wore an expression of fierce determination.

"We're ready to go," she said.

"Then we go," I said.

The stairs appeared to go up forever. They were dark black, with hints of blue light shining through them. I groaned. We had quickly been able to ascertain that we were on the ground floor of the Tower. With the defense megaspell still active outside, there was only one way to go: up.

“Well, at the very least. We'll have some time to relax, right?” Patch said, trying to break the tension building in the air. I sighed and nodded, taking the first step. It illuminated as my hoof touched it. I moved forward with purpose, and I wasn't planning on stopping until I reached some way out of this fucked up place. As we walked, an eerie quiet filled the air. It was too quiet.

“This place is a little creepy,” I heard Danish say. Lilith giggled.

“A little?” She said. “I think this place maxes out the creep scale.” I was inclined to agree with her. There was something off about this stairwell. It was the very definition of creepy. We reached a landing, and I looked up once more. I groaned again. I really hated stairs. If there was ever a more villainous thing in the Wasteland, it was stairs. Violet gave me a reassuring glance as we continued moving. I had a lot to think about. Where were all the offices? Why were there so many stairs? I briefly wondered if Discord was playing with me again, but pushed the thought from my mind. No... the spirit of Chaos wouldn't be that cruel. Sure, he liked a good game, but this many stairs? No... only pre-war ponies were that fucked in the head.

The next couple landings had doors that apparently led to other sections of the Tower, but they were locked. I considered trying to open them, but I knew it would be fruitless. The only way I could see out of this was to speak to the Minotaur. The next landing however, had a door that was wide open. Skittering lights gleamed off the walls beyond it.

“Do you think...?” Violet questioned. I shrugged.

“I'm not exactly sure how high up we even are,” I said. “Still, it's worth a shot.” We moved into the hall, moving as quietly as possible. The lights danced along the walls as the hall opened up into a series of terminals sitting at cubicles. They were still active, it seemed. Their screen saver programs were responsible for the dancing lights. At the far end of the office was a unremarkable set of double doors.

Help us... a voice whispered, tugging at my ears. I cocked my head in confusion.

“Did you guys hear that?” I said. The others shook their heads.

“Hear what, Star?” Steeljack said. “It's quiet.”

Help us... the voice whispered again. It was coming from the doors. As the others picked through the cubicles for anything salvageable, I moved over to the two doors.

“Hello?” I said quietly. “Is anypony there?”

Help us... the voice whispered, louder now. My eyes widened. There was something here. What was it? I pushed open the door. Beyond it was a wide circular chamber. In the center was a pedestal

holding what appeared to be a silvery crystal. I stepped inside, the doors closing behind me.

“Who's there? What is this place?” I called out. I moved deeper into the room, coming closer to the pedestal. The crystal gleamed in the darkness.

Help usss..... the voice continued. *We need your help....* Something moved out of the corner of my eye. I spun about, growling and unlatching Stargazer. Violet held up her hooves as I pointed my gun in her direction.

“Star! It's me, it's me!” She shouted. I sighed, dropping the minigun.

“Don't do that,” I said. “This place is giving me the creeps already. Sneaking up on me only makes it worse.” Violet grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry, sweetie. What the hell is this room?” She asked.

“Not sure,” I said, running my hoof over the crystal sitting on the pedestal. A film of dust came away from it. “Whatever it is, nopony's been here for a very long time.”

“I don't think there's anything else on this floor,” Violet said. “We didn't even find anything good in the cubes. And we can't get any of terminals to come out of their screen savers.”

“We should probably head back to the stairs then,” I said as we moved towards the doors. I pulled on the handle with my telekinesis, but it wouldn't budge. “Umm... Violet? The doors won't open.”

“What? What do you mean they won't open?” My marefriend said, stepping past me and flaring her horn. The doors remained closed.

Help us.... the voice that I had been hearing said. Violet's eyes widened.

“Did you hear that?” She said.

“You too?” I asked. “I've been hearing it since we moved into the office. It was coming... from in here.”

HELP US... the voice shouted. We turned around towards the source of it. The pedestal in the center of the room was starting to bubble an inky blackness from the top of it. It began to spew forth, causing the silvery gleam of the crystal to disappear entirely.

“Star... what is that thing?” Violet said, her voice shaky. The black bubbling substance spilled over onto the ground. I was vaguely reminded of the Smooze, but it was the wrong color. The stuff began to grow, and what appeared to be a head began to rise out of it. It didn't have any eyes, and it was growling loudly.

“I don't know, but I don't like it,” I said, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. I aimed, watching and waiting. A pair of legs emerged out of the black goo, followed by another pair. The vacant depressions where eyes should have been considered us.

HELP USSSSSS.... a rasping voice erupted from the maw of the creature. It lurched forward, leaving

black hoofprints on the floor.

“Violet, we need to get out of here. See if you can work on the door, I'll try and hold this thing off,” I said. My love gave me a fierce glare, but simply nodded and moved back to the door. She began to bang on it, hoping to draw the attention of the others. I turned my attention back to the black thing. It was still moving toward me. “Help you? Who are you?”

WE ARE LOST... HELP US.... the thing rasped. Its voice was raw and harsh sounding.

“We're lost too. So what say we help each other? We can get out of this place,” I said, chuckling. I hoped I could distract the thing long enough for Violet to make some progress.

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND... WE WANT YOU... YOU WILL HELP US... FEED US! the voice broke into a shriek as the creature lunged forward, its mouth expanding. Silvery crystal teeth glittered inside. I growled, stepping back and smacking the ponyform in the face with Stargazer. It reeled backwards from the impact, hitting the ground with a ***splat***.

“Violet? How's that door coming?!” I shouted.

“I don't know why it won't open! And the others haven't heard me beating on it, either!” She called back. “I'm gonna try something!” I heard her open up with Thunder Flash, the silvery light flashing in the corner of my eyes. The bubbling creature pulled itself up from the ground, gurgling as it lurched forward again.

NOOOOOO..... the thing rasped. *NOO GUNS, FEEEEEED USSSS.....* It launched at me, its jaws wrapping around my leg and catching me off guard. Pain shot through my body as the creature's maw clamped down. My leg sizzled and I roared. I shook the appendage, trying to dislodge the thing.

“Get off!” I shouted, floating Stargazer around. Using the minigun as a club, I began beating the thing relentlessly. I growled, forcing my way through the pain. The creature wasn't letting go. Its mouth began to wrap around my limb, the black substance it was made of flowing over my body like slime. My horn flared, and I reached into the back of my mind, trying to find some way out of this. Telekinesis wrapped around the thing, and I pushed my magic to try and force it off of my leg.

A soft glow erupted from the creature, and it slipped away, leaving my body as quickly as it had latched onto it. It squealed angrily as it tried to come at me again. A green glow found its way around me, yanking me backwards through the air before the thing could get close enough. I glanced back, seeing Violet. Her eyes were on fire and Thunder Flash was floating in her magic. A blast of silver erupted from the beam rifle, slamming into the monster. Smoking holes appeared where the fire hit it. The door behind her slammed open violently, revealing Steeljack.

“Come on!” He shouted, stretching forward to snatch Violet's tail in his teeth. Violet's expression as he dragged her bodily out of the room was indescribable, and even with my leg in agony from the creature's bite, I couldn't help but laugh. I spun in Violet's magic as she slid out the door. As I rotated upside down, I saw the monster beginning to reform itself. It surged forward, growing massively as it charged the door. I forced the metal closed with a flick of my horn, as the thing struck with a massive ***thud***.

NO..... HELP USSSSSS..... the thing called from beyond the door. I flopped unceremoniously to the

ground as Violet released me from her magical grasp. My horn flared, grabbing a desk from one of the cubicles and forcing it against the door to hopefully prevent it from opening. I panted, looking back at the others and grinning sheepishly.

“Erm... sorry, we sort of got locked in there,” I said. I could hear the thing continually pounding at the door. It was still calling out for help. “We'd better get going. This won't hold for long.” Without wasting a moment, we moved out of the office area and back to the stairwell. I groaned. This place was already proving to be one fucked up thing after another. Just what was that thing in that room? Why did it need help? What did it want? Too many questions filtered through my brain as we began to walk, a little more hurriedly now, up the stairs.

“What happened to you guys?” Danish said. “One second you were there, the next Steeljack was banging on those doors.” I sighed as Violet explained what had happened. The others began theorizing on what the thing was while we walked. I wanted no more distractions. We needed to find the Minotaur. It was the only way we were getting out of this hellish Tower. The stairs continued to flow upwards. It seemed like we would never reach the top. We passed landing after landing, not daring to stop after what had happened. I knew instinctively that the Minotaur would be at the top of the Tower. I wasn't sure how I knew, but the intuition was strong enough that I was willing to depend on it.

After what seemed like hours (which only ended up being less than an hour according to my PipBuck's traitorous time function), we arrived at a landing where the stairs just... stopped. A set of doors graced the far end of the landing. A sign on one read **MINISTRY OF ARCANES SCIENCE RADIO HUB**. A red light was on the wall next to them, with a sign reading **ON AIR**. It was dark.

“Is this it?” Lilith asked.

“It has to be,” Patch said. “There's no more stairs.” I nodded.

“Let's go,” I said. “We've got a date with the Minotaur.”

A cold breeze whisked across my coat as we made our way down the hallway, inching closer towards what sounded like beeping noises. I was sure that this is where the Minotaur was. My eyes drifted up to the ceiling, noting the cameras following our movements. *Looks like he knows we're here*, I said. The hallway opened up into a large open room, large terminal monitors lining the far wall. I recognized this room. This was where I was before when I met the Minotaur.

“Radiant Star,” a harsh voice from behind the large metal chair at the far end called out.

“Minotaur,” I said calmly. A chuckle erupted from the chair.

“You're a hard mare to catch up with, you know that right? I was beginning to wonder where you'd run off to. But then the explosions started, and you showed up in the Tower,” the Minotaur replied. “You blew up a fucking Stable!”

“Not exactly. Diamond did that,” I said angrily. “She triggered the self-destruct sequence.”

“Diamond? Diamond Night?” The voice said. “So she was involved. That makes sense.”

“You knew her?” I said, my eyes widening. “How...?”

“Ahh, Ministry Mare. I've been around this city a long time. I see and hear everything,” the Minotaur said. Several of the monitors flickered to life, showing the area surrounding the Tower. “Just like how your little adventure in the Stable has caused quite a bit of damage to the city.” The majority of the buildings on the screens were devastated. The ground appeared to be shaking still, the repercussions of the Stable's explosion highly evident. I cocked my head.

“Why didn't the Tower fall?” I said. The chuckling returned.

“This Tower has stood since before the end of the war. It's never going to fall,” the Minotaur said. “It's too well constructed.”

“How do you know that?” Patch said, cocking her head.

“You don't really want to know that,” the voice said. “There's just some things about this place that are better left unsaid.”

“Like the fucked up chambers with black inky pony-shaped things in them?” I said. “What else is there that's worse than that?”

“So you've seen one of the megaspell chambers. One of the Tower's primary functions was megaspell research and design,” the Minotaur said. “That is why it was so well built. If it wasn't, it would rain death and destruction upon a lot more than just this city.”

“So... what... you keep everything under control?” I said angrily.

“I do. And I will continue to do so for a very, very long time,” the Minotaur replied. “Now then... I assume that you're here because you want safe passage out of the Tower.” I nodded. “I can't let you do that. You're dangerous, Ministry Mare. With what you've seen here, how can I trust that you won't come back?”

“I have something that I need to do,” I said, stepping forward. “Something important. This place... it will remain safe. I will guarantee that.”

“No. I think not,” the voice said. “I will ensure this building's safety by eliminating you.” Several ceiling mounted turrets came down from above, pointing right at us. I growled, unlatching Stargazer.

“Coward! If you want to get rid of me, come here and do it yourself!” I shouted. The voice chuckled much louder.

“Oh, that would be oh so difficult,” it said. The metal chair began to swing out from the large mass of terminals. It turned around, revealing that it was completely empty. My jaw dropped. “You should see the look on your face. It's quite priceless.”

“Where are you?” I said.

“Everywhere. Haven't you figured it out by now, or are you that dense?” The voice said. The terminals

began to light up and beep. "I'm the Artificial Intelligence that controls the Tower. Designed by the late great Iron Will for the war effort. I was designed to be an ultimate adaptive intelligence."

"Wait... you're a computer program?" Patch said, her eyes aglow with awe.

"Yes. My original purpose was monitoring and surveillance. I was supposed to guard Filly's Tower, as well as to monitor the Equestrian populace. Thus, the camera systems installed around the city. Pinkie Pie herself even used my network services to interface with her sprite bots. I still shudder at the music," the voice said.

"So why the radio broadcast? Why the Minotaur?" I said. "Why invent him?"

"After the end of the war, there was little that was left living in the city. My systems picked up rumors of life in the south, near Manehattan. Being unable to leave this Tower... I used what systems I had access to in order to communicate. A radio personality by the name of DJ-PON3 came into contact with me, and I learned much about the Wasteland from him," the Minotaur said. "The Minotaur that you know was invented in order to prevent anypony from accessing the Tower." The turrets whirled as they kept a close bead on us. "Now, that is enough idle chatter. I'm sorry that I must kill you. But you must know that I cannot let you wreak your brand of havoc on the city."

The turrets opened fire, sending out blasts of hot red death. My friends and I scattered, the fire striking the ground with a sizzle. I tumbled into a roll, bringing Stargazer around. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots at the turrets. The spell released and my gun let loose. The bullets struck, sparks flying from the metal casings. One of the turrets exploded, flooding the air with shrapnel. Violet snarled, unleashing a blast of silver from Thunder Flash. Lilith leaped in front of Danish, using her bladed wings to deflect a laser blast that was headed towards the cream-colored stallion. Patch and Steeljack fought back to back, dodging and ducking as they fired at the turrets. Nixis awkwardly rolled out of the way of a blast of energy, clutching his bandaged side. He replied with a flung knife, skewering one of the turrets in a vulnerable spot. It obligingly spat sparks and exploded.

"Minotaur!" I shouted. It was obvious that we couldn't keep this up. More turrets appeared from the ceiling as well as the walls, each one firing its own particular brand of fiery death. "You have to stop this! Listen to me!"

"Negative," the Minotaur replied. "I have to get rid of you. You cannot be allowed to live. She wishes it, so it must be." I cocked my head amidst the chaos.

"She?" I said, confused. "What?" As if in response to my question, all of the monitors in the room switched over to a picture of a black alicorn. Her mane shone like the stars themselves. It was the same alicorn from the Stable. The shadows playing over her face seemed to writhe and turn at their own whim as the mare grinned wickedly at us. The turrets stopped firing, winding down as she began to speak. It was clear that she wanted to gloat over us.

"Yes... Did you really think that pathetic bitch Diamond could contain me?" She said. I blinked. *No... No it can't be...* I thought.

"You're... you're that... that thing from the statues?" I said. The mare nodded. "What did you do to Diamond?"

"She's buried six thousand feet under tons of rubble," the alicorn said. "The pathetic weakling couldn't even save herself, much less hold me." I glared at the mare on the monitor. *No! I thought. Diamond sacrificed herself to stop this thing! And it just... bypassed her like she was nothing!*

"What are you... some sort of fucked up pre-war shit?" I asked angrily. "You said that you knew the real Twilight Sparkle. What did you mean by that?" The alicorn chuckled loudly.

"After all of my clues, after me speaking my name, you still don't recognize me? I am the one who nearly brought eternal night to all of the world. I am known by many names, but most call me *Nightmare*," she said. My eyes widened. It couldn't be. Not her. There was no way. She was supposed to have... have died! "Yes... you know who I am, Radiant Star."

"That's impossible... how are you... how are you even here?" I said frantically.

"Trapped within seven statues, I was once the being you called Nightmare in legend. I am but a vestige of that power. But now... now I am free! I am able to take control of this city! And once I launch the megaspells contained within this tower, I will control the Wasteland!" The alicorn crowed madly. Her draconic eyes flared as she began to cackle wildly.

"Did... she just say what I thought she did?" Danish said, cocking his head.

"I think she did," Lilith said. I growled under my breath.

"No... I will stop you," I said angrily, thinking of the Pink Cloud megaspell that I had brought here myself. "I will not let you do that. You'll destroy all of Equestria!"

"I believe that's the point," the dark mare replied. "You ponies... so attached to your silly pathetic little lives. You see, Diamond always had aspirations of grandeur. She wanted the power, but she couldn't take it for herself. I will get my revenge on Equestria!" The turrets surrounding us began to whine as they re-aimed at us. So that was it. This... this... thing was controlling the Tower, and pretty soon it intended on launching every weaponized megaspell in the place. I hung my head. What could I do? How could I stop this thing? "Yes... you see how pointless it is. You are defeated, Ministry Mare. And now, I shall kill you along with the rest of this sad little world you love so dearly. You see... you let me out after all. When you helped that pathetic mare in her mind, you gave me life."

A fire lit in the back of my mind. Nightmare... it had been trapped inside the statues and locked away for hundreds of years. Diamond had somehow imprisoned it in her own mind, which must have kept its influence from spreading too far. But I had freed it when I had helped Diamond overcome it. I hadn't dispelled the damn thing like I thought I had!

But... maybe there's a way to put it back, I thought. *But I don't have the statues... they're down in the Stable.* My eyes widened. *But I do have...* I accessed my PipBuck's inventory spell, searching for it. There! I pulled the item out of my saddlebags and set it on the ground. Lucky's smiling form looked out at me. The words *Have Faith* were all I could focus on. Without thinking or even knowing what I was doing, I cast the spell, feeling the magic flow through me. The statue glowed with intense power, and the mare on the screen scowled.

"What are you doing?" Nightmare snarled. The turrets geared up to fire again. I opened my eyes, the arcane energies causing them to glow brightly. I lifted a hoof, putting up a shield spell around us. The

statue of Lucky hung before me, gathering the magic in the air as the mare in the monitor howled loudly. “No!! What is this?! What are...?”

“I’m putting you somewhere you’ll never harm anypony ever again!” I shouted. I hated to have to do this to the statue of Lucky, but I realized that her message was more important than the physical thing. I needed to have faith, I needed to be confident in my own ability to stop this thing. It was Lucky’s brand of blind faith that drove me forward. I unleashed the magic, a vortex of power that engulfed every inch of the room. Nightmare snarled as she was pulled from the screen, her essence flowing towards the statuette. After a few moments, everything went pure white and then immediately returned to normal. The statuette sat on the floor, glowing. I slumped to the ground, my horn searing in pain. A voice brought me out of my pain as I felt Violet put her hooves around me. I had done it. Whether the thing was truly the real Nightmare, I would never know... but for now I had managed to prevent it from escaping and hurting a lot of ponies.

“bzzzzttt..... Ministry Mare....” the Minotaur said from all around us. “What happened?” I tried to speak, but couldn’t do anything but hold a hoof to my horn.

“There... there was something infecting you...” Violet said. “Don’t you remember it?”

“My logs tell me that I was out of commission for several hours. I don’t remember anything during that time,” the computer replied. “You saved me?” Violet nodded. “Why?”

“Because...” I croaked through the pain. “Because you can keep this place safe. You have to. If you don’t... I don’t even want to think about what would happen.” I pushed myself up, gesturing to the statue. “Plus... I need you to keep this thing safe. Lock it up, where nopony will ever find it.” A door opened, and a service robot appeared, a tiny pony with an oversized head. It trotted up to the statue and picked it up, removing it from the room as quickly as it had appeared.

“It will be done, Ministry Mare,” the artificial intelligence said. “To thank you for saving me, I will allow you to leave the Tower safely.” I sighed. Finally! Some progress!

“Thank you...” I said, coughing. “Umm... we don’t have to go back down all those stairs do we?” The computer chuckled.

“No,” it said finally. “There is an elevator here that will take you down to the ground floor. I will give you time to clear the perimeter before I re-activate the Tower’s defenses. Now... go Radiant Star.” A door opened from nowhere at the far end of the hall, revealing the elevator. I nodded, allowing Violet to help me to it. The others followed and I looked back at the computer terminals.

“Goodbye, Minotaur... thank you.” I said, sighing as the elevator door closed. It began to hum as it made its way down the Tower. In what felt like forever (but was actually ten minutes), the door opened, revealing that were on the ground floor once more. I stumbled out, Violet helping me to move along. I smiled at her.

“You alright?” She asked. I nodded.

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “Let’s get the hell out of this place.”

I looked back up at the Tower as we made our way out of the perimeter. The elevator ride had been brief, but had allowed me enough time to plan our next move. The Tower seemed to look down on me as I left, and I nodded a salute at it. Moving to follow my friends, I considered what I had just done. I knew I was leaving Lucky's statue, but I also knew that she wouldn't have minded. Her faith in me had bolstered my resolve, and helped me seal away Nightmare... for good.

I stalked along in silence as the others took in the cool night air. The sun was beginning to drop, and the city of Chicacolt was quiet. My mind was lost in my thoughts, considering what I was going to do now about Spark. I flicked on the radio, hoping to hear something from the Minotaur. The brash familiar voice that was so different than the computer program's real voice filled the air as we walked.

Yeeeeeeeeehaaaaawwww!! That's right kiddos, it's time again for the Morning Moo Madhouse! I'm your host, the greatest of all time the MINOTAUR!

And boy do I have some news for you. That rumbling you fine folk heard for miles? That was Stable 180 friends. It's been blown up. If you're within... well... if you're near the center of the city, you done felt it more than others. How did this happen? Well kids, it seems that the cause was our friend the Ministry Mare. There was apparently some bad juju going on down there, and as a result the self-destruct sequence was activated.

My intelligence says that the Ministry Mare is now headed out of the city. Hats off to you, Ministry Mare. I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for.

Now, with that said, let's get back to the dick and fart jokes. We've been missing those for far too long on here! ...

I chuckled at the Minotaur's broadcast. At least he was tasteful enough to not explain the real reason the Stable had blown, and for that I thanked him. I went back to ignoring the radio and thinking to myself. I didn't even hear Violet tell me that we were getting close to our destination until she poked me really hard in the side.

"Ow!" I said, glaring at her.

"Sorry, but we're here," she said, motioning with a hoof. The soft glow of Theater came upon us as we rounded the next corner. Danish stepped forward, an air of confidence around him as the guards approached.

"Boys," he said. "Stand down, it's just me."

"Danish?" One of the guards said. "Where the fuck have you been? The Boss has been worried sick about you." Danish grinned.

"Tell the Boss we're alright," he said. "I'll be getting the Ministry Mare and her crew set up here, then I'll be over to see him." The guards nodded, moving aside to allow us to enter. I nodded in thanks to them as I walked by, seeing friendly smiles on their faces.

The hustle and bustle of Theater was just as I had remembered it. Ponies, griffons, and other various species flowed through the open lobby, purchasing what wares they could from the vendors. There was

newness to the settlement as well. The banners, once filled with war propaganda and promotions for musicals were now painted over with simple colors representing the MMMM. The group had made good on their promises to maintain the settlements, it seemed. The vendors also had increased their haul considerably, their loud shouting adding to the general din of the main marketplace.

Danish proceeded to move swiftly through the crowds, heading straight for the far end of the settlement, where the MMMM had set up their operations. Several of the gang's members saluted to the cream-colored unicorn when he appeared.

"Hello, boys. Need to put my friends here up for a while. Whatcha got for me?" He said. One of the ponies, a chocolate colored earth pony mare, stepped forward.

"We've got a few rooms available," she said, her eyes widening. "Luna, you all look like hell. Thin Mint!" A soft green mare popped head out of one of the makeshift doors. "Get these folk upstairs to some of the empty rooms, and make sure to bring them up some food while you're at it!" The other mare nodded excitedly, motioning for us to follow her. I looked down to Danish.

"Thank you," I said softly. The unicorn grinned.

"Tain't nothin'," he said. "Now go on, you rest. I've got some business to take care of here."

"Would... would you mind some company?" Lilith said, her eyes hopeful. I smiled. Ha! I knew there was something going on there! Danish's face seemed to flush red for a moment and he nodded.

"Sure, darlin'. I wouldn't mind at all," he said, glancing over at Nixis. "Also... this old boy needs to have a doctor to look at him." The chocolate colored mare nodded.

"If he will follow me, I will take him to see the doctor," she said softly. Nixis smiled a carefully tooth-free grin and loped after the mare. The others moved to follow Thin Mint to their rooms.

"I'll... be up in a bit myself," I said, putting a hoof up. "I'd like to walk around, relax a little." The others nodded. I followed behind the two wayward lovebirds for a short while, chuckling to myself as they tried to not walk too close together. I peeled off, heading down another long stretch of vendors. My eyes drifted over to the bar I had met Lucky in. It was the same bar that I had seen Grenadine and Cutter in. I allowed myself to head there, not intending to drink any, but to see. I sat down at the bar, the familiar face of the bartender appearing before me. His blue eyes looked old and wise, if a little sad.

"What can I get for ya, darlin'?" He said.

"A water, if that will please," I said. The bartender nodded and began to pour a glass of water for me. "Are you... Horace per chance?"

"Aye, that'd be me," he said. "And you're the famous Ministry Mare, if my listenin's on the radio are correct." I chuckled.

"Yes... you're right. It's me," I said softly.

"Something bothering you?" The bartender said. I shrugged.

"Just... too much going on. Lost friends, lost a lot more," I said. "Fuck it. Give me a bottle of your finest, Horace."

"You sure?" Horace replied. I nodded, and the bartender pulled out a bottle. I floated out enough caps, setting them on the counter. Pouring myself a glass, I took a drink. The smooth burning taste of alcohol seared my throat. I sighed in contentment.

"Ahh... that's the stuff," I said. "Let me ask you something, Horace... you ever have friends?" Horace nodded.

"Once upon a time, I did. Two regulars that used to come in here. Cutter and Grenadine. They're gone now," the bartender said morosely. "But I won't ever forget them. They were good friends." I nodded. I wouldn't forget them either. I took another swig of the brown liquid. I knew this was a bad idea, but I didn't rightly care at the moment. Life, it seemed, had conspired to take much away from me. Diamond... Cranky... Lucky... even Spark if I truly considered what she was.

"Did you... know anypony named Diamond?" I asked without thinking. Horace nodded solemnly.

"Diamond Night. Alicorn just like you. Poor girl, she went a little loco in the head. I never knew what happened to her after that," he said.

"She... she died. Saving lives, but she died all the same," I said, lowering my head onto the bar. "She was a friend of mine as well. And I miss her terribly."

"I'm sorry to hear that, friend. Let me know if you need anything else. I've got some things to take care of," Horace said, trotting down the other side of the bar. I sighed, taking another drink. A glint of silver caught my eye. Sitting down the bar was what I thought was a Steel Ranger. A red cape draped off his shoulders, a silver helmet sitting next to him. His soft white mane drifted down his neck, which was lined with scars. He glanced over at me, the green of his eyes meeting my own. I smiled softly as the stallion almost sprung to his hooves, flipping his helmet onto his head with an almost theatrical gesture. He trotted over to me, and bowed low.

"Milady. Thou art the one they call the Ministry Mare?" He said. I nodded.

"And you are...?" I said, my cheeks flushing red. *Oh, great...* I thought as the alcohol began to take hold.

"Mine name is Grey Knight, Holy Knight of the Celestial Order. I come to thou with a message. I have been waiting for you," the stallion said. "I was told that thou would return to one of the pony settlements."

"Really, now? A message?" I said. The stallion nodded.

"It is from the residents of Arlington," he said. "The wicked and vile Steel Rangers in the area have begun to threaten the town. It is a crime against ponykind to allow their kind to prosper. Why have thou simply not destroyed them, yet?" I groaned. This was one of *those* self-righteous ponies. I idly wondered how he had survived in the moral ambiguity that was the Wasteland.

“Look, you ancient knucklehead, we just barely got out from under 6.. 6000.. 600 thousand million rubbles of ton that was exploding around us. We just lost two of our own, barely saved the Wasteland from a shadow of the Nightmare itself - HIC-,” I said drunkenly, thinking back to the town of Arlington. Cotton Candy's vile face popped into my mind. “And WE art going - damnit- are going to take at least ONE day to lick our wounds and REST. If you're so worried about it, why didn't you help them?”

“The townsfolk specifically requested thine assistance. I now see that I was in error to fetch you. Thou art a drunk and vile pony,” Grey replied angrily. I sighed, my face turning redder under the alcohol's influence.

“Hold it!,” I said, continuing my drunken rant. “I will help the ponies of Arlington, but I am going to spend at least ONE day in bed with my marefriend first! When I leave, we'll go to Arlington and sort all of this out, alright?” Grey looked away for a moment, and then nodded.

“Fine. I will be staying here until thou art ready to leave,” he said. I cocked my head.

“Why do you speak so funny?” I asked, the alcohol taking my questions in a completely different direction.

“Whyfor dost thou not, fair alicorn?” The stallion said. “This is the High Equestrian tongue, borne of the great Princess Celestia herself. I have studied it as part of mine initiation into the Order.”

“There's... more of you?” I said. I had never heard of the Celestial Order before. Was this some sort of new faction?

“Nay. I am the only member,” Grey said. “I have seen much in the Wasteland, going from place to place and stopping what suffering I can. Crimes are crimes, no matter the circumstance.” I blinked.

“I... I see. Well... it was nice to meet you. I *will* go to Arlington. But I have to rest, Grey. I'm exhausted, right now I would be no help to anyone,” I said. The stallion nodded curtly, and turned to leave the bar. He passed by a familiar pair of faces. Danish and Lilith had entered the bar, waving at ponies who noticed the two. I smiled as they sat down next to me.

“Hey there, how are you two doing?” I said quietly. Lilith smiled.

“Great,” she replied. “What about you?”

“I... I'm alright. Just... thinking about things,” I said.

“Don't think too hard, alright? I know it's rough... but I miss them too. No matter what Diamond did, in the end... she tried her best to redeem herself,” the black mare said.

“I know... but... what do we do now?” I said, nearly moving to tears. “They're... they're gone...” Lilith pulled me close, giving me a fierce hug.

“That's something you need to spend some time figuring out, sweetheart. I can't help you with that,” she said. “But I can listen, alright? If you need to talk, just let me know.”

"I'll see you in a little bit, then?" I asked the mare. She smiled and nodded. I rolled my eyes and headed upstairs. Within moments I had arrived at several makeshift rooms that had been set up in the office areas above the main lobby. The rooms were grungy and dirty, but they were still better than I had expected. I plopped down onto the mattress next to Violet and sighed sleepily.

I pulled open my bags and began pulling out my things while the others were lying on their beds. I had certainly collected quite a bit in my travels. The memories of Pride and the others rested nearby, secure in their carrier. I intended to give them to Gluttony as soon as possible, a testament to Diamond and Cranky's sacrifices. I floated out Twilight's diary, paging through it and looking for any clues I could as to Spark's location. A glint in the corner of my eye caught my attention. It was a memory orb, sitting in my bag. It wasn't one that I had remembered putting there. It shimmered as I rolled it out. I glanced back at Violet, who was in the middle of cleaning Thunder Flash. I needed something, some form of relief for even a little while.

"Violet?" I said quietly. She looked over at me and saw the orb sitting in my hooves. She nodded slowly and I smiled. I glanced down at the orb and latched onto it with my magic, feeling the world slip away into nothingness.

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I knew this body, quite well actually. I had been in Twilight's body often enough to be familiar with the Ministry Mare's form. Where had this memory orb come from? Why was it from Twilight? Nothing made any sense, here. The mare was walking down a long hallway in what appeared to be a large palace. Crystals shined from every inch of the walls. Twilight opened the door at the far end, appearing in a large open dining hall. A pink alicorn sat at the far end, her eyes lighting up as she saw the mare.

"Twilight!" She said as she stood, rushing over to give my host a hug. The two ponies grinned as they went through what I figured was practically ritual by this point in time.

"Sunshine, sunshine! Ladybugs awake! Clap your hooves and give a little shake!"

The two giggled loudly as they finished their little dance. Twilight smiled.

"Cadance," she said. "It's good to see you."

"And you, Twilight. What brings you to my little corner of Equestria?" Cadance replied. "You're a hard mare to get a hold of, you know that right?" My host giggled.

"Yes, well... I've been plenty busy. Ministry business and all," she said. "I actually came to see Shining. Is he... is he around?"

"He's down in the throne room, I believe. Do you want me to call him?" The alicorn said. My host shook her head.

"That's alright, I'll go down and see him myself. I need to speak with him," she said. Cadance cocked her head.

"What's up? Something wrong?" She said.

"Nothings wrong," my host replied curtly. "Ministry business. Princess Luna sent me." Cadance's eyes narrowed.

"Fine, don't tell me. I'm not sure what I was thinking. Your Ministries and their secrets are obviously more important than spending time with your sister," she said, turning away. "Like I said, you'll find him down in the throne room. Let me know when you're ready to leave." My host turned around, stepping back into the hallway. As she walked, I felt another presence appear next to her.

"Well, that was certainly vicious of you," Spark said as she shimmered to life. She looked much like I knew her, black mane and all. She had a wicked grin on her face.

"You know how important this is," my host said angrily. "I cannot afford to let anypony know of why I'm really here."

"Still... you were so... short with her. I very much enjoyed it," she said. Twilight glared at the spirit.

"I'm sure you did," she said. "I didn't like it one bit, but Cadance can't know about Shining Armor. Not ever." The mare continued down the hall, finding herself at the top of a large crystal staircase. *What is it with pre-war ponies and their stairs?!* I thought as Twilight descended them. The stairs ended at a massive hallway with a large crystal throne at the far end. A familiar white unicorn sat upon the throne, listening to the petitioners and nodding occasionally. He looked up as he saw my host, his eyes widening.

"Alright, everypony," the stallion said, standing from the throne. "That will be all for today. Thank you for your concerns." The line of petitioners grumbled, but trudged out of the hall anyways. Shining Armor looked down at my host, motioning for her to come to him. "Twilight. It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, brother," Twilight replied icily. Shining narrowed his eyes.

"So... you figured it out?" He said. My host nodded. "I see. That's not very good."

"No, it's not. Why didn't you tell me?" My host replied. Shining Armor turned away for a moment.

"It wasn't important. I didn't want you to worry about it," he said.

"You plan to kill yourself, and you don't want me to worry?!" My host shouted. "I don't see why you have to do this!" Shining lowered his head, grunting in pain.

"Because... I'm doing it for you. You know that, Twilight. It's all for the spell," he said.

"Fuck the stupid spell!" My host raged. "I'm sick of this, Shining! I'm sick of all of this secrecy, this pain! I can't stand it! I just can't... I want to find a cure for you..."

"This is a cure, Twilight. Once you've cast the spell, I'll live forever," Shining replied. "I will be perfect in every way. All thanks to her." Twilight sighed.

"No, it's not perfect. And I'm sick of hearing about her. She... she scares me, Shiny," my host said. "I'm frightened of what she might do if she were free."

"I know you're scared, Twilight. But trust me. Everything will be just fine," he said. "Now, come here." My host hung her head and trotted over to the unicorn. Tears were beginning to fill her eyes.

"I just... I can't do it Shining. I can't... I can't watch you die..." she said. Shining reached out, pulling the mare into a hug.

"Don't worry... everything will be fine. It will fix this, and then we can make it so nopony else can ever die. I have faith in you, Twily," the older stallion said. Twilight sighed and nodded finally, clearing her tears. Shining smiled softly. "Now, I'm sure you've got business to attend to. Let me know if you need anything, anything at all."

"I... I will," my host said. The stallion turned away and headed out of the throne room. Twilight stepped up to the balcony, looking out upon the empire beneath her. "I will save you, Shining. The right way."

"And just how do you plan on doing that, Twilight?" Spark echoed in the back of her mind. *"He's set on the plan that we agreed upon."* Twilight growled.

"No... that's not the way. I won't let you do it. I'll find a way to stop you. If I have to expend all of my energy on it, I will stop you," the mare said angrily. "I will stop you!"

"I'm looking forward to it, Twilight. But until then, be a good little filly and do the work I've shown you," Spark said. I could just see the smug face of the spirit in the background. Twilight scowled and turned, walking away from the balcony and to the door as the memory faded to black.

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I awoke to a dark room, Violet snuggled closely next to me. I poked my head up, looking around. Everypony seemed to be present and accounted for, except for Nixis and Danish. I stood, careful not to wake Violet. I made my way out of our room, pondering what I had seen and where the mystery memory orb had come from. Somepony had obviously wanted me to see Twilight and Shining Armor, but who? What did it all mean? And how did it play into what Spark was doing now?

I trotted down the stairs to the lobby, stepping once more into the hustle and bustle. Theater it seemed, never slept. Ponies of all creeds flowed through the crowd, and I caught a glimpse of who I was looking for. The hellhound and the unicorn were sitting at a table in the bar, speaking quietly. I stepped to the table and sat down. They looked up at me and smiled.

"Gentlecolt and hellhound," I said, glancing over at Nixis. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Sleep does seem to elude me, yes," the hellhound replied. "Danish and I have been discussing plans for what's going to happen next."

"Do tell," I said, interested in what the two had come up with.

"Well, darlin'. I'm planning on staying here. The MMMM needs me, and I can't abandon Gluttony," Danish said. I nodded softly.

"I sort of... expected as much," I said. "What about Lilith? Is she going to stay here too?" Danish shrugged.

"Don't rightly know. What she decides is up to her, I suppose. I suspect that she'll decide to follow you, though," the cream-colored unicorn said. "She's a good mare. Got a good head on her shoulders." I nodded.

"And you, Nixis?" I said, turning to the hellhound. "What do you want to do?"

"I would like to see my village, once more," Nixis said. "But I will go with you as long as you have need of me." I smiled.

"Thank you, Nixis. That is appreciated," I said. "I... I know that we need to find Spark. And I think the only way we can do that is to go to Manehattan."

"What's in Manehattan?" Danish said, cocking his head.

"The Twilight Society. I need to see them. Maybe... maybe they can help me decipher where Spark went," I said. "There's also a settlement south of the city that I need to visit. Arlington."

"I've heard of them. What's wrong down there?" Danish asked.

"Steel Rangers. A particularly stupid group of them are threatening the town. I need to help them," I said. Danish nodded.

"If you'd like... I can get together a contingent of MMMM to assist," he said.

"That... might be a pretty good idea," I said. "The backup might be needed, and would certainly be appreciated." A waiter came by and dropped off a set of drinks. I smiled and took the mug, drinking deeply from it. The warm liquid seared my throat. Thankfully, the memory orb had given me enough time to sleep off the drink I'd had earlier.

"I can do that. Least I can do for you, Star," the unicorn replied. "I'll make a call to a few of the boys. They should be free."

"Thank you," I said, taking another drink and standing. "I think... I think I'm gonna wander, see what else is around here." In truth, I had a destination in mind. It was a place I'd been wanting to see since I got out of the Stable. Nixis and Danish nodded cheerfully. I left them and headed towards the entrance to Theater, smiling at the guards standing watch. The streets were lit by the soft glow of the signs on the side of the settlement. I trotted down the dark road, trying to keep an eye out for my intended destination. The bank sat at the far end of the street, looking as still and decrepit as it had in the memory. I stepped inside its ruined walls, taking it all in. Diamond had been here, once. It had been her home in this corner of the Wasteland.

I trotted into the back offices, looking for any signs that the mare had indeed been here. I came across what appeared to be a bed, made out of old tattered blankets. A dead terminal sat in the corner. I sat down, rifling through the blankets. I found a book, nearly coming off of its spine. Opening it, I realized that it had belonged to Diamond. It was her diary, apparently. I picked up in the middle of the book, coming across familiar names.

An old friend visited me today. Cranky. Oh, how I've longed for somepony to be around that actually knows me. I've been so lonely as of late. Evora has told me many times that I'm never alone, but she doesn't understand. When I was in Unity, I was part of something. I was part of a larger community, all working towards perfection. I... I miss it still. My erstwhile sisters have abandoned me now, placing their faith in this Savior they so tout. The Followers of the Apocalypse. I've watched them from afar, but never allowed to come near. Why do they hate me? Why do they not want me around? Is it because my memories aren't perfect? Is it because my mind is shattered into thousands of pieces? I wish I knew.

But that will all change, soon. I've made several discoveries as of late concerning the statues. The statues that Twilight Sparkle herself made several references to. I know they exist, I can feel it in my bones. It's almost as if something is driving me towards them, pushing me to find them.

I sighed. Diamond... she deserved so much more. Why did the Followers shun her so? If we had shown her friendship, would Pride have ever existed? As I read through the diary, the entries began to get more erratic and frantic. Then... there was a final entry.

The thing I have long waited for has come to pass. This shall be my final entry in this diary. It shall mark my passage from this place to the next. It is time for my ascension.

I closed the book, placing it in my saddlebags for safe-keeping. At the very least, it would give me something to read later. I shuffled around some more, looking for anything that would provide a distraction from what was really bothering me. The one thing that I didn't want to think about.

I'd failed my friends. I'd failed Diamond, Cranky, and nearly gotten Nixis killed, not to mention almost losing the others in the escape from the Stable. *No... you did you best to try and save them*, a little voice in the back of my head said.

I rummaged some more, finding nothing of great importance. I was about to leave, but then a glint of silver caught my eye. Sitting not too far away on a pedestal was a memory orb. I grinned. *Now that's something worth looking into*, I thought as I stepped over to the pedestal. The orb shimmered in the darkness. I hadn't noticed it before, but there it was. Without even thinking I grabbed hold of the orb with my magic, letting myself drift away with the fading of the world around me.

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I knew exactly who I was. Diamond. Why would she leave a memory orb of her own memories? What did it all mean? The alicorn was sitting where I had been, in the abandoned bank. She was looking at her diary, writing along in it. She stopped for a moment, looking behind herself.

"You know if you wanted to visit, you could have just called first," my host said wryly. A shadow in the darkness moved. It coalesced into the lithe form of Evora.

"I apologize. I've been training to be silent lately," she said, smiling. "I just wanted to check up on you, see how you were doing." My host sighed.

"I'm alright. I've been trying my hardest to crack into that chest at the Ministry. But I've had no luck," Diamond replied. Evora nodded and sat down next to my host.

“What are we going to do, once you get in there?” Evora said.

“Hopefully... what's inside is the statues,” my host said. Evora smiled, placing a hoof on my host's shoulder.

“Diamond... I know that this is important to you, but you have to accept that they might not be what you think they are,” she said.

“But... then how am I supposed to gain acceptance? How am I supposed to help?” I said, tears filling my eyes.

“Diamond... you can help. You have friends. Let them help you. You are worth so much more than you give yourself credit for!” Evora said. My host shook her head.

“Evora, I need to do this. They have to be real. It's the only way,” my host said, standing. “I hope you'll understand, but I really should get back to the Ministry hub. I need to keep trying.” My host's wings flared out. She walked outside as Evora trailed behind her.

“Diamond, please. Just... be careful alright?” The zebra said. My host glanced back at her, nodding.

“I will. I promise,” she said, taking off into the air. The city stretched out below, beautiful in its own strange way. The Ministry hub loomed in the distance. The mare sighed to herself. “I don't know who you are... but I know you're there somehow.” *What?* I thought. *Was she talking to me?*

“Of course I am. Who are you?” The alicorn said.

I'm... How is this is even possible? I said. Diamond smirked.

“Magic works in strange and unexplainable ways. Besides... you feel familiar to me... I can't place it,” she said. “So... who are you?”

A friend, I said. I wasn't truly sure if this had actually happened or if I was merely hallucinating. *Somepony who understands you.*

“No pony understands me,” Diamond said. “I'm an outcast. A freak. Not even wanted by my own sisters.”

That's not true. You should listen to your friend, she's right. You have others who accept you for who you are, I said.

“She doesn't truly get it. She's stuck with her head in the clouds, thinking she's in love with me. If she could only see, she wouldn't want to be near me,” the alicorn said.

See what? I replied. Diamond hesitated before she finally spoke again.

“How broken I am. How messed up my mind is. Maybe that's what this is, another fucked up part of Unity that got stuck in my head. I don't know,” she said quietly. “I'm not a good pony, friend.” I sighed.

Neither am I, I said. I did a bad thing. I left a friend in need, two friends to be exact. They... they didn't make it.

"I... I see. Were you close to these friends of yours?" Diamond said as she landed in the courtyard of the Ministry Hub.

They... they were friends. That's all that matters. And I failed them, I said. I don't know what to do about it, either. Diamond nodded, turning to head into the Ministry.

"I wish I had an answer for you, voice in my head. But I do not. And I have no more time to spare. I need to find my prize," the mare said. She had reached the door that held Twilight Sparkle's chest.

Diamond... whatever you do... don't let it consume you. Trust your instincts, and trust your friends, I pleaded with the mare. I don't know why I was doing it. Even if it was a true communication, it was a foregone conclusion that it wouldn't work. Diamond stalked towards the chest at the far end of the office, as the memory faded to black.

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The world drifted back into color and I glanced down at the memory orb. It was a strange thing having spoken with the mare herself. I couldn't explain it. "Strange and Mysterious" it seemed, was as good a descriptor as any for the inner workings of magic. I sighed. Seeing the memory made me feel much worse. Diamond was an outcast, put out by others and treated terribly. It was no wonder she wanted to find some way to help her fellow ponies. I placed the orb in my saddlebags and sighed. I should have been able to save Diamond. Instead, I let her sacrifice herself so that I could escape. I was a horrible pony.

"Foolish pony of purple fair, I see before me the Ministry Mare," a soft voice said from the shadows. I spun about, looking for where it came from. I knew that voice.

"Who's there?" I said cautiously. Dark green eyes appeared from the darkness, attached to a striped body. Envy had a soft smile on her face. I leaped back in surprise. The zebra lifted a hoof.

"Hold thyself, Radiant Star. I come in peace," she said. "I am not surprised to find you here, after what has transpired."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Envy smiled again.

"I mean the sealing of the spirit in the statue. It was like I awoke again, remembering everything I had before I was affected by Pride," she said. "I remembered *her*."

"You... you loved her very much," I said. "And I'm responsible for her death. In a sense, I killed her. Her and Cranky. You must hate me..." The zebra gave a small chuckle and shook her head.

"I cannot hate you, Star. You are no more responsible for her death than I," she said. "You must realize this. Diamond made her own choice. She was always stubborn like that. I guess that was what I loved about her. And Cranky... he lived for centuries without his one true love. It's high time he had the peace he long desired."

"I still... I still failed them," I said, tears filling my eyes. "Why did I do it?"

"Because they were your friends. You trusted their judgment. Cranky knew what he was doing. So did Diamond. They both did what needed to be done to save their own version of the Wasteland," Envy said. "Wasteland. It's such an appropriate name, Radiant Star. This place wastes us all. It wastes our efforts, our loves, and in the end it wastes our lives. In the face of that, the best we can do is pick ourselves back up and keep trying. Even if - no, especially if things seem bad."

"I... I never thought of it that way," I said. "Everything seems so complicated now. Spark's gone. There's nothing left for me in this city, anymore."

"The one you seek may be out of reach, but to you there is so much to learn that I could teach," Envy said. I blinked. "What I'm trying to say, is that to repay you for the kindness you have done to us for saving Diamond... I could show you some things to help you in your journey. All I ask is that you stay for a few days longer." I sat and thought about it for a moment. It was a good offer, for sure. Also, it was a chance to understand Diamond a little better through Evora's eyes. I could send Grey Knight back to Arlington to prepare the ground, and make myself a better fighter. I looked up at her and nodded.

"I'll do it."

The soft glow of Theater greeted me once more as I trotted up to it. Envy had instructed me to meet her the next day at the bank, where I could begin to learn from her in the ways of zebra magicks. I still wasn't sure about it all, but I knew I was going to need all the help I could get to face Spark again. My thoughts had been plagued by Diamond and Cranky all the way back to the settlement. I pondered Envy's words. Was I really ultimately responsible for their deaths? I wish I knew. I did know, however, that Envy was right. They deserved peace. And in the end, that was what they got. The peace of mind knowing that they had helped the world in some small way. Even if bad things had to happen first. Maybe that was how it was in this Wasteland. Maybe... in some way, bad things had to occur in order to get to the good. I was certainly hoping for some good.

I entered the settlement, smiling at the guards as they let me pass. The place was still active. I waved to several of the MMMM enforcers walking through the crowds, receiving friendly nods in return. Immediately I made my way to the stairs heading up to our rooms. I turned down the hall that housed our temporary home, my eyes widening.

The door to our room was busted off of its hinges, and the light was on. I galloped towards it. *What happened?!* I thought as I burst into the room. In the center of the room was Steeljack, bound and gagged and completely naked without his power armor. The stallion looked up and began shouting through his gag, making muffled noises as he tried to shift around to sit up. Laying on the floor next to him was a piece of paper with a knife holding it to the ground. My horn flared, untying Steeljack and removing the gag from his mouth. He coughed as the piece of fabric moved away.

"What happened?" I said.

"Somepony hit us, I didn't see them," the stallion said frantically. "I was knocked out cold. When I

woke up Lilith, Violet, and Patch were gone.” I blinked.

“What about Nixis and Danish?” I said angrily.

“They haven't been up to the room in some time,” Steeljack replied, glancing down at the note. I levitated it away from the knife and folded it open. I narrowed my eyes as I read.

We have the mares. If you wish to seem them alive again, come to the perimeter of Chi-Town and Middle Town. Come alone, and unarmed.

- Lotus Bloom, of the Lotus Triad

I groaned loudly.

“Not again...”

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

New Perk! The Peace of Death – Your resolve has been hardened by your losses, and at the same time you're still wondering if it was your fault. You are at least 15% wiser.

New Spell! Gravitron (Rank 2) – You can now cast an anti-gravity spell! Although, you might want to watch casting it outside...

Violet Iris: Level Up!

New Perk! Cutie Mark Crusader! - The true meaning of your destiny has been unveiled. While in the presence of your friends, you gain a +10 % bonus to hit hostile targets.

New Spell! Healing (Rank 3) – Your healing powers have gotten better. You can now use them in hostile situations.

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Chapter 22: City on Fire

King Sombra is already attacking the Empire. He could reach the Crystal Ponies at any moment... reach Princess Cadance, my brother, my friends... there may not be enough time for me to find a way to escape. You have to be the one to bring the Crystal Heart to the faire.

Loss. What's it like to lose someone? I know from personal experience, that it hurts. It hurts a lot. This hellish place we live in steals away so many lives, uncaring and unfeeling. The story of the Wasteland is not that of the heroes who fight in it, but of the ponies who are lost to it. The loss of our values, our lives, and our very souls. The ponies before the war understood loss very well. They lost their own to battles fought and battles won, and in the end... they lost everything.

I lost friends. Cranky... Diamond... I lost them to the Wasteland. And as much as I wished I could bring them back, it just wasn't possible.

I lost myself... will I ever find myself again? I can only hope.

I stared down at the note, fuming mad. I was beyond furious, beyond compromise. The Lotus Triad was going to pay for what they had done. I had already lost Cranky and Diamond. I couldn't stand to lose Violet. Not after what we'd been through together. I growled, lashing out at the piece of paper and burning it to ashes with pure magic.

"Star?" Steeljack said quietly. I glared at him.

"What?" I asked. The stallion swallowed hard.

"What are you... you going to do?" He said. His eyes spoke volumes of fear. Fear of... me? I shook my head and sighed.

"I'm going to find them, and bring them back," I said. A knock on the door interrupted me before I could say anything else. I looked up, seeing Nixis in the doorway. Danish was behind him. The two had shocked expressions on their faces.

"Where were you?" I snarled. "Huh?! Where were you?!"

"Darlin', calm down. What happened?" Danish said calmly. I pounded a hoof into the ground.

"They took them, Danish! Lilith, Violet, Patch. Those fucking Triads took them!" I yelled. Danish's eyes narrowed.

"Where?" He asked. I shook my head.

"No, the note was for me. It told me to come alone, and I'm going to do just that," I said, moving to push past the cream-colored unicorn. Danish put up a hoof, stopping me cold.

“Star. Calm down. Think this through, would ya? You're playing right into their hooves. They want you there alone,” he said.

“You think I don't know that?” I snapped. “I'm well aware that it's a trap. I'm going anyways. It's time that the Triad is stopped for good.”

“By getting yourself killed?” Nixis spoke. “I'm sorry my friend, but I cannot let you do that. We are your friends, we want to help you handle this.” I growled loudly, turning about and packing up my things. The others stood there and just watched me as I placed Stargazer on my bedroll.

“I'm going,” I said after a few moments of silence. “I'm leaving this here, in case something happens.” I pointed to Stargazer.

“Star, listen to Danish. Please,” Steeljack said. “We need to be smart about this. We'll get them back, the right way.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. “But I can't do that. I have to do this. I'm tired of the Triad fucking with us like this.” I moved towards the door, but the gray stallion pushed his way in front of me. “Steeljack.”

“Star. I won't let you do this,” he said.

“You're going to, though. For Patch. Besides, if you don't move in about 5 seconds, I'll move you myself, and you won't like that,” I said forcefully. Steeljack thought about it, and stepped to the side. Danish glared at him.

“You're going to just let her run off and get herself killed?” The unicorn said. Steeljack nodded.

“Danish, I can't stop her. She could put me through the wall if she wanted to. Besides, I trust her,” the gray stallion said. Danish sighed.

“Alright, look. If you're gonna do this, at least let me set up some boys to extract youse if shit goes southward,” he said. I looked over at Steeljack. He nodded hesitantly.

“Fine,” I said. “But I want it to be you three. No pony else, got it?” The others nodded. “I'll radio in my PipBuck if things go down. Otherwise, you stay outside. They want me to come to some warehouse right at the perimeter of Chi-Town and Middle Town.”

“I know the place,” Danish said.

“Good, because I'm not waiting for you to leave,” I said, flaring my horn. I glared at the stallions, who shuffled uneasily under my gaze. My teleportation spell went off and I disappeared. I reappeared outside of Theater, in the streets. I spread my wings, taking to the sky. The cold night air blew across my coat, but I paid it no mind. I was angry still, letting it drive me forward towards Chi-Town. The city was alive tonight, ponies looking up at me as I flew overhead.

I slammed to the ground not a dozen ponylengths away from a warehouse, only notable for the good shape it was in. For now. I stalked forward, igniting my horn as I came closer to the main entrance. I was hoping that the Triad knew I was here already. In fact... I was counting on it. I wanted them to see what was going to happen to them. I reached out with magic, ripping the metal doors from their seams

violently.

“HEY LOTUS!! I’M HOME!” I shouted. The soft click of two assault rifles getting ready to fire filled my ears. Two of the Triad’s enforcers shimmered into existence before me. A part of my mind not concerned with ways of destroying these irritants noted that they were pegasi. Interesting, but not important right now.

“Ministry Mare,” one of them said. “You will lower any arms you may be carrying and --” I never gave the mare the chance to continue. My horn fired a vicious blast of energy, blowing the feathers completely off the mare’s wings. She shrieked in shock and pain, catapulting away from me. The other enforcer aimed her battle saddle and fired. I snarled, reaching out and grabbing the bullet with telekinesis. The projectile spun around in mid-air, turning back on its owner and slamming home into the pegasus’ shoulder. The mare yelped in pain as she fell.

“No. I don’t believe I will be doing anything you say,” I said, striding past them. The mare that had been shot grunted. “Where are my friends?”

“F-F-Fuck you,” the pegasus spat. She coughed, blood pouring from her shoulder wound. “I’ll never tell you.”

“Darn. I was sort of hoping that would actually work,” I said, flaring my horn. The mare lifted into the air and slammed against the wall. She groaned and passed out. A blast of gunfire erupted down the hall from me as another pegasus shimmered into existence, firing an automatic rifle at me. The bullet grazed my shoulder and I howled in pain and rage. I reached out with my magic as the mare aimed her gun again and grabbed the offending weapon, snatching it out of her mouth. She yelped, and shot me such a look of consternation I snorted in laughter.

And then I bashed her in the face with her own gun. She crumpled to the floor silently. I resumed my stalk, floating out a magical bandage patch to cover my burning shoulder. At the end of the hall, two unicorn mares in combat armor rushed at me, combat shotguns held loftily in their magic.

“Don’t think so!” I shouted, sending out two telekinetic blasts at each of the unicorns. The blasts struck with intense force, slamming the two mares into the sides of the wall. I reached out, opening the double doors beyond them, revealing a massive warehouse. Metal catwalks spread out above me like a spider web. A conveyor belt system wound its way through the large room, leading out into the shipping area. It was active, moving metal boxes of who knows what. I stepped forward, stopping when a voice echoed over the speaker system.

“Ministry Mare. Continue any further and your friends will be dead before even your unnatural powers could find them,” the snide voice said.

“Try me,” I snarled. “I’m not in a great mood right now, if you haven’t noticed.”

“And you killed my sisters,” the voice said. I blinked.

“What?” I asked. The voice chuckled.

“My name is Lotus Bloom, the sole head of the Triad now. My sisters were Lotus Petal and Lotus Blossom,” the voice said. I growled under my breath, glancing about. There was no sign of where the

voice was coming from. The conveyor belt continued to hum amidst the quiet warehouse.

"I never killed your sisters. They came after me," I said. "I wasn't the one who dealt any killing blows. Hell, I wasn't even aware they'd perished. The last time I saw Lotus Blossom, she was in the custody of the MMMM."

"Oh, they're both dead now. The Triad does not tolerate failure. I murdered my own sisters because of their inability to capture you," the voice said.

"You... what...?" I said, blinking. "You monster... why? Why would you do that?" My rage was boiling over inside. This pony had her own flesh and blood killed because they had failed to kill me. What kind of fucked up punishment was that?!

"It is a matter of no consequence now. I will avenge them, and destroy you. All you have to do is turn yourself in, and your friends will go free," Lotus said over the speaker. I lowered my head and shook it. *No*, I thought to myself. *I'm going to free my friends and shut you down for good.* My horn flared, sending out a wave of telekinesis right at one of the metal catwalks, dislodging it from the wall and sending it screeching to the ground.

"No. I will find them, and then I'm going to fucking shut down the Triad forever!" I shouted. "Show yourself! Coward!" I began to canter forward, looking for anywhere the mare could have been hiding. An office of some sort? Where were the administration offices for this place?

"Fine. Have it your way then. Kill the mares, and then give this bitch the end she so rightly deserves," Lotus said. I knew I didn't have much time as gunfire erupted in the air above. I dove underneath an overturned metal shelf, the bullets pinging off of it. I glanced up, seeing three pegasi mares diving down, each one wearing a battle saddle mounted assault rifle. I found myself really wishing I'd brought Stargazer after all!. I called up a shield instead, hardening it as best as I could. The first of the pegasi struck and fell to the side. A wicked idea crossed my mind and I reached out, casting a very specific spell on the other two. The magic took hold and suddenly the two mares weren't diving down at my shield, but instead frantically backwinging as they fell upwards. Their eyes widened as they struck a metal catwalk. I let the spell slip and my erstwhile assailants fell off the bottom of the catwalk to land with grim ***thuds***. They didn't get up.

"Is that all you got, Bloom?" I called out. "You won't even touch a hair on my friend's heads, you hear me? You won't because you know if you do, there's nothing stopping me from coming to wherever you are and turning you into paint. Now show yourself, you fucking coward, and let's have this out like civilized mares." A bullet came out of nowhere, streaking by my face. I looked back, seeing a bright pink pegasus mare snarling as she barreled towards me. A honest-to-Goddess Anti-Material Rifle hung off her battle saddle, massive and threatening.

"Stop calling me a coward!" She shouted as she landed in front of me. On her flank was the cutie mark of a flower opening.

"About time," I said angrily. "Now. Where are my friends?"

"Not telling. They're being disposed of as we speak," she said, a wicked grin creeping onto her face.

"We've got a real problem, then," I said calmly. "Because that means I'm going to rip your fucking

head off.” The other mare chuckled.

“I’d like to see you try,” she said, flexing her wings. “I’m not like my sisters. They were pansies. I’m the real deal.” She stalked to the side, circling me as I narrowed my eyes at her.

“We’ll see,” I said, launching forward and spreading my own wings. Lotus Bloom’s eyes widened in surprise as I struck, knocking her back. Her Anti-Machine Rifle fired, the bullet searing past my shoulder blade. I ignored the pain, but didn’t ignore her next shot, which was aimed right at my face. I ducked away from the all encompassing crash of sound her gun made. The shot missed high, putting a head-sized hole in a metal support beam. It was smoking. I jumped back, growling. I really really wish I had just brought Stargazer with me. Why had I been so stupid? I wasn’t even thinking this through, and there was a good chance that my friends wouldn’t make it out of this alive. I couldn’t handle losing any more, especially Violet. I had already lost enough. I glanced around for anything that I could use to fight with. I leaped behind a row of metal shelving, narrowly missing my body becoming swiss cheese. Lotus Bloom cackled.

“That’s it. Run, you pathetic little bitch!” She shouted. “You can’t beat me. I’m the best Triad there is!” I dove across the hall, landing behind a pile of metal crates. The shelving collapsing behind me told me just how close I’d been. “And you didn’t even bring anything to fight me with?! How sad. No matter, when I kill you and your friends, it will still be a victory.” A gleam of silver caught my eye from inside one of the crates. Inside were packages and packages of what appeared to be dressmaker’s needles. A sly grin crept along my face and I reached out with telekinesis, opening as many packages as I could. I stepped out from behind the metal crates, my eyes narrowed at the pegasus.

“Enough of these games, Bloom. Where are my friends?” I said. “This is your last chance.” The pink pegasus turned her saddle-mounted cannon to me. The hole in the end looked easily big enough to crawl into...

“No dice. You die here, and the Triad gets all the glory,” she replied. I hung my head and flared my horn. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of dressmaker’s needles soared into the air around me. It was a veritable tornado of whirling metal. Lotus Bloom stepped back, the expression on her face that of mixed surprise.

“What...? What are you...?” She started to say before the first needle struck her on the cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. I roared with unbridled fury as I directed the flying death metal at her. Silver needles hung in the air around her, striking her sides with pinpoint precision. The mare tried to fly away, but couldn’t get off the ground as two large crochet needles slammed into the base of her wings. I stalked forward, looking down at the terrified pegasus. “Please... please don’t...”

“I will not ask again. Where are they?” I said coldly. The mare was blubbering underneath me, begging for her life. It would have been so easy to just take it. I wanted to, so badly too. I wanted to make her pay for what she had done, for nearly making me lose my closest friends. I sighed, the needles dropping to the ground. The tinkling sound of the needles raining down surrounded us. Lotus Bloom was seeping blood from a dozen wounds, some needles still sticking out of her flesh. She shoved herself away, trying to curl up in some sort of weird fetal position. I stepped forward again and she screamed.

“No!” She shrieked. “Please...! Please don’t kill me!”

"I want to. You have no idea how much I want to, right now," I said harshly. "But... but I can't. Violet wouldn't want me to do that. As happy as it would make me to just... pin your head to the ground with a dozen needles, I'm not going to. Now... just tell me where they are." The mare nodded silently and pointed upwards. I followed her gaze and noticed the offices were suspended above the warehouse. What were pre-war ponies thinking sometimes? I looked back down and nodded in reply. "You will never come after us again, do you understand me? I never want to see another Triad as long as I live." Lotus Bloom blubbered more as she tried to lever her pinned wings away from her body. I turned away and took to the air, flying up towards the office platform. The office windows were dark, their reflective faces giving no clue what lay within. I pushed open the door, revealing a band of cubicles around a large conference table.

"Hello?" I called out, having a very bad feeling about all of this. Why didn't I just end Lotus Bloom like I'd wanted to? Maybe it was because I couldn't stand to cause a loss myself. I had been responsible for enough death already. I moved into the area, hearing muffled cries of help from one of the side offices. I pushed open the door frantically, seeing my prize. Violet, Lilith, and Patch were all tied down, gagged, and held against the far wall. Their eyes widened as they saw me. I started forward, stopping when I saw my friends shaking their heads as best as they could. I looked down at the office desk. Strapped to it was enough plastic explosives to level a small city block. A burst of static emitted from a speaker attached to the corner of the ceiling.

"Hello again, Ministry Mare," a voice came from it. "Enjoy my little trap? I know I did."

"Who.. what?" I said, trying to process what was happening. The voice chuckled.

"I knew that you'd be pretty pissed at me, so I made sure that the building only had those personnel that were essential to the operation," it said. "Including that impersonator who played me. Pretty good, eh?"

"What the fuck is going on?" I said. My friends looked scared shitless.

"I am the real Lotus Bloom," the voice said. "The pony you fought was an impostor. I'm in a secure location, just waiting to send you and your friends to hell." I narrowed my eyes, snarling under my breath. This whole thing had been a trap. And I had thrown myself and my friends right into it. I felt horrible. I wasn't sure I could get them away in time. I wasn't even sure I could get myself away in time. I hung my head. I was so stupid! "You should see the look on your face, Ministry Mare. It's quite priceless. You thought you were so smart. You even bought that sob story about my sister's deaths!"

"So you lied about everything, and now you've got us, is that what you want to hear?" I said quietly. Lotus Bloom chuckled. The explosives in the room began to beep.

"No Ministry Mare... I want you to die!! Before you came to this town, we were fine. But then you got involved. And quite frankly, all you've done since then is piss me off!" The voice said. "Now... *bomb* voyage!!!" The beeping got faster. I heard the click as the speaker shut off, with a grim finality. Glancing at Violet, I shrugged. I flared my horn, 'pushing' at the room with my magic. Nothing answered so I pushed harder, feeling the tickle of pain at the base of my horn. This time, I welcomed it. With an overpowering flash of white, the world dropped away. Moments later, I was standing on the roof of a nearby building. I smirked at the warehouse as the explosion lifted a section of its roof off. From the other side of a teleport, it seemed almost gentle.

Violet and the others were still bound and gagged, and I hastened to remedy that. I couldn't keep a smile off my face as I untied my lovely green unicorn and my friends. Violet stood, removing her gag. Her horn sparked, and I noticed a small metal ring around it.

"Magic inhibitor?" I said. She nodded. My horn glowed softly, pulling the offending device from her head. Violet grinned as she pumped out waves of her own magic. Lilith and Patch stood shakily, using each other as support. "Everypony alright?"

"As well as one can be," Patch said. "After getting nearly blown to bits, that is." I chuckled.

"Well, that went swimmingly," Lilith said. "Those Triad freaks... they never seem to learn do they?"

"She... she wasn't even in the building," I said quietly, drawing my friends gazes. "Lotus Bloom. She used an impostor to fight me, and then lured me in. I can't believe... Augh. I put you girls in danger because I let her play me!" A hoof set itself on my shoulder. Violet smiled brightly.

"It's alright, sweetie. I knew you could get us out of there," she said, winking. I sighed, reaching down to nuzzle my love.

"This is awesome and all, but it's a little cold up here," Patch said. "We should probably get back to Theater." I shook my head.

"You three go on ahead. I've still got some business to clear up with the Triad. It's time they were shut down for good," I said forcefully.

"Star. Just leave them be. They're not going to come after you now," Violet said. "They probably think you're dead or something."

"And when they find out that I'm not?" I said. "I don't want to chance anything bad happening to you, Violet. They started this... now I'm going to end it."

"What are you going to do?" Violet said angrily. "Waltz right into Triad territory unarmed and unprepared?"

"No. I'm going to do what they did to that building. Rip the damn thing from its foundations. And when I find those bucking Lotus sisters, they're going to pay," I said, stomping a hoof. Violet groaned.

"Star... we're going to be leaving soon. You need to think this through!" She said. "Even if the Triad figures out we made it out of that building, do you think we'll even be around for them to come after us?" I sighed. I knew at the very least that Violet was right. We could theoretically lay low long enough to leave the city undetected, but that wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to stop the Triad for good.

"Violet..." I said softly. "I'm tired of them, I'm tired of them putting good ponies - my friends - in danger, I'm tired of them being... being. If I can shut down their operations for good, then they can't threaten this city anymore. Chicacolt will be a lot better off if I do something." Violet hung her head and sighed.

“Alright,” she said. I blinked. “Alright. But not ‘I’. We. I’m coming with you.”

“Me too,” Lilith interjected. Patch grinned widely.

“Mares fighting mares? Seems like a great idea to me!” She chimed in. “It’s sort of like a girls night out!”

“You three do know that we have no equipment, and the Triad has all sorts of tricks?” I said. “At the very least, Violet and I can use magic, but...”

“Please. I can handle myself in a fight,” Lilith said, flexing her bladed wings. “Do we even know where their headquarters is?”

“We know that they control all of Chi-Town. But... you know girls, planning and plotting is the Triad’s thing. Let’s not do that,” I said. Lust grinned wolfishly.

“Let’s just show up and start trashing mooks until their bosses show up?” She said.

Violet laughed. “And then we trash them, and their bosses.”

“And just work our way up!” Patch concluded. We shared a hug, laughing uproariously on the rooftop. Violet took a step back, eyeing the burning warehouse.

“Let’s go, then. The night’s young!”

Two unicorn mares in armored barding rushed towards us, floating along assault rifles in their magic. They took aim, firing a steady stream of bullets. I put up a shield, deflecting them away as Violet shot a blast of magic at one of them, knocking the mare to the ground. It hadn’t taken us very long to find our way to the Triad’s base. Waltzing right into Chi-Town like we owned the place, the Triad couldn’t resist attacking us. The location of the Triad’s main base hadn’t been a surprise. A sprawling maze that had been a hotel before the War served as their base of operations. I knew Lotus Bloom had to be pissed off that we’d survived, and the swath we were cutting through her faction certainly had her at a boil. I grinned as we galloped down the next hall, running into a group of pegasi enforcers.

“Stop them!” One of them shouted, bringing up her shotgun. Lilith surged at the mare before she could get a shot off, slicing the weapon in half with her bladed wings. She grinned widely as her opponent dropped the shotgun in shock. Lilith leaned in and planted a kiss on the startled mare. Her wings shooting upright, the pegasus had just enough time to let out a wordless moan before Lilith literally swept her off her hooves. The mare toppled to the ground to be knocked out with a well placed kick.

I laughed maniacally as I doublecasted the gravity spell on the two others in the group. The enforcers instantly shot upward, hitting the ceiling with a ***splat***. The second cast brought them plummeting back to the ground double quick, smashing them into insensibility. I wasn’t completely sure we were getting closer to our goal, but every enforcer we took out was a small victory.

The next hallway was bare of any enforcers, giving us a bit of relief as we made our way to the stairs heading upward. Did Lotus Bloom know we were here? I couldn’t tell. The stairwell was thankfully

also clean of opposition. I narrowed my eyes. I had a bad feeling about this, and I'd been through too much to ignore any bad feelings lately.

“Something about this doesn't feel right,” I said quietly. I glanced at my E.F.S. Nothing. Of course.

“If it's a trap, I say we trip it,” Lilith said, grinning. I looked over at Patch.

“Think you can handle it?” I said. The mare grinned and nodded excitedly. She took off like a rocket, zipping up the stairs. As she got closer to the next landing, a shot rang out nearly striking her in the side. Patch leaped out of the line of fire, landing with all four hooves on the railing and sliding back down to us.

“Definitely a trap. Got some sort of sniper laying down fire up there,” she said. “Any ideas?”

“Just one,” I said, flaring my horn. “We give them what they want, of course.” I cast my spell, forming a simple shield around the four of us. We started up the stairwell, nearing the point where Patch had been shot at. I glanced upward, seeing a unicorn mare floating a highly impressive looking sniper rifle out over the top of the landing. Her eyes narrowed as she saw us. She took aim and fired, the bullet striking my shield and deflecting off of it. I cast the gravity spell on the rifle, watching with glee as the weapon fell out of the mare's magic and headed straight for the ceiling. Her attempts to recapture it were met by a blast of telekinesis from Violet. The rest of the stairwell was surprisingly bare. Was that really the best the Triad could throw at us? If so... they really needed to hire better help.

The doors at the top of the stairs were massive, stout portals barred and sturdy. I grumbled and reached out with my magic. The doors were strong, but they were fixed a two hundred year old crumbling building. A surge of effort ripped them out of their frame, and I set them aside. locked. Beyond was a cramped hallway that led deeper into the hotel. We moved as quietly as possible, stopping to check each door that we came across. All of them were locked. They seemed to be resident rooms, so we didn't bother with them. At the far end of the hall was a door that led to the hotel's ballroom according to its sign. Finally, a red blip came up on my E.F.S. I nodded at the others. Forcing the door open, we moved inside.

“Welcome... Ministry Mare,” a cruel voice echoed from across the room. I took in the area. A pink pegasus in armored barding stood at the end of what had once been ballroom. The room had been converted to an operations center. Banks of terminals lined the walls, several unicorn mares in Stable jumpsuits tapping away at them. Lotus Bloom grinned wickedly. “Been waitin' for ya, bitch.”

“Lotus Bloom,” I snarled. “It's time that the Lotus Triad was shut down for good.” Lotus Bloom coughed rough laughter.

“Hardly. You see, Ministry Bitch, the Triad's a living thing. We won't ever be shut down as long as one of the leaders survives. And you won't take me as easily as you did Petal and Blossom,” she replied. She flirted her wings, revealing a large missile launcher mounted on her armor. “Now then... let's end this, shall we?”

“Yes... let's,” I said, surging at the mare. The unicorns running the terminals vacated the room quickly through the rear as Lotus Blossom fired up her weapon. A frag missile shot forth from the pegasus' launcher, tearing through the air at me. I reached out with my magic, taking a hold of it and turning it around. The projectile soared back at Lotus Blossom, who merely grinned and took wing herself,

dodging by the missile as it hit the back wall. It exploded violently, putting a massive hole in the already decrepit wall.

“That all you got?” She shouted wildly, strafing to my side and firing off another missile. This time however, Violet stepped in and ignited her horn. The missile fell apart in mid-air before it ever reached me. I grinned widely.

“Lotus Bloom, you don't get it, do you? I don't need heavy weaponry to win. I just need my friends,” I said. I spun about, catching the mare before she could get off another shot. I pulled her close and tossed her towards the ground. Lotus grinned as she flared her wings, pulling out of the fall gracefully and back into the air.

“Oh, I've got much more than that. Who needs friends when you've got family?” She said. A blast of magic erupted from next to Violet, catching my love off guard and knocking her back. A pink unicorn mare stepped forward, her horn brightly lit with her magic. Her wicked knife floated in the air next to her.

“Nice to see you again, Ministry Mare,” Lotus Petal said. “Maybe once we're done, I'll have fun with that other ear of yours.” A green blast of telekinesis struck her from behind. Violet snarled as she charged.

“No way, bitch, you're mine!” My love shouted. Lotus Petal sneered and turned towards Violet, meeting her charge as the latter struck her in the midsection. Lotus Bloom soared into the air above me as Lilith shot up to meet her. I glanced over at Patch.

“Patch, see if you can shut down their operations center,” I said frantically. The dark green earth pony nodded and bounced towards the central terminal. A blue earth mare popped up from behind the desk next to the terminal.

“I don't think so!” Lotus Blossom said, shoving the desk at my friend. Patch dodged and popped into the air, landing on the desk and bounding off right into Lotus Blossom's face. The blue mare growled as she launched herself at Patch with a vicious forehoof strike. Patch blocked it swiftly, spinning about and moving in for her own strike.

“Looks like the gangs all here!” Lotus Bloom crowed as Lilith chased her. The black mare's wings flared out, slashing wildly at the pink pegasus. “Have to do better than that!”

“Oh I'll show you better,” Lilith said, surging forward. The darker mare was obviously faster than Bloom, shooting past her and slamming into the other mare's barrel. I sat up, watching as the others fought their respective opponents. Grinning, I turned to the terminal in the center of the room. Lotus Blossom and Patch were still wrestling and thrashing with each other, barely paying any attention as I moved over to the terminal. I began tapping at the keyboard, poking through the lines of code and trying to find something that resembled a password. I finally hit upon the word *lotus* and grinned as it was accepted. These Triad mares really were pretty stupid. I began shutting down whatever systems I could find that the terminal had access to, which seemed to be pretty much everything.

“The terminal!” I heard Lotus Bloom shout. I looked up to see the pink pegasus shooting straight at me, only to be cut off by Lilith, who grabbed the mare by her wings. The two went pinwheeling across the ballroom, Lilith's superior agility letting her put the Triad leader face first into the wall. Lotus

Bloom tried to wriggle out of her grasp, only to meet the ground face first as Lilith dropped her. The pink mare didn't get back up. I stole a glance to see how Violet was doing. My love was fierce and fast, ducking past Lotus Petal's cruel knife and striking with her cybernetic hoof. Blood splattered across the floor and Petal fell as well.

"Gotcha," Violet said, grinning. "Patch, what's your twenty?"

"Oh you know, just hanging out," the green mare said. I looked up, seeing Lotus Blossom hanging from a rope tied to the chandelier. She was unconscious. Patch sat below her, smiling widely. I grinned, tapping at the keyboard. The terminal and all the ones in the room shut down completely.

"Alright, done!" I called out, standing. I flared my horn, lifting the terminal into the air and slamming it against the ground, smashing it into tiny pieces. I moved to meet my friends in the center of the room. Lotus Bloom groaned as she tried to push herself up. I put a hoof on the mare's back, stomping her down against the ground. "I wouldn't get up if I were you. Bad things might happen. Now... your little operation? All that fancy tech you love? It's all shut down. Let this be a warning to you. If I ever hear about your little gang ever again... you'll hear from us." The mare tried to speak, but it was muffled by the concrete. I grinned. "Good enough for me. Girls, let's go. We're done here."

"Alright!" Patch exclaimed, smiling widely as she bounced around us. "Let's go!"

The soft light of Theater came back into view, and we all breathed a sigh of relief. We were in high spirits, tired and beaten to hell, but high spirits nonetheless. The guards smiled and waved at us as we entered the settlement. The hustle and bustle greeted us as normal. A familiar cream-colored unicorn rushed across from the market, followed by Steeljack and Nixis.

"Steely!" Patch called out as she flung herself into her lover's hooves. I glanced at her, mouthing *Steely?* as I tried to process the nickname. The two grinned at me and I waved them off. They moved into the crowd, disappearing. They deserved a little down time, for sure. I was happy to give it to them.

"We were startin' to get a little worried 'bout you, darlin'," Danish said. "Thought I was gonna have to send out a group. Buzz is, though, that the Triad's practically fallen apart."

"I don't believe you'll have to be worrying about them for quite awhile," I said, winking. "With their center of operations destroyed, the Triad is now effectively gelded. Which... is a little strange considering they're all mares." I pondered that thought for a moment as Danish laughed.

"Well, take a load off, Star. I think we've all earned a little rest," he said. I grinned. "I've got some business to attend to. Lilith, care to join me?" The black mare nodded, taking his foreleg and trotting off. Nixis gave a small salute, and loped off into the organized madness of Theater. I glanced down at Violet.

"Well, looks like it's just you and me," I said. She sauntered ahead of me, wiggling her flank a little and stretching. My face turned beet red as she looked back up at me.

"Like what you see?" She said. I nodded mutely. "Good. Cuz you get this all night long." I giggled

like a schoolfilly as I trotted after her. I'd been missing the playful Violet so much. I was so wrapped up in her that I nearly didn't see the pony I stumbled over until I was on the ground. I looked up, seeing Grey Knight staring down. I groaned. *Not exactly the pony I wanted to see right now*, I thought.

"Ministry Mare," the stallion said. "Didst thou hear me call your name?"

"Umm... no?" I said, grinning sheepishly.

"Sorry about that," Violet interjected. "I may have... erm... distracted her a bit. Who are you?"

"Mine name is Grey Knight, Holy Knight of the Celestial Order," Grey replied as I pushed myself to my haunches.

"I probably forgot to tell you," I said. "Grey here is going to accompany us to Arlington when we leave. The townspeople there asked him to find me, concerning their issues with the Steel Rangers."

"Cotton Candy?" Violet asked. I nodded. "Dammit, I knew those Rangers were bad news."

"Grey, this is Violet Iris, my marefriend," I said. Grey bowed before my lover. Violet giggled.

"It's a pleasure, milady," he said.

"Grey... I'm actually glad I ran into you. Something came up, and I need to stay here for a few more days," I said, gaining the stallion's attention.

"I thought that thou were planning to leave sooner than that," Grey said, looking perturbed. Violet cocked her head, but said nothing.

"I know, but this is important. I want you to do me a favor if you can," I said. "I would like for you to start heading towards Arlington. Keep a low profile and gather information on what the Steel Rangers are doing. We'll join you in a few days time."

"I... I can do this," Grey said. "The pursuit of justice shall not rest. I will expect to see you soon, faithful squire." The stallion turned and trotted off. My eye twitched.

"What do you mean, squire?!" I yelled after him. No response. I growled. "What did he mean, 'Squire'?!!" Violet chuckled as he disappeared in the crowd.

"Well, he's an interesting one," she said. "Now then... what's this about staying here a few more days?"

"Let's... let's get to the room first," I replied. "I would rather talk about this in private." Violet nodded and we continued on, making our way up to our quarters. They were empty, thankfully. I would have felt extremely awkward if we'd walked in on Patch and Steeljack again. I plopped down onto the dirty mattress and sighed.

"Alright, spill it. Or no fun time for you," Violet said, grinning playfully.

"I went and found the bank that Diamond lived at, when she was still Diamond," I said.

“Oh, Star...” my love said softly. “I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve... I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. Diamond suffered, and hurt. But she’s gone now, and can’t hurt anymore,” I said. “But that’s not why we’re staying. I ran into Envy there.”

“Envy? What did she want, to try and capture you again?” Violet said.

“Not particularly. She remembers, Violet. She remembers everything,” I said. “She offered to teach me, train me to be a better fighter.”

“And you accepted?” My love replied. I nodded. “When?”

“Tomorrow. She wants me to meet her at the bank, alone,” I said. Violet sighed.

“What if it’s a trap, Star?” She said. “What if she’s just trying to get you alone to capture you again?”

“She already had me where she wanted me, Violet. She could have done her worst, but she didn’t. I... I trust her,” I said. “I want to do this... for Diamond.”

“She really meant that much, didn’t she?” My marefriend said.

“She... she gave her life to save ours. In the end, she was good. She used her second chance to help us,” I said. “I owe it to her.” Violet mulled over this for a few moments and sighed again.

“Alright,” she said finally. “If you think it will be fine, then it’s okay. Do you think this will help?”

“I’m... I’m not sure. I don’t know much about fighting like a zebra,” I said. “Now that we’ve gotten that taken care of... where were we?” I grinned, nuzzling my lover’s neck. Violet nickered, pecking me on the cheek.

“Right about... there,” she replied, before diving into my embrace. I smiled as I let myself melt away. Tomorrow, I would have to get back to reality, but for tonight... tonight there was only Violet and I.

I awoke, feeling quite rested despite the strenuous activities of the night before. Violet lay next to me, nuzzling my neck softly. She was still sleeping. My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room and I noticed that at some point Steeljack and Patch had made it back. They lay across the small room, snuggled close together. I smiled. Despite everything that had been happening to us lately, there was finally time for us to relax and recollect. I sighed in content. A glance at my PipBuck revealed that it was pretty close to noon. I needed to get over to meet Envy. Shuffling out of our makeshift bed, I carefully stood so that I didn’t disturb Violet. My love rolled into her pillow, yawning as she fell back asleep.

I closed the door, thinking ahead to my training with Envy. I wondered just what the zebra could show me about her magic. My mind was lost in thought as I moved through the afternoon bustle of Theater. The city air was clean and crisp for a change. I trotted through the city until I came across the ruined bank that had belonged to Diamond. Envy was nowhere to be seen. I glanced down at my PipBuck. It was getting relatively close to when I was supposed to meet her. A glint in the darkness caught my eye

as a knife shot out from nowhere at my face. I growled, pulling back and flaring my horn. Magic caught the silvery knife, but it wasn't stopping it. I strained my telekinesis, finally turning the knife to the side to where it struck the ground next to me.

"Terrible," a voice said from out of nowhere. "Your form is horrifying. You're practically a horn on a stick, it's a wonder that you were ever able to beat me." The lithe form of Envy appeared beside me. I nearly jumped out of my coat. I hadn't even heard her move. I glared at her.

"Envy," I said.

"Ministry Mare. Follow me, I have the perfect place we can begin your training," the zebra said, motioning for me to follow her. I trotted after her until we were in the middle of the courtyard of the Ministry of Arcane Science hub. Envy stopped and turned around, smiling. "Now then. One of most important things that I wish to impart upon you, is that zebra magic is much more instinctual than pony magic. There is less study, and more practical application. To learn zebra magic is to command the primal forces of nature itself."

"Instinct? So there are no written spells to learn?" I said. Envy nodded. "So... where do we begin?"

"The first thing we must do is teach you how to fight like a zebra. I said before... your form is terrible. You do not move as part of your body," she said. "When you strike, you hit like a train."

"Hey, that's not very nice. I'm not fat," I said. Envy chuckled, rolling her eyes.

"Your weight was not called into question, Ministry Mare. I am speaking of how efficiently you use your form. Your movements are erratic. You react, not pro-actively move to intercept your opponent," the zebra said. "Your magic, while useful, will not always protect you."

"To be fair, the blade you threw at me. It resisted my magic," I said. I was still a little sore about this.

"Such armaments are not common to zebra fighting. The blades are made out of adamantite, a metal that resists magical contact. It is quite rare. One of the few places this metal can be salvaged is north of the city," Envy replied. "I had them made special for my own use. Now then, enough talk. Once again... to learn to fight like a zebra is to practice. The reason I chose this area for your training is that it was open enough for us to fight unimpeded."

"Fight? What do you ---" I started to say as Envy reared up, leveling a hoof strike at my face. My eyes widened and I leaped backwards, trying to dodge. Envy grinned, pushing forward.

"Too slow!" She shouted, landing a hoof on my shoulder. I grunted in pain under the force of the blow. "Be light on your hooves, and expect your opponent's attacks!" She dropped on her rear legs, swinging out with a sweeping kick. Clumsily I reared myself, pushing off to leap over the kick.

I failed. Pretty badly actually. The kick struck my leg, knocking me to the ground. Envy stood over me, glowering.

"That sort of thing would have gotten you killed had I been serious," she said. "Perhaps we must start small with you. Your heart is not in this, I think."

"No, I'm fine," I said, pushing myself off the ground. "Just... keep going. I'll never get better unless I practice, right?" Envy grinned, rearing up again. She rushed forward with an unnatural speed, thrusting her forehoof at me. I braced myself into a standing position like she had done, moving to block the strike. The hoof hit me like a ton of bricks, but at least I didn't fall over. I flared my wings, spinning about to try and use one of them to strike back at the zebra. Envy ducked, using her insane speed to move about me in a circle. She stalked around me, ending up in a blind spot before I could turn to meet her. Her hoof struck the side of my barrel, knocking me back and making me lose my balance. To the ground I went again. Envy chuckled.

"That was... better. You are starting to understand how to maneuver. Pull yourself up, Star, and come sit. Let us speak about the other part of zebra magic," she said, sitting down on her haunches. I moved over and sat down in front of her. My entire body was sore from even the limited amount of fighting we had done. "Now. I said before that zebra magic is instinctual. You just took your first steps towards understanding that. When you can predict your opponent's movements, you are participating in the essence of zebra magic. Conversely, there is another part of that magic that we have yet to touch on."

"And that is...?" I said, catching my breath.

"Zebra magic is also about reflection. You must be able to reflect on your surroundings. This requires meditation," Envy said. "Close your eyes." I closed my eyes, wondering what Envy meant. What was I supposed to be reflecting on? "Clear your mind. Let your thoughts go. Feel the world around you. No noise, no sound, no din, no fuss, must interfere with your focus. Unlearn what you have learned, only then can victory be earned." I growled under my breath. Every time I tried to clear my thoughts, a certain black maned alicorn kept popping into them. Spark. She invaded my mind even more than when she had been present in it.

"I... I can't do it," I said, opening my eyes. "It's like... I try... but then she's there, watching me."

"Ah yes... the other Radiant Star. The one who so thoroughly bested me," Envy said calmly. I nodded. "I know that she is no longer within you, but yet you are troubled by her. You care greatly for her, despite all that she has done to you."

"I... I want to save her. She's just confused, doesn't know what she's doing. If I could help her, she could help everypony," I said. "That's why I can't stop thinking about her."

"And yet you must. You cannot let this break your focus. You have to keep moving forward, and shed the sins of the past," Envy said, reaching into her cloak. She pulled out a scroll. "There is a particular magic that I wish for you to learn. It will help you to understand how to be silent and deadly. This will work while you are fighting as well as using your normal magic." She handed me the scroll. I furled it open, perusing the words it held. Well... at least I thought they were words.

"I can't... exactly read zebra," I said. Envy grinned.

"Turn it over," she said. I flipped the scroll around, the words revealing themselves to be written in perfectly legible Equestrian. I paused for a moment to savor the fierce heat of the blush riding my cheeks. Once I was able to actually read the spell, my eyes widened. It was a spell designed to silence my movements. The only problem was there was no instructions on how to actually cast it. "Now then... cast it. But do it the zebra way. Feel the natural surroundings around you, and let its energy

flow through you.” I sighed, glancing down at the scroll. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the energy required, but my mind kept getting in the way. I scrunched my face as I started to feel... something. I thought about Spark, and the feeling went away immediately. Envy was right. I was so hung up on Spark and where she was that I couldn't even do something as simple as clear my mind.

“I... I can't do it,” I said, finally opening my eyes. Envy nodded.

“I thought as much,” she replied. “Time. Time is what you will need to learn this. I had not expected you to do it on the first try.”

“How am I ever going to get it?” I whined. “I can't even meditate right! I can't let go of her...”

“You will learn, Radiant Star. Trust me,” Envy said, standing. “Keep the scroll. Study it and meditate every night. Eventually, you will understand. Now... come. We have sat still long enough.” I stood, feeling a little more invigorated. Envy grinned as she pulled herself into a rearing position. “Are you ready?”

“Ready,” I said, rearing up myself. Envy shot forward like a bullet, striking for my exposed midsection. I pushed off to the side, my opponent narrowly missing as I spun away. Regaining my balance, I rushed forward on my hind legs. Envy turned about, standing firm as she awaited my attack. I grinned, flapping my wings for momentum. I lifted into the air, kicking out and clipping the other mare as she struck out herself. Her attack caught me in my barrel, knocking the wind out of me and forcing me to the ground again. I coughed, trying to force some air down my lungs as Envy stood over me.

“Again.”

“Again!” Envy shouted. I groaned, standing and rearing again. Two whole days had passed since our first training session and I still felt like I wasn't getting any closer to understanding zebra combat or zebra magic. My meditation sessions were faring worse, if anything. Spark haunted my thoughts during every session. Every time I closed my eyes all I ever saw was her. Envy had been as placid and unmoved as ever, but I could tell that even her patience was beginning to wear a little thin. I growled, surging forward as Envy strafed to my left. I turned to follow, the zebra leaping backwards to put distance between us. I came down to all fours, breaking into a swift canter. Pushing off of my hind legs, I struck out, catching Envy off guard and hitting her in the shoulder. The mare was pushed back, grunting in pain.

“Good!” The zebra exclaimed. She kicked out, coming just within reach of my nose. I pulled away, slapping the hoof to the side frantically. Envy spun, dropping to a normal standing position, turning my deflection into a buck that landed right on the front of my chest. I dropped, falling onto my back. Envy chuckled. “That was much better, Star. You are learning.”

“I... I still can't beat you though,” I said, pushing myself off the ground. “And my meditation... still terrible.”

“Yes, but you are beginning to understand how to fight like a zebra,” Envy said. “Come. Let us rest for the moment.” I sat down next to the mare, looking out across the city. Our latest sparring session

had taken us to the roof of the Ministry hub, as Envy had wanted a little more danger added to it. I sighed, hanging my head.

"I'm never gonna get this," I said. Envy laid a hoof on my shoulder, smiling.

"Star, trust me when I say. Not everypony can quite understand the intricacies of this training. To come as far as you have is quite impressive," she said.

"I... Thank you. I really do appreciate the help. Violet was a little apprehensive about me coming here," I said. "After all that's happened though, we needed the down time." Envy nodded. "Envy... I've been wanting to ask you about something. Can you... can you tell me a little bit more about Diamond? I've been thinking about her a lot lately."

"Of course. I had expected this to come up at some point," Envy said, pulling a small pouch out from underneath her cloak. "I prepared this to show you something. It is a memory, of sorts. Of the first time I met Diamond Night." She took the pouch and dumped it, blowing on the green dust as it flowed from its container. The dust swirled around in the air, surrounding us until all was green.

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I blinked. This was a different way to view a memory. I wasn't in a host, but in a spectral form of my own body. I looked around, noticing the drab grey of the walls around me. It was a drab grey I was quite familiar with. Stable 180. Evora was ahead of me, trotting along the dank hall. She made her way to the entrance of the Stable. The area outside of the entrance didn't look like I'd remembered it. I guess something as large as a Stable had to have multiple entrances, after all. Evora stopped for a moment. She looked back, almost as if she was expecting something. She turned and continued forward into the city. Almost as if I were on autopilot, I trotted after her. The journey through the city was uneventful as Evora neared close to an abandoned office building. The zebra mare entered through a broken doorway and glanced about. Seeing nothing, she continued forward, picking through desks and filing cabinets for anything worth scavenging. Evora sighed, clearly coming up empty. A banging noise caught her attention and mine. The zebra turned, her eyes wide with fear.

"Hello?" She called out to the darkness. No response. Evora stepped back from the desk that she been picking through. The banging noise sounded again, coming from the nearby stairwell. A loud shouting accompanied it. Evora moved towards the door she had entered the building from, scrambling to get away. The door to the stairwell slammed open, revealing two raiders. The lead raider, a dirty white unicorn buck, trotted into the room, his eyes widening with glee at the sight of the zebra.

"Stripe!" He shouted, floating out a SMG in his magic. Evora dove to the side as he fired, one of the shots catching her flank. The zebra groaned as the raider stalked forward. "Get her, boys! Show this fucking piece of shit not to tread on our territory!" Two more raiders entered the room, whooping and hollering. Evora yanked a roll of magical bandages out of her bags, trying to apply them as quickly as she could. One of the raiders, a blood red colored earth pony mare, rushed forward and swung a wicked spiked club that narrowly missed the zebra's head. Evora yelped and rolled away from her hiding place, grunting. She pushed to her hooves, galloping as fast as she could toward the exit. Another storm of gunfire erupted from the leader's SMG, striking the mare in her back legs. Evora hit the ground hard, howling.

"Yeah!" The raider leader crowed. "Pick her up. Bring her here." The blood red mare stepped over,

grabbing onto Evora's jumpsuit with her teeth and dragging her across the dirty floor. The lead raider grinned widely as he looked down at the mare. "So... whatcha doing here, bitch? You thought you could just waltz in here and start taking our stuff? This here's our place." Evora tried to speak, but wasn't able to get any words out. "Looks like we'll have to cut the answer out of her." The raider floated out a serrated knife and grinned.

"RELEASE HER," a voice boomed from above. An explosion ripped through the air, knocking the raiders off of their hooves. I looked away from Evora, seeing a pony stepping through the blasted wall. A dark blue alicorn towered over the raiders, who were scrambling to get up. Evora groaned as she tried to pull herself away.

"Fuck! It's one of those alicorns!" One of the raiders shouted, lifting a pistol and firing blindly. The alicorn's horn glowed brightly, erecting a shield and deflecting the bullets back. Two of the raiders were struck by stray fire, shouting in pain as they went down.

"LEAVE THIS PLACE, FOUL VILLAINS," the alicorn yelled. The lead raider growled and floated out his SMG, spraying gunfire about the room and striking the alicorn's shield. The dark mare flared her horn again, pushing the raider to the ground. She stepped over towards the rest of the raiders, righteous fury in her eyes. With another blast of her magic, the raiders were dead. The alicorn turned to the zebra, who was struggling to pull herself off the ground. "Hold thyself for a second. You're badly injured." The alicorn floated out a healing potion, bringing it to the zebra's lips. Evora sputtered as she tried to swallow the potion, her eyes fluttering open and shut.

"Who... who are you...?" The zebra coughed as the healing potion's magic began to take effect. The alicorn smiled softly.

"I am called Diamond. I was in the area and heard the cries for help. Are you alright?" She said. Evora nodded.

"I... I'm fine," the striped mare said.

"What were you doing in this building? Those ponies could have killed you," Diamond said.

"Scavenging. It's how we survive out here in the city," Evora replied, looking up at the alicorn with awe. "You... you're an alicorn."

"Guilty," Diamond chuckled. "And you're a zebra. But we won't hold that against you, will we?" Evora grinned as she pulled herself into a sitting position. "Now, where are you from? Your friends and family might be worried."

"I... I'm from Stable 180. I live there with the others," Evora said. "Why would you help me? I thought that alicorns were... you know... evil." Diamond sighed.

"We... we used to be. But then we were... Freed. Left on our own, to... Rediscover ourselves," the alicorn mare said. "I helped you because... well, I'm new to this city, and I... I couldn't let you get killed by those monsters." Evora stood, shaking herself off.

"I do appreciate it. Raiders are pretty vicious around these parts. I really should have been better prepared," the zebra said. "I honestly don't know how my family at the Stable would take seeing you,

though. I should be able to make it back by myself. Thank you... again. Perhaps sometime we could... venture out and scavenge together?"

"I... I would like that," Diamond said. The world around me began to suddenly fade to a greenish tint before everything disappeared.

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I blinked. I had returned to where I was sitting. Envy glanced over at me, and smiled softly.

"So you see... I owe Diamond my life," she said. "She saved me, and that was the day I fell in love with her." I sighed, hanging my head.

"And I left her to die in that damn Stable," I said. Envy laid a hoof on my shoulder once more.

"Again... I do not blame you for what happened down in the Stable. Diamond... she knew the dangers of the Wasteland. And despite the mistakes that she made, I never hated her for it," the zebra said. She stood, stretching her legs and yawning. "So... are you feeling rested enough to try again?"

"I... I suppose so," I said, standing. "What do you want to work on now?" Envy grinned.

"I have an idea. There are still some wings of the Ministry hub that are unexplored that might have active security. We are going to practice your sneaking skills," she said, pointing to a nearby door. "Come on. Let's go." She loped forward, trotting lightly. I followed behind the zebra as quietly as I could. Envy opened the door and grinned. "After you."

I stepped inside the small stairwell, feeling quite cramped as I started down. The amount of light coming from the hallway below us was dropping as we walked. When we reached the bottom, the hall was dark and dank. I looked up and down the hall.

"Which way?" I said. Envy motioned down the hall to the left. I trotted forward, keeping an eye on my E.F.S. for any hostile activity. Nothing. The last time I had been here, I hadn't run into anything that attacked me. Now... I wasn't so certain. Granted, I also didn't remember that room that Diamond had found the chest in. I rounded the next corner, not expecting a laser blast to suddenly hit the ground before me. I yelped and leaped into the air, looking up at the ceiling mounted turret that had suddenly come to life. The turret tracked my movements, firing another stream of deadly fire my way. I snarled, throwing up my shield and deflecting it. "Shit!!"

"Star! Remember your training," Envy said sternly. "Watch and learn." The zebra leaped into action, silently and quickly bounding through the hall. Every time the turret tracked her, she was already gone, moving onto the next piece of cover. She drew one of her wicked blades, tossing it with deadly accuracy at the turret. The blade embedded itself in the metal and the turret began to spark. Envy turned back to me with a stern expression. I lowered my shield and sighed.

"Sorry. I just kind of... panicked I guess," I said.

"Just... try to feel your surroundings. Listen and look, and not just at your E.F.S. Learn to fight without it," the zebra said. "Now then, let's continue. There is one other reason I brought you here, and that's to see Twilight's office. I thought you might be able to glean some information from it about

Spark.”

“What? Really?” I said, grinning. “Alright then, what are we waiting for!” I started to canter forward and then immediately fell flat to my face as Envy yanked on my tail with her teeth. I glared up at her.

“We are going to do this the right way,” she said. “Undoubtedly we will run into further defenses. We need to be careful.” I sighed, and finally nodded. Pushing myself to my hooves, I followed Envy as she started down the hallway. The zebra stalked like a hunter following prey. I tried to move as quietly as I could, attempting to feel the surroundings around me and not blindly glance at my E.F.S. I sighed. It wasn't happening. The hallway ended in a set of stairs, and there were no more turrets on this particular level. We set down the stairs, eventually coming to the door that led to the ground floor of the Ministry hub. I pushed open the door cautiously and stepped into the hallway. Envy nudged me with her muzzle, motioning down the hall. I stalked down the hall, trying to keep myself loose and quiet, but while I couldn't even hear Envy behind me, I could clearly hear my own hooves striking the ground. I was never going to get this silent thing down, it seemed.

The hallway was bereft of any hostile activity. I briefly wondered if the Twilight Society had cleared out everything, but the turret in the upper levels gave me pause. There was still some danger to this building, despite how easy this seemed. As we rounded the next corner, I found myself wishing that it was still easy. The large open hall before us appeared to be a lobby of some sorts. Roaming to and fro were several Ponitron security robots. Red blips fluttered into my E.F.S. Thankfully, they hadn't noticed us yet. Envy looked over at me and nodded. Sighing softly, I stepped forward and tried my best to sneak up on the first robot. The pony-shaped metal thing was whirring quietly as it scanned a nearby hall that branched off from the lobby. I got to within two feet of it before it turned, blaring a loud alarm that alerted practically every other robot in the room.

“Aww, come on!” I yelled, angry at myself for my inability to be silent. The Ponitron's red eyes flared and a laser blast shot forth from them. My eyes widened as I instinctively cast my alicorn shield, deflecting the blast right back into the robot's face. It exploded violently, rocking me back across the hall to the hard ground. I grunted in pain, sliding to the wall with a violent **thud**. Envy leaped into action, slicing into the nearest Ponitron with her wicked blades. I pushed myself off the wall, narrowly missing an electrical blast that would have flash-fried my head. With a flare of my horn, I grabbed the robot, crushing two others with its flailing form.

“Do you always make a habit of getting yourself beaten up and shot?” Envy called out, sneering as she ripped another robot to pieces with her knives.

“It's not something that I actively plan for, no!” I shouted back as I rammed into the last robot, sending it flying into the wall to explode in a shower of sparks. I huffed as I tried to catch my breath. Envy chuckled.

“Still, it seems as if you aren't even trying, Star,” Envy replied.

“I am trying!” I exclaimed. “This is a lot harder than it looks, you know.”

“I... I'm sorry. I forgot that you are just starting to learn. You have come far, but you need to continue your meditations. Now, let us cease this speaking, our destination is quite close to here,” Envy said. I nodded, following the zebra down the hall amidst the broken and smoking Ponitrons. We turned down the next hallway, and there... there it was. Two massive doors lay broken next to the entrance to the

office. Inside lay the most plush carpet I'd ever stepped on in my entire life. I was giddy as I glanced about the wonderful room. Books upon books upon books lined the walls, and while the crystal globe in the back of the office had lost its shine, it was still something to behold.

"Wow... this is... just... wow," I said, finding myself at a lack of words. I trotted up to the desk, glancing down at the open drawers and terminal sitting on top of it.

"We found it quite by accident. In fact, I almost think that you couldn't find it unless you were meant to," Envy said. "Something here... it wanted Diamond to find it."

"That something was... not a very pretty thing," I said. "It was... a nightmare. A nightmare that took your friend from you." A glimmer in the darkness caught my eye. *What was that?* I thought as I let my gaze drift upon the crystal globe. At the base of it was the stylized etching of Twilight's cutie mark. "Umm... Envy? Can you see this?" I trotted up to the globe and pointed at where the mark was.

"See what, Radiant Star? I see nothing other than metal and crystal," the zebra replied. I sighed.

"I thought so. All over this city, I've been finding these... messages. Left by the original Ministry Mares. They're always addressed to Twilight. The last one I saw was in Stable 180, belonging to Pinkie Pie. It was associated with a symbol of her cutie mark," I said. "There's one right there. But I don't think anypony else can see them. I think they're messages for me. Hold on, I'm going to try something..." I flared my horn, my magic taking a hold on the etching of the cutie mark. It lit up brilliantly, spilling light into the air that coalesced into the form of a familiar purple mare. Twilight smiled softly, a golden crown with a pink star gem inset sitting upon her brow.

"If this message has found you, then I have failed to do my duty as a Ministry Mare, and... as a Princess of Equestria, and we have all lost." I blinked. *What...? Princess? What is she talking about?* I said. It was then that I noticed that Twilight's stature was a bit... taller than I'd remembered. I glanced at her, cocking my head and realizing that it was due in part to the wings that were tucked neatly against her sides. Twilight was an alicorn? But... how did I not notice this before now? The image continued to speak.

"When this war started, I thought I could help Celestia and Luna solve it peacefully. But I was wrong. Littlehorn happened. Celestia gave up the throne... and Luna... created the Ministries. I did what was necessary to help her. I gave up my role as a Princess. I became the Ministry Mare. Always hiding myself, my true self from everypony."

No more. I am going to use this power I've been given to complete my mission. To ensure nopony else will ever die, I will use my own wings and horn to finish this for good."

If I've failed... I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. The Zebras played their part, but We did it. We destroyed everything, and life will never be the same. I'm so sorry..."

The hologram faded to nothingness, and I sighed deeply. How had Twilight managed to hide the fact that she was not only an alicorn herself, but once a Princess? None of it made any sense. Every memory I'd seen of the mare or been in her body, she was a unicorn. I couldn't figure it out. I looked over at Envy. The zebra had a concerned look on her face.

"Sorry about that. Like I said... these things tend to only show themselves to me," I said. She nodded.

"I don't know if there's anything here that can help me with Spark. I'm not even sure I completely understand what I just saw, anyways."

"Where will you go then, to seek the answers?" Envy asked.

"Manehatten. There's a group of ponies there called the Twilight Society. They might know of some way to locate Spark," I said.

"Then go, we should. We have been away too long. Your friends will worry and you have a journey to prepare for," the zebra replied. I nodded, turning to follow her as she headed towards the door. I glanced back once more at the stylized cutie mark on the metal. Unlike any similar message marks, this one was still glowing brightly. Pulsing, even. My eyes widened as a blast of magic emanated from the mark, striking me directly on my horn. I fell to the ground, groaning. Envy whirled around and began to call out for me as whiteness overtook everything.

"Star!!!"

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"Well, that's just lovely," I said, gritting my teeth as I glanced up and down the long hallway. The doors that lined it looked the same as they always had. "Hurry up and open up, Twilight. I haven't got all day to wait for you." I snarled. As if on command one of the nearby doors opened immediately. I stepped through, finding myself in a dark wooded area. In the center was a large treehouse I knew had once been home to Twilight. I trotted up to the door, and pushed it open.

"Hello?" I called out. "Is anypony there?" I wondered briefly what emotion or memory or thing that Twilight would have ready for me. I gasped softly in surprise when I saw her. The mare sitting in the center of the library was a broken shell of what she once was. Her wings lay limply at her sides, and she appeared as if she had been crying for hours on end. She looked up at me and forced out a soft smile through her cracked face.

"So, you finally know the truth of the matter, do you?" She said. I blinked.

"Twilight?" I said. The mare nodded. I trotted over and sat down on my haunches in front of the mare. "You... you weren't just a unicorn were you? You were... like me."

"Yes. I was an alicorn much like you are. I was also at one time, a Princess. The Princess of Magic, they called me," the mare replied.

"But... what happened?" I asked.

"Littlehorn. The zebras killed so many fillies and colts that day. Celestia was stricken with grief over it. She decided that she wasn't fit to rule. I tried to console her, but she wouldn't listen to me. She tried to offer the throne to me... but I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I couldn't just take my mentor's place like that. Not after seeing how heartbroken it made her," Twilight said. "Luna came. She offered to take the throne. Said she had some ideas on how to win the war. That was when she proposed the idea for the Ministries."

"But then... your hologram said you had to give up being a Princess," I said. Twilight nodded.

“Luna said it was for safety reasons. She said that if the worst ever came to pass, that I could take her up place as ruler. I was the backup plan, so to speak. I was forced to abdicate my Princess status, and take a new role, as the Ministry Mare,” she said. “At first... I agreed with her. But after awhile, I wanted to use my power to try and stop the war as best as I could. That included many many unfinished projects, but some of them you know quite well.”

“I.M.P.,” I said. Twilight nodded again. “But... how is it then that all this time I've only ever seen you as a unicorn, even in memory orbs?”

“That was... Rarity's idea. She thought that if we made my identity as an alicorn obscure, that the zebras wouldn't try to attack me. She came up with a spell to overwrite certain parts of memories, and every propaganda poster that was shown I was without my wings,” Twilight said. “She wasn't the Ministry Mare of Image for nothing, after all. I still wonder how she learned all of that in such short time. Perhaps Luna? I don't know.” Twilight paused to draw a deep sigh of breath, fluttering her wings listlessly. “I was the only new alicorn in the historical record. I had thought that the mechanism behind that transformation could be duplicated...”

“I.M.P. again,” I interjected. Twilight nodded, staring at her hooves.

“If we could have created more alicorns, it would have meant so much... Aside from the obvious military applications, it would have meant government stability if Luna or Celestia fell. But... you know how that turned out.” I nodded silently.

“So what now? What do you want from me?” I asked. Twilight sighed.

“Out of all the alicorns that... resulted... from I.M.P., Star, I only have a connection with you, and it's decaying. It's not going to go away quickly, but I'm worried it won't be quick enough.” Twilight said, a flicker of animation crossing her tired features. “It all comes back to Spark, and to third-manifold cross-temporal thaumatographical connectivity. Spark is leveraging her primary link to me as a cotermporal Element Bearer to reach through spacetime itself --”

“Twilight; Equestrian, please!” I interjected, my eyes wide and staring. Twilight grinned sheepishly, settling back to the floor.

“Sorry, I just -- Sorry.” She smiled sadly. “In plain Equestrian, Spark is using her bond to me as a bearer of the Element of Magic *then* to bring her power through you, *now*. When my link to you fails, she'll be able to take it over. That will let her force her magic into the web of life in this world. She'll kill everything on the planet to remake it in her perfect vision. She must be stopped.”

“Why? Why does she want to do that?” I said. I couldn't begin to fathom the amount of magic required to perform such a feat.

“I... I failed. The spell, the life spell that should have brought Shining Armor back to me. In casting it, I spent the last of my energy. I reverted to a normal unicorn, my wings... given to the spell. I didn't have enough power to give Spark her own body,” Twilight said. “Spark resented it. She claimed she wanted freedom, to live her own life. But I saw past her deception and saw her true goals. She wanted the world, Star. She wanted to see everything in the fires of Tartarus with her as the ruler. I personally believe the grandiose nature of Nightmare impressed that upon her.”

"I... I can believe that last part," I said, thinking about what had happened with Diamond. "But Spark... there's still a piece of goodness in her. I know it. I can feel it, in my heart. If I can just get through to it, I might be able to save her, Twilight. I don't have to kill her."

"Maybe, but I'm not taking any chances," Twilight snarled. "That self-serving bitch never really helped me. She never wanted to be my friend. She wanted power, plain and simple. All I ever wanted was to have Shining back."

"Your brother," I said. "What was his angle in all of this? I know that he wanted to die. He wanted to help you complete your work, to complete the spell."

"Shining... was corrupted by *her*. Spark's goal was to push me into a corner, force me to cast such a complex spell to give her a life of her own. She failed, because I intentionally put all of my energy into trying to bring back Shining Armor. I still don't know if the spell actually did anything. But that didn't matter," Twilight said. "It gave me a way to beat her. And then of course, the megaspells dropped and now here we are." I looked down at my hooves, taking it all in. I remembered Twilight's memory. She had told Spark she would stop her.

"Twilight," I said finally after a few moments of awkward silence. "I can't make any promises about her. I made my choice. She has one of my friends inside of her now. And I made a promise to her. I intend to keep that promise."

"Just... don't trust her. Don't let her get to you with her words, her charm. She'll as soon as destroy you as look at you," Twilight said. "Please... be careful. You are important." I glared at the purple mare. I was important? I wished that were actually true.

"When this is all said and done, you and I will have to talk about that," I said forcefully. "And from now on, if I want to talk to you... you'll be available. None of this proxy shit from Unity."

"Fine," Twilight replied. "The emotions will no longer trouble you. Now... you should go. Your friends... they will be missing you." I stood, looking down at her. I realized how broken she looked. I felt sorry for her. All this time, she'd been alone, hurt... and angry. So very, very angry. Was this how I was for a time? I couldn't remember. In fact... I'd been having trouble remembering a lot lately of my own life. It was like Twilight's memories kept popping up into place. The only constant it seemed... was Violet. I could clearly remember everything about her. I turned around and trotted to the door of the library. Before everything went dark, I looked back at Twilight and sighed. I knew what needed to happen next. It was time to leave Chicacolt, time to find Spark and end this.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

"Star!" Envy shouted from above me. Her hoof laid on my shoulder, shaking me fiercely. "Star!!!" I groaned, rolling over on my side. My eyes fluttered open. The zebra's expression was one of fear and concern. "You're... you're awake. I feared you were hurt or dead, or worse."

"Just... another one of those freaky mind things I get sometimes," I croaked, pushing myself off the ground and back onto all fours. "How long was I out?"

"Several hours, at best," Envy said.

“And you stayed with me?” I said, raising an eyebrow. The zebra nodded. “I... thank you. I really appreciate it.” Envy smiled.

“It would not befit my duty as a teacher to leave a student alone, especially in a place such as this,” she replied. “But I feel we should return to Theater. Your friends are sure to have begun to wonder where you have gone off to.” I nodded, pondering that thought. Violet would have come and found me, she had my PipBuck tag. Where was she? We trotted out into the hallway, glancing about for any more hostiles. Thankfully, there was nothing. Within several minutes we had made our way to the main entrance of the Ministry hub and out into the city. It was dark out already, but there was an odd hint of light in the distance.

Then I heard it. An explosion, muffled, but still clear enough to know what it was. It was coming from the direction we were headed. From Theater. The large blast was followed by several smaller muffled sounds. I moved into a gallop, Envy keeping pace with me. What was happening? Were my friends alright? The closer we got, the more the muffled sounds began to clear up. Gunfire. Grenades. This wasn't just some Wasteland beast who got too close to the settlement. This was a firefight. From what I could tell by the flaring glows dancing off the streets, there were also flamethrowers being used.

I turned the next corner, not paying nearly enough attention to my E.F.S. as I ran right into an earth pony who was carrying a semi-automatic submachine gun in his teeth. He snarled around the grip, spraying a fire that went wide thanks to my inadvertent collision with him. I reached out with my hoof, striking the weapon and knocking it from his mouth, taking a few of his teeth with it. The other hoof shot out automatically, catching the stallion in the face and knocking him out cold. I shook that hoof, pain lancing up into my leg. That buck had a really hard head!

“One of the assailants, it seems,” Envy said softly. “Probably meant to hold a perimeter. We should move quickly and assist the townspies of Theater.” I nodded, looking down at the unconscious stallion. His style of dress stuck me as odd. He was wearing a nice (as nice as one can get in the Wasteland) tailored suit. My eyes widened as I recognized the outfit. *The Cowpones? After what happened with them the last time?* I thought. Something just didn't add up here. Why would the Cowpones be attacking Theater?

Because you weren't there, I suddenly thought. I hung my head. Somehow, they had known I would be gone and planned this excursion. Possibly they thought I'd already left the city, thanks to the Minotaur's last broadcast. It would have been the perfect time to strike at the MMMM, and at one of their larger settlements, too. Envy poked me in the side, breaking me free of my thoughts.

“Come on, Star. There are yet more battles to be fought,” she said. I noticed she had her blades dangling around her legs, ready to be used at a moment's notice. She turned and began cantering silently towards Theater. I followed, trying to use my wings to keep me off the ground and keep myself silent as well. It wasn't working too well, but silence didn't seem to matter too much when we turned onto the stretch of concrete that lay outside Theater's entrance.

It was a war zone. The ponies of Theater had attempted to put up a crude barricade and were firing from behind their cover at the brahmin and earth ponies that were besieging the town. All over, I smelled the stench of burning flesh and flamer fuel. A large earth pony at the head of the siege was the responsible party, the massive flamethrower strapped onto his battle saddle alight with death and fury. A flash of black above me caught my eye. Lilith was soaring over the battle, a whining noise tracing

after her as the Bitch let loose its payload of pain. A missile shot forth from the launcher, slamming home into the ground in the middle of the Cowpones' army, exploding violently and spraying shrapnel everywhere. Elsewhere, ponies I recognized as foot soldiers of the MMMM were engaged in smaller skirmishes away from the main fight. The defenders appeared to be vastly outnumbered, however, and I noticed a few bodies that definitely belonged to them as well as the Cowpones attacking. I nearly died inside when I saw Thin Mint laying among them, her pale green coat seeming even more pale in the stillness of death. While I hadn't known the mare all that well, she had been a genuinely caring pony for myself and my friends.

A blast of silver fire from behind the barricade both warmed and froze my heart at the same time. Violet would be there too of course. There was no way she wouldn't be helping. It was in her nature. Still, I worried she would be okay. Unfortunately, there wasn't much time for me to process everything else going on before I was spotted. A blast of gunfire struck the concrete just in front of my feet, causing me to leap back. I flared my horn, taking a cue from the fight with the Triad, and cast my gravity spell at the less than fortunate assailant. Screaming, he went flying into the air as he disappeared from sight.

"That... was actually kind of frightening. You know that, right?" Envy said as she leaped past me. I grinned.

"Certainly effective, though," I said. "Let's get to the others, and quick." The zebra nodded, leaping into the fray with intense and controlled fury. It was amazing to watch her fight for real. She moved from target to target with fluid grace, easily dispatching three opponents in mere moments. I galloped forward myself, raising my alicorn shield to deflect any oncoming fire. The majority of the ponies and brahmin firing at me seemed to just stare when I did this. I wondered briefly if they hadn't expected me to actually be here. It was no matter. I just needed to get to Violet. A blast of silver fire torched two earth ponies who had come close to the barricade. My marefriend grinned as she saw me.

"Star!" She called out. Envy leaped after me as we made our way onto the other side of the holding point. I smiled softly at my love.

"What happened? What's going on?" I said.

"The Cowpones," Violet said, stomping her metal hoof on the ground in anger. "Those bastards snuck right up on us, started attacking Theater. We're lucky it's inside the building, but still a good portion of the entrance has been destroyed. This is all we have to defend at the moment. Danish went to go get Gluttony, try and get us some reinforcements." The flamethrower pony roared in the battle behind us, his weapon searing the outside of the barricade with intense heat.

"Well, we're here to help," I said. "Sorry for not getting back sooner. Had a bit of an out of body experience with Twilight. I'll tell you later about it, after we get out of this frying pan." Violet nodded.

"That flamethrower wielding fuck is getting damn annoying!" A tiny voice shouted. Patch glanced back up at me, grinning wildly as she balanced Para Bellum on her shoulders. "Star! Hey, Steely, Star's back!" I groaned. I was *not* going to get used to that nickname. Steeljack waved, his concentration on the attacking forces. He let loose from behind his cover with a ***crack*** of his rifle, taking down two brahmin with a single shot.

"Where the hell is Nixis?" I said, wondering aloud. Violet grinned.

“Nixis is ensuring the safety of the ponies inside the settlement. He's digging a way for them to get out just in case the Cowpones breach our defenses,” she said. I nodded. It made perfect sense, really. With his eloquence and peaceful manner, I sometimes forgot that my friend was a hellhound, his claws capable of digging even through metal.

“Well, then. Envy, what are you ---?” I started to say before I realized the zebra was missing from my side. She had moved quietly out into the roaring sounds of battle, using her stealth and speed to strike swiftly against all who would have opposed her. “Nevermind, then. I guess I've got the flamer pony then.”

“I'll give you cover. He seems to be the leader here, if you can get him down the rest of them might fall apart,” Violet said. I nodded and threw up my shield spell again. Leaping out from behind the barricade, I charged straight forward into the fray. Two brahmin wielding spiked clubs rushed right at me, and I went to retrieve Star-- uh oh. I forgot I didn't have my weapon! The two brahmin ran right into my shield and began beating on it with their stout clubs.

“Violet!!” I shouted, backpedaling to where she could see me. My love rolled her eyes.

“I sort of figured you'd forget to pick it up!” She called out, floating out my beautiful minigun away from the barricade and right into my magical grasp. I grinned widely as I took control of Stargazer once more. I spun about, the ripping slash of Stargazer's fire music to my ears. First up was the two brahmin that were assaulting my shield. In a flash the two went down, their bloody and broken bodies striking the hard concrete. I was in no mood to pull any punches here. If I didn't, the Cowpones might break through our defenses and breach the settlement. I couldn't let that happen. I rushed forward, nearly running into a blast of fire from the flamer pony. He howled loudly and let out another burst of flame, stopping me dead in my tracks. I grinned, slipping into E.S.A.T.S., hoping that I could see – Yes! I could target the honking huge tank on flamer pony's back. Queuing up every shot I had and hoping for the best, I released the spell. Stargazer released its payload, the bullets slamming into the fuel tank. The tank exploded violently, setting it's wielder on fire. The stallion dropped to the ground, trying to roll around and put out the flames, but to no avail. He stopped moving after a scant few seconds, the residual fires spreading to the surrounding area.

A shot slammed into my rump from behind me, pain shooting through my flank. I growled as I spun about, facing down my next assailant. Several earth ponies with shotguns mounted on battle saddles charged in at me. I sighed, an idea forming in my mind. I latched Stargazer onto its harness and rose on my hind legs, pulling myself into a rearing position. It wasn't perfect, and I knew my form was still off, but I had to keep trying. I pushed off, using my hind legs to lift myself into the air in the center of the three ponies. Landing, I struck out clumsily with my forehoof, catching the one to my right and knocking him out cold.

“Sloppy form, Star!” Envy shouted as she leaped in next to me, catching the stallion behind me in the leg with a slash of her blades before he could get a shot off. “Tighten it up!”

“I'm sorry!” I called back, twirling about on one back hoof. I accidentally caught the other stallion in the side, knocking him over. Envy dropped down to all fours, slashing out and ending the stallion's life quickly and quietly. “I'm trying!! I really am!”

“Not hard enough,” the zebra chided. I sighed. I was still learning, it seemed. The chaos of the battle

exploded around as more of the Cowpones poured into the streets. I growled as we were surrounded on all sides. Gunfire rang through the air. I could see the barricade being attacked again from where we were. Silver fire filled the air, and cracks and retorts from various weapons struck the veritable army that had descended upon it. This wasn't just a siege. It was turning into a slaughter. How many did they have? Where in the hell was Gluttony? I glanced over at Envy.

"What now?" I asked. The zebra shrugged, slipping out her knives.

"Fight. If we die, we die. But we cannot let these bastards kill the good ponies of Theater. They deserve much better than that," she said. I grinned. "It's been quite an honor to fight beside you, Ministry Mare."

"Likewise, Evora," I said, using the mare's original name. She smiled softly. I slipped Stargazer out of its harness and tossed up a shield, hoping to discourage any would be attackers as we tried to make our way back to the barricade. We were getting closer when something really really *big* dropped right in front of us, slamming right into my shield and tossing Envy to the ground a few feet away. "What the...?" I looked up, and my eyes went wide. The creature in front of us was the ugliest thing I had possibly ever seen in my life. Two grotesque cow-like heads jutted out from its massive upright body, and two sets of overly muscled and scarred arms were situated on its sides. Its legs were small, but stout. Its height more than made up for it. It towered over even me. A torn suit jacket with holes cut out for the beast's four arms adorned the creature. The thing's eyes gleamed. It was as if somepony had taken a minotaur and a brahmin and stuffed it together in some unholy matrimony of evil... like a brahmintaur? Everypony and brahmin in the immediate vicinity gave it and us a wide berth.

"So," the left head said, its voice guttural and throaty. "You're that Ministry bitch I keep hearing about on the radio."

"Yeah, the Ministry bitch," the other head said. It sounded... excited and higher pitched. "Can we kill her? Please tell me we can kill her?!"

"Shut the fuck up, wouldja?" The left head replied.

"What... what the fuck are you?" I said. Both heads chuckled loudly.

"I'm the one who's finally gonna take you down," the left head said. "I'm Cow. This is Face." One of the thing's arms pointed at the right head. I blinked.

"You're Cow-Face? The new leader of the Cowpones?" I said, narrowing my gaze. The left head nodded. "What do you want here? These ponies never did anything to you."

"Ohhh boss boss boss!" Face said. "She's pretty, I like her! I wanna fuck her! We can still kill her first, but I'm gonna fuck her, boss!"

"I said shut the fuck up!" Cow shouted. "Sorry, forgive him. Suffice to say, he's not my better half. You wanna know why I'm here? I'm here cuz I'm sick of the MMMM running the show around here. I'm here to shake shit up a bit! You? You're just a bonus."

"I'll stop you. I won't let you hurt anypony," I said angrily. Cow-Face chortled.

“You ain't gonna hurt anyone, today,” Cow snarled. “I didn't think you'd even be here, to be honest. Last I heard on the radio was that you was leaving town.”

“Didn't take. Now then, call off your crew and maybe I'll let you off easily,” I said, lifting Stargazer. The... thing... if that's what you could call it moved faster than I could even blink, its four massive arms slamming out at me and striking me directly in the chest. I hurtled backward in the air, striking the ground with intense force. I groaned, trying to push myself up as I felt the beast upon me before I could even get up. The bottom set of arms grabbed me by my throat, lifting me into the air. The other two arms joined them, wrapping around and squeezing hard. I couldn't see any of the others beyond the massive beast.

“Yeah!! Kill her kill her kill her!” Face crowed. I struggled, trying to breath and stay conscious. “Strangle the life outta her!!”

“You know... for once... I have to agree with him. Goodbye, Ministry bitch,” Cow said, grinning. Face kept going on in the background.

“And when you're done with her, fuck her liver! Better yet, let me fuck her liver! Come on, Cow, you gotta let me fuck that shit when she's dead, it'll be fucking awesome!” The right head of the creature shouted. Cow's expression turned to that of disgust.

“Really? You're fucked in the head, you know that Face?” The left head replied. Face chuckled loudly, his eyes crazed and wild. I could feel my eyes starting to go black. I didn't have much time. I tried to flare my horn, but nothing happened. Was this how I would die? I couldn't... I couldn't go yet. I had to stop Spark still! I kept flopping from side to side, trying to break free, but his grip was just too strong.

Then I suddenly had breath and I was on the ground. Cow-Face had leaped back as an even larger creature slammed down in front of me. I coughed violently. I looked up to see who had saved me. A massive earth pony stood over me. His dark eyes glanced down and a smile came from his face.

“You alright?” Gluttony said. I nodded, pushing myself up shakily. The soft amber glow of magic assisted me and I glanced over, seeing Danish next to me. I smiled in gratitude. The MMMM's leader turned back to the leader of the Cowpones. “So... you're that new asshole running the Cowpones. Cow-Face, right? What makes you think you have the right to come into Theater and shit in my playground, huh?!”

“Oooh, he's huge! Let's rip him open, Cow, I bet he's got huge guts!” Face erupted. The left head nodded and grinned.

“And you're the big bad of the MMMM. Word is on the streets, you've gone soft,” he replied. “I think we'll tear you open to see just how soft that is.” The four-armed monstrosity rushed forward, striking at Gluttony before he could move. The earth pony growled loudly as he fell backwards, nearly toppling over me. Cow-Face wasted no time, hammering at the side of the MMMM leader with vicious strikes. Gluttony rolled over, turning his size into an advantage to toss the brahmintaur away from him. Cow-Face landed easily, using his bottom arms to cushion his blow. Danish grabbed onto me.

“We'd better make tracks, sweetheart. This could get real dangerous for us,” he said. I shook my head.

“No, you go. I need to help Gluttony,” I said.

“Don't be stupid, Star. This is a battle between them,” the cream-colored unicorn replied. I looked over at the two combatants. They were busy trading blows with one another. Despite Gluttony's size, strength, and speed, he wasn't doing so well. It was easy to see how the brahmintaur had caught me off guard. Cow-Face was elemental, Face's screams seeming to goad the composite creature to new heights of rage and fury.

“No. I need to stay,” I said finally. “If I don't... I'm afraid of what might happen. Get to Evora. See if she's okay,. We might need her help.” Danish sighed.

“Fine, fine. But don't come hauntin' me when you're dead,” he said. “Just... be careful wouldja?”

“You know it, Danish. Thanks,” I said, pulling myself off the ground. Danish disappeared into the chaos of the battle, headed in the direction Envy had been thrown to. I spun about, gazing upon the titanic conflict in front of me. I lifted Stargazer up without thinking and leaped into action, spraying a line of bullets at the four-armed creature. Cow-Face snarled as he jumped back to avoid the fire, giving Gluttony time to refocus himself.

“Two against one? Hardly seems fair,” Cow snorted. Face's... err... face lit up and he began to cackle madly.

“Yeah, fair! For you! Hardly seems fair for you! You stupid fucks! We're gonna come over there and rip your skin from your bone and wear that shit as a fancy hat! That's right! And then I'm gonna pose your skeletons and make you bone each other! Geddit! Bone, skeleton! Oh fuck you, that was funny!” The right head spouted. I could see why Cow kept telling him to shut up. I honestly couldn't imagine what it must be like to live with that sort of psycho.

“Gluttony! Are you alright?” I called to the massive earth pony.

“I've been better. I do appreciate the assistance,” he replied. “You try to disable him. I'll put both his heads six feet under, starting with that annoying right head.”

“You got it,” I shouted, pulling up Stargazer again. I slipped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots that were intended to strike at non-fatal parts of his body. I wanted to disable him, not make ground brahmintaur. I released the spell and fired. The minigun spun into action, several of the shots missing but the few that counted hitting the brahmintaur in his arms and legs. Howling in pain, Cow-Face charged forward, aiming right at me. He was deadly close when Gluttony interposed himself between us.

“You're fighting me, remember?” Gluttony said, striking out at the brahmintaur. Cow-Face parried the blow, bringing his lower set of arms in for a brutal thrust that struck the earth pony in his chest. Gluttony roared in pain, trying to scramble backwards to put some distance between him and the Cowpones leader. Cow-Face pushed off from the ground, launching himself at Gluttony, grabbing onto his neck with all four of his powerfully built arms and squeezing.

“Fuck yeah!! Squeeze the shit out of that fat fucker!” Face crowed. “Squeeze him until his shit comes squirting out!”

“Kind of gross, Face,” Cow said, grinning. “But I will most certainly comply. It's time for your reign

to be over, MMMM fucker.” The brahmintaur squeezed harder, but Gluttony merely grinned as his hooves came up, knocking loose Cow-Face’s grip. Gluttony pushed out with his forehooves, tossing the four-armed beast to the ground. Gluttony stomped forward, the earth shaking underneath his hooves as Cow-Face pulled himself up.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily, freak!” Gluttony shouted, putting his oversized shoulder right into the brahmintaur’s twin faces. Cow-Face grunted, taking the brunt of the blow before pushing back with his powerfully built arms. The brahmintaur battered at the leader of the MMMM, each strike knocking the earth pony back until the two were at a distance from each other.

“You’re strong, I’ll give you that,” Cow said, trying to catch his breath. Gluttony began to snarl a response, only to be interrupted by Face’s triumphant cry. “No fucker’s stronger than Cow-Face!”

“I’ll show you strength, you freaky deaky son of a bitch,” Gluttony said, stomping his forehoof and causing a shockwave that sent the brahmintaur soaring through the air. The beast struck an overturned trash bin, smashing it to pieces as he continued through it and to the hard concrete. Cow-Face stood, setting himself for a charge.

“Oh no you don’t,” the massive earth pony said, slamming forward with a hoof strike that knocked the brahmintaur back to the ground. “Now you’re mine!” Gluttony reared up, intending on bringing down his giant forehooves on the creature below him. They came down, stopped only by Cow-Face’s four rippling arms. The brahmintaur thing sneered with both faces.

“Nice try, but no,” he said, lifting the earth pony’s hooves off of him. Cow-Face straightened his arms out, holding Gluttony at full extension. His faces alight with rage over clenched teeth, the massive bipedal monster shouted in effort and flung Gluttony off of him. Gluttony cartwheeled across the concrete, smashing back first into a nearby building. The ground shuddered below our feet as he struck. Cow-Face stood, the left head grinning widely at me. “Now then, where were we?”

“We were just about to cut her open and fuck her liver, boss man,” Face said, chortling. “Cut her up! Fuck her up! Cut her fuck! F ---” Cow headbutted himself, silencing Face instantly.

“For the last time, would you shut the fuck up, you moron? Sheesh! Is that all you ever think about?!” He shouted. I charged forward, trying to use this opportunity to strike while I had the chance. Whipping Stargazer about, I slammed the butt of the gun into the brahmintaur’s gut, knocking him back. Catching his breath, both heads snarled as the brahmintaur’s powerful arms reached out and grabbed onto Stargazer. I struggled to keep hold of the weapon with my magic, but his grasp was strong and I could feel my control slipping. How strong was this thing? He looked like he’d barely taken a beating from Gluttony and still had plenty of juice to drop him into a building. Danish was right. This was way out of my league. But I didn’t have a choice now. I had to stop this thing before it and its cronies could breach Theater. I had to save ponies, not let them die. I had to be better. I just had to.

“LET GO OF MY GUN!!” I shouted, filtering my magic into my voice to act as a shockwave, hoping that a kiss of the Royal Canterlot Voice would get him to loosen his grip. For a split second Cow-Face startled, all four of his ears pinning back. I took the opening and acted, ripping the minigun away with a blast of telekinesis. Cow-Face dropped back and I did as well, hoping to put some distance between us.

“Feisty. I like it,” Cow said. “But take a look, Ministry bitch. You've spent so much time fighting me, you forgot that your friends are going to die by my gang.” I shot a glance back at the barricade. The ponies there were still fighting but it was becoming harder and harder to see them amidst the chaos and carnage of the battle. I turned back around, looking past the brahmintaur, chuckling softly.

“No. They won't. My friends are a lot stronger than you think they are, Cow-Face. If there's anything I've learned...” I said, lifting Stargazer into the air as I spoke. “It's that you can never, **EVER**, underestimate the power of good friends!” A roar from behind the four-armed beast grabbed his attention. Gluttony charged at the brahmintaur with a ferocity I was quite sure that I was happy to not be on the receiving end of. He struck Cow-Face like a freight train, using all of his momentum to push the beast into the air. The massive earth pony lashed out, bringing his hoof across the brahmintaur's midsection and slamming him back into the concrete. One of the heads coughed, blood spewing forth from its mouth.

“I told you, stupid fuck. This is my playground. And I'm the king of the sand castle!” Gluttony erupted as he stood over the brahmintaur. “And now I'm going to end you!” The gigantic pony brought his forehooves down in a spectacular hoof slam, striking the four-armed creature with a force and intensity the likes no pony had ever seen before. I heard a ***snap*** as bones broke and muscles ripped apart. Gluttony's massive weight and power had punched his forehooves completely through Cow-Face, crushing his lower shoulders like melons. Gluttony gave no quarter to this monster, and he deserved it. As he pounded Cow-Face into jelly, Gluttony roared loudly in triumph, stopping the siege instantly. Brahmin and ponies alike halted in their fights, looking up at the massive earth pony with fear and awe in their eyes. Gluttony stared back, puffing out his chest as he shouted. “Alright, listen up you stupid Cowpone sons of bitches! You want a piece of the MMMM, you gotta go through me first. Now who wants a piece of my fucking cake?!” He stomped a hoof, the impact of which caused a small earth tremor.

Panic ensued. The army of the Cowpones fell apart before the power and ferocity of leader of the MMMM. They fled from the settlement as fast as their terrified legs would carry them. Gluttony stood triumphant in the center of the square, letting them go. With the head cut off, he didn't need to do anything further. The fleeing Cowpones kept shooting looks at the destroyed corpse of their boss. I glanced down at the body of the brahmintaur, myself. He was still twitching, his body broken and bloody. I stepped up, noting that the head that belonged to Face lay limply off to the side, blood streaming from its dead eyes. Cow's head shook as he looked up at me.

“Fuck... you...” he said, before his eyes went dark and his head dropped as well. I sighed. Some things in the Wasteland just lived for death, I supposed. I lifted my eyes to Gluttony.

“Thank you for the help,” I said. “I think I owe you one.” The earth pony grinned.

“Nah. I owe you a lot more, Radiant Star. More than you'll ever know. You're a friend. And as of today, you and yours are officially honorary members of the MMMM. As you can see - as you *do*, we protect our own,” he said. I smiled as I joined him in the walk back towards Theater. The outer walls of the settlement had taken a massive beating, but in time, the ponies living there would recover much better than if they had been overrun by Cowpones. A flash of green ran towards me as Violet hopped into my embrace.

“You're alright!” She said, tears welling up into her eyes. I nuzzled her close and grinned.

“Was there ever any doubt?” I said. “Okay, that sounded bad. Sorry, won't ever do that again.” Violet snickered. “Say... did anypony see what happened to Evora?”

“I'm right here,” a voice in my ear said. I flipped out of my skin and jumped five feet into the air away from the zebra mare, who had somehow managed to sneak up on me once again. “You're still not perfect at it, but I believe you are ready to continue your studies without me, Star.”

“I... I'll try, Evora. I don't know if I will ever get good enough at all of this, but I will try as hard as I can,” I said. “When this is all over, we'll have to spar again sometime.”

“I'd like that,” Evora said. She looked up at Gluttony. “It is good to see you again, Grenadine. I would stay, but there are things I must attend to.” The earth pony nodded.

“And you, Evora. Before you go, though,” Gluttony said, plopping to his haunches, taking one of the forehooves in both of his own. “With Pride -- I mean Diamond -- out of the picture, us Sins have to stick together. Don't be a stranger, if you need help, or just need a friend - come see me.” The zebra smiled, leaning forward to put a peck of a kiss on Gluttony's forehead before bounding off into the night. There was a smile on her face as she disappeared into the depths of Chicacolt. I looked down at Violet and back up at Theater.

“It seems like trouble always seems to follow us, doesn't it?” I said as we trudged back toward the settlement. Gluttony walked beside us to where Danish and the others waited. Danish had a grim look on his face.

“Darlin', we've got a big problem,” he said. I put a hoof up, stopping him.

“Please, I think I know. You can't send anypony with us to Arlington, right?” I said. Danish nodded. I sighed. “I understand. It's alright. I sort of figured that with everything going on, you'd need every available pony you could get.”

“I'm sorry, darlin',” he said. “I wish we could help you. Between this attack, and what happened with the Lotus Triad, it's gonna take some time for the MMMM to rebuild.”

“It's going to be all hooves on deck here for quite a while, Radiant Star. There's just no way we can spare the ponies to back your play in Arlington,” Gluttony added, scowling at Danish. The cream unicorn stood fast under his boss' disapproval, and I nudged Gluttony as I stepped up to Danish.

“No worries, my friends. I know that this must be hard on you,” I said, smiling at the cream-colored unicorn. “On that note, it's late, and I'm quite tired. We should make preparations to leave first thing in the morning.” The others nodded and we trotted inside the settlement. The ponies of Theater were filtering back into their homes and shops. I waved at Nixis, who was busy helping the MMMM ponies with the refugees. Making our way to our room, I flopped down on the mattress and closed my eyes. Every part of my body ached and I groaned as Violet lay down next to me.

“Star? You alright?” She said softly. I rolled over and looked at her, smiling.

“Yeah... just thinking,” I said. “This night really got a little crazy on us. I was... I was scared you all were going to be fine, even though I knew in my heart that you would be.”

“Oh, Star,” Violet replied, stroking my mane with her hoof. “Just rest, okay? One more night, and we'll be on our way to Arlington, and everything will be alright.”

“I sure hope so, Violet. I sure hope so.”

My eyes fluttered open and I yawned. Soft light filtered into our room as I snuggled in closer to Violet, who had taken to curling herself up next to me. She awoke shortly after, and I smiled as we rose to meet the new day together. I began packing my things, knowing that this would be the last time I would see this place for a long time. The others were awake now too, and had begun packing up their saddlebags. When everypony was finally ready, we made our way down to the main part of Theater.

The destruction of the night before had certainly taken its toll on the ponies living there. Many of the shops near the front of the settlement had been completely decimated in the first wave of the attack, and the wall and doors were scorched black from the fires. Still, life went on. The ponies of the settlement had hunkered down and were starting to rebuild. I smiled at the progress of it all. Danish awaited us at the entrance, Lilith standing next to him. The two were talking softly amongst themselves. They glanced up at us and nodded as we trotted up.

“Star,” Danish said. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“For now, my friend. For now,” I said, hanging my head. “I promise you, Danish. Someday, I will return.” I glanced over at Lilith. “And what about you, Lilith? Are you staying here?” The black mare smiled brightly.

“We... we discussed it, and I want to go with you, if you'll have me,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I asked. She nodded.

“I want to help you find Spark. I want to make sure that Diamond, Cutter, and Cranky... that their deaths weren't for nothing,” she said. I smiled.

“Well... alright,” I said. “We could use the help from another flier, and you've already proven yourself on more than one occasion.” Lilith nodded and picked up her saddlebags.

“Shall we?” She said, trotting past Danish, who nipped at her flank as she passed. Lilith shot him a look that made him blush to the tips of his ears. Shaking his head, Danish focused a more sober look on me.

“Be careful out there,” he said. “I'd hate to hafta come and save your ass again.”

“Don't worry,” I said, waving a hoof. “Grey Knight will have the situation scoped out, we'll be fine.”

“Besides, I get to save her ass first,” Violet interjected, prompting a laugh from Danish. We bid him and the rest of Theater goodbye and stepped out into the morning air. The scorched and blasted ruin of the street greeted us, the stench of death heavy. Still, despite all that had happened here, I knew things could get better. Maybe, just maybe... these ponies of the MMMM were what this city needed. They could make the world, or at the very least Chicacolt, a better place, one pony at a time.

We trotted along the streets, heading south towards the border of the city. Time seemed to drift away as we traveled. Steeljack and Patch walked closely together and I couldn't help but think that their experiences in this city had brought them closer than ever. Nixis loped alongside myself and Violet while Lilith lazily flapped her wings in the air above us. Grinning, I put on the radio, curious what the Minotaur had to say about the battle last night, if anything. We were greeted by the smooth rock beats of the station's music instead. After the song finished, however, the brash and loud voice of the DJ hit the airwaves.

“MOOOOOOOO YEAH!!! That's right, kids. It is time again for the 'Morning Moo Madhouse' with your host with the mostest, the ONE, the ONLY, the MINOTAUR!!!

That's right kids, it's time again for some news!

It seems that the Cowpones thought that the time was right to make a big strike against the MMMM settlement of Theater, but the baking ponies said NUH UH, GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! Not only that, the infamous leader of the brahmin gang, known only as 'Cow-Face', made his first and last appearance, thanks to the combined efforts of the MMMM and none other than the Ministry Mare who was staying at the settlement. Fuck yeah, Ministry Mare! Way to support the good ponies and fight the good fight!

Now... it's time for your old pal the Minotaur to get a little serious.

My eye in the sky tells me that our city's new protector is on her way out. You see, kids... There's a big bad juju going on out there, and our friend the Ministry Mare has to go and take care of it. But life in our little hole of the Wasteland goes on! Out there every day are ponies who fight the good fight, who bring light to others. Treat each other well Wastelanders, and always make sure your guns are loaded and your friends nearby.

You never know when you might need both. ”

I smiled, and clicked the radio off. I knew deep down that somehow, I'd done some good here in this crazy little place called Chicacolt. But the Minotaur was right about one thing. Spark was out there, and I needed to find and save her. I thought about Diamond, Cranky, Lucky, and all the others whose lives I had come into contact with in my time here. I would do this for them, and do exactly what the Minotaur said. I was going to fight the good fight. To bring a little light to those around me, or die trying.

A flash on my E.F.S. caught my attention as Violet nudged me on the shoulder and pointed off in the distance. I glanced over in the direction of it, and my eyes widened. In the dim light that was overshadowed by the massive buildings around us, I could have sworn I saw two pairs of smoldering red eyes. I blinked, and they were gone, along with the flashes on my E.F.S. I looked down at Violet.

“Do you think...?” I said softly.

“I don't... I don't know...” she replied. I sighed. For a moment, I thought had seen Cranky... maybe we were just seeing things. Or maybe he and Matilda had survived, I didn't really know for sure. If he did, why didn't he approach us? Or maybe that was his way of saying good bye, and thank you.

We kept walking, the city's border and noon arriving at the same time. I looked back at the broken city and smiled. We were leaving, yes. But not for forever. I promised silently to myself, and to everypony there who needed it, that I'd be back someday, to help, to live, and to forgive. I glanced back at my friends, who were waiting expectantly for me. Into the Wasteland we trudged as the skies began to darken and clouds rumbled in. Rain fell as we walked, pattering lightly against our coats. I checked my PipBuck, it looked like we would reach Arlington in the late evening. I hoped that Grey Knight had been able to keep an eye on things before we could get there. The stallion was strange, but I knew in my heart that his head was in the right place. He wanted to fight the good fight too. And I knew for sure that I certainly needed more ponies like that in my life.

Hours passed and we finally came over the ridge that led down into the valley that oversaw the tribal village of Arlington. A flash of red and silver caught my eye. Grey Knight was standing at the top of the ridge, looking down into the valley. I trotted up behind him, and he looked back down at me. There were tears in his eyes.

"Too late," he said softly, turning his head back down to the valley below. I stepped up next to him and my eyes widened as a soft gasp let loose from my throat.

Arlington was burning.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached

Skill Upgrades: Unarmed Skill +30, Sneak +10

New Spell! Gravitron (Rank 3): You can now cast this on other ponies and in combat! Scary!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

All Characters: You are now official members of the MMMM! Now you just gotta learn how to bake...

Chapter 23: For Honor and Glory

No, Spike. They're not who they are meant to be anymore. Their destinies are now changed, and it's all my fault.

Honor. When ponies say they fight for honor, what are they really fighting for? I believe that when a pony fights for honor, they're fighting for others. They're fighting for those who can't fight themselves. But what if a pony is fighting for glory, instead? Well... that pony is fighting for purely selfish reasons. They fight for their own, not even bothering to acknowledge the existence of the ponies they deem beneath them. They prefer to be exalted for their actions, not humbled.

I often wonder what the ponies of the past fought for. Did they fight for honor, or for glory? Or some strange combination of both? Did they intend for generations later to revere their actions, no matter how bad they were? Or did they not even care? Sometimes... I wish I knew.

And what about myself, what am I fighting for? Am I purely selfish, seeking only to return myself to a normal state of mind and body? Or am I fighting for the ponies of the Wasteland, no matter how poor or hurt they are?

I'd like to think it's the latter.

The fires in the valley below had ravaged the town completely. Buildings were blackened and charred, the ground burned dark under the hellish fury of the flames. My eyes narrowed as I scanned the valley. I could make out very few bodies amidst the wreckage. Where was everypony? What happened here? Where were the Rangers? I growled under my breath as I tried to process what was happening.

"Where are the Steel Rangers now, Grey?" I said quietly. The stallion standing next to me looked up, clearing his tears with a single swipe of his armored hoof.

"I arrived here yesterday," the white pony replied. "The town was attacked last night, the vile Rangers used some sort of large robot to completely decimate the folk and smallholders. Three of their number opposed me, but I was triumphant and... Withdrew from the field. The Rangers withdrew shortly after the attack. Almost as if they were looking for something but didn't find it."

"I... see," I said, looking back at Violet. She had a horrified expression on her face. I stomped a hoof, getting her attention. "Violet, this isn't your fault. Do not even think it." She glanced up, a hint of tears forming in her eyes.

"But... I made the deal with them," she said.

"Yes, and *they* broke it," I replied. "What happened, happened, and now we just need to deal with it."

"What deal is thine friend speaking of?" Grey interjected. I glared at the white stallion.

"A deal with the Steel Rangers," I said. "We made a deal with them to leave this place alone before we entered Chicacolt." I could see my words troubled the stallion, but I didn't care. I was too pissed off to care.

"Thou made a deal with those vile creatures?" Grey responded, his face a mixture of confusion and disgust. "Why?"

"Because that's how the Wasteland works, Grey," I said angrily. "Or haven't you noticed by now? Moral ambiguity is the defining factor of this place. It doesn't care how good or bad you are, or how you live your life. It'll kill you either way." Grey grew quiet, processing my reply. He looked up at me and grinned.

"I can see that thou has much to learn, good Squire. It is not the land that defines a pony's morals. It is the pony that defines the land," he said. He turned away and looked back down at the burning valley. My eye twitched. *What the hell does he mean, 'Squire'????* I screamed in the back of my mind. I started to speak, but stopped when several flashes of red appeared in my E.F.S.

“Shit, we've got company,” I said, pulling out Stargazer. “And not the good kind either.” The sharp retort of gunfire answered my warning, striking the rocks nearby. Violet floated out Thunder Flash, shooting off a blast of silver fire in the direction the gunfire came from. I snarled as a contingent of no less than ten Steel Rangers came into view. Several of them carried battle saddle mounted heavy anti-machine rifles.

“Halt!” One of them shouted, taking aim with his rifle and firing. The bullet tore through the air, headed right towards Patch. I growled, throwing up my alicorn shield, deflecting it back into the earth. The ground smoked from where the bullet struck. I lifted Stargazer and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up as many shots as I possibly could. Time slowly resumed, my minigun unleashing hell upon several of the anti-machine rangers. Metal splashed on metal as each round slammed home. Three of the rangers dropped to the ground, calling out in pain. Two of them rushed forward, letting loose with their assault rifles.

“Fan out, and take out as many as possible!” I called out. Steeljack and Patch grinned widely as the two moved forward, working as one. Their shots struck true, but did very little in the way of lasting damage to the armored ponies. Nixis leaped into action on my other side, followed by Grey Knight. The white stallion carried some strange looking sword-like weapon in his teeth, the blade humming with pulsing blue energy. He reached his first target, a shotgun wielding ranger, and thrust forward with the tip of the weapon. The bladed appendage hit the ranger hard, forcing its way through the armor and right through the other side of the pony. Grey withdrew, dropping the ranger to the ground. They didn't get back up. Nixis slashed the nearest ranger to him, his claws cutting through the armor like a thick butter.

Several shots from an assault rifle came slamming home into my flank, the pain ripping through me like wildfire. I spun about, spraying a line of bullets in the direction the gunfire had come from. The Steel Ranger that had been attacking me dropped as Stargazer rendered his legs unusable. I glanced back at my flank. Pain spiked as a green glow flared inside the wound, and I had just enough time to panic before the bullet popped out of the hole. Violet's magic dropped the spent round and soaked into my hide, cutting off the bleeding and knitting the flesh together. Violet's horn glowed softly, and I smiled.

“Thanks,” I said. My lover nodded, lifting Thunder Flash and tossing more silver fire in the direction of two oncoming rangers. A glance at my E.F.S. revealed what I had dreaded. There were far more Steel Rangers than we could possibly handle. We needed to retreat and find someplace to hide. I knew that one of these rangers had already alerted Cotton Candy to our presence, and I wondered when this supposed robot that they had would show its face. I wasn't about to hang around and wait. We were caught off guard and even I knew when to run. I glanced over at the others, shouting to get their attention. “Fall back! Everypony, fall back!” Steeljack and Patch pulled away from their last opponent, supporting each other as they limped back towards me. Each one of them showed various bullet burns and in Steeljack's case several holes in his power armor. I grabbed onto them with my magic and began to carry them along, the familiar tickle of pain rolling into the base of my horn as I started running. Chaos reigned as we tried to escape from the Rangers.

“Over here!” I heard a voice cry through the carnage. I glanced over to see a head poking out from underneath a set of rocks. It was a white mare, her face twisted in fear and concern. It was Nurse Care! She was frantically motioning for us to move to her. I turned to the right, charging across the field towards the white mare. She was still shouting, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. The others were behind me, panting hard. We were starting to drag, and I could feel it in my bones. My horn screamed in pain and I did all I could to let down Steeljack and Patch easy before it flickered out, dropping the two earth ponies to the ground. I stopped and turned back to them. Violet trotted up, helping me to get our two friends up and running again.

“Watch out!” Nurse Care shouted. I looked up to see a glint of metal soaring through the air. My eyes widened.

“Grenade!” I screamed. I tried to reach out with my magic but the pain was too much. My horn flickered and the light around it died just as quickly as it had appeared. The silvery apple struck the ground and exploded, spraying shrapnel everywhere. I hit the ground hard, howling as I felt several pieces pierce my legs. A pair of hooves wrapped around me and began to drag me forward. I groaned, my vision blurred from the pain. I could feel the blood pouring from my sides where the shrapnel had dug in.

“Shit, you're heavy,” a voice from above me said. It was Nurse Care. Was she dragging me? I tried to mumble something about how I wasn't fat, but it only came out as babbling.

“Star, just hang on, you're gonna be alright,” I heard Lilith say. A loud slamming noise struck my ears and my eyes could only see black. A bottle forced itself between my lips and I felt the healing potion slide down my throat. I sighed as my vision began to return. A short jab of a needle hit my flank and I glanced back. A white mare knelt behind me, working diligently on where the shrapnel had dug in. Nurse Care looked up at me apprehensively, but she was smiling.

“Well, Ministry Mare, I'd be lying if I said you weren't a sight for sore eyes,” she said. I rubbed the side of my head as she finished digging the shrapnel out of my wounds. I felt the cold magic of a healing bandage slapped onto my flank. My eyes widened as I remembered the others.

“Violet? The others?” I said. Care smiled.

“They're just fine, if you'll see,” she replied, pointing behind me. I glanced back, seeing Violet and Lilith sitting with Steeljack and Patch. They were helping the stallion out of his power armor and patching up the two earth pony's wounds. Nixis and Grey Knight stood off to the side. The sounds of more explosions rang in my ears, even muffled by the walls of this hidey hole. Dust shook from the metal ceiling, but we appeared to be safe for the time being.

“Where are we?” I asked. Nurse Care placed a hoof to my lips.

“We're safe, but we need to keep moving. I don't know how long it will take the Rangers to find this tunnel, but when they do the others have orders to collapse it. At the end of this tunnel is the Stable,” she rattled on, motioning for us to follow her.

“Stable?” I said, cocking my head as we moved to follow the white mare. “What Stable?” Nurse Care chuckled.

“I forgot, you've been gone for awhile,” she said. “A few weeks ago, we received a message from that fuck Cotton Candy. He wanted us to clear out or die where we stood. We didn't know why, until one of our own found a tunnel. It led down to the entrance of a Stable of all things.”

“So that's why the Steel Rangers wanted this place so bad?” I asked. Care nodded. A large metal door came into view at the far end of the tunnel. Two tribal ponies were guarding it. “So you guys survived the town burning?”

“You got that right, sugar. We knew it was only a matter of time before the Rangers came. So we moved in and locked it up tight. Been hiding down here for a week now,” she said. “But our resources are running thin, and the Rangers are getting closer to the location of the main entrance. Before long they're going to get in, and that damned robot of theirs will lead the way.” The two guards opened the door and we trotted inside. The walls looked just like every other Stable I'd ever been in, drab and gray,

I was worried about going into another Stable so soon after 180, but this place was completely different in feel. The lights were bright and constant, and ponies crossed our path on their errands, nodding to us as they went.

Nurse Care led us through the halls until we found ourselves in the Atrium. I was surprised at how small this particular Stable was. It seemed like we only walked moments to get there. The tribals, at least what was left of them, had gathered in the open area. A few of them smiled and waved.

“So what's this about a robot?” Patch piped up. She winced in pain but continued on. “Grey said that there was a big robot.”

“It's been a huge fucking problem. Every time we've tried to find a way to escape them, that thing has been there. Too many have been lost already,” Care replied as she led us down another hall away from the Atrium and towards where the signs said the Infirmary was. “It's apparently something that's pre-war, but other than that I don't know much more about it.” The Infirmary was bare, what cabinets there were had been scavenged by the tribals. Care pulled out a few healing potions out of one of the drawers and handed them to Steeljack and Patch. The two drank down heartily, immediately looking much better. I groaned as I plopped

to the ground. The others moved into the small room, finding someplace to sit as well. Violet leaned up against me, sighing.

"I just... I feel terrible about this, Care," I said after a few moments of silence. I glanced up at the white mare.

"Why's that, sugar?" She asked.

"Because, we didn't get here in time..." I said quietly. Nurse Care narrowed her eyes at me.

"Now, don't you dare tell me it's your fault. No pony knew this place was down here until we found it by accident. You didn't even know it existed until Grey here caught up with you," she said, motioning at the white stallion. Grey nodded. "It's not your fault. Those fuckers were going to come here anyways. It was just a matter of time."

"But..." I started to say. Care raised a hoof.

"But nothing, Star. You helped this town out more than you hurt it. Without you going and getting those medical supplies for us, we wouldn't have lasted two weeks. You bought us the time we needed, a second chance," she said. "Now. I want you all to rest for a bit. You're all in bad shape, and you almost bit the dust out there, Star. You're lucky I'm a good doctor."

"What about the Rangers?" I asked. Care smiled.

"I wouldn't worry about them right now," she said, holding up a hoof. "Rest. Recuperate. We'll come up with a plan to get out of here then."

"Thou wants to leave?" Grey interjected. "But that is... unfair. Thou should not have to leave thine home because of these vile creatures."

"I wish I could agree with you, Grey, but we have no choice. Those Rangers are coming in, whether we like it or not, and I'd rather not be here when they do," Care said.

"Well... then we'll take care of them," I said. "We'll make them wish they hadn't come here."

"Star... that's crazy and you know it. You saw for yourself. They're organized and deadly. No matter how good you are, you won't stand a chance," Nurse Care said angrily.

"She has a point, Star," Lilith said. "We barely scraped by out there. Even old Nixis over there was having trouble with those Rangers." The hellhound nodded in response.

"Then we get organized too," I said. "This place has an armory right? We can use what we have available to us and get together a counterstrike."

"And what about the robot? What if it shows up?" Care said.

"I... may have an idea there," Patch said. "If I can get close enough to it, I might be able to reprogram it. I don't know much about robots, but if they're anything like small terminals and computers I could give it a shot."

"I'm in," Steeljack said softly. "But I agree with Star, we need to stock up in the armory. The better our firepower, the better our chances."

"I'm with Star, to the end," Violet said, her eyes narrowing at the doctor. "Besides... I owe you too. I made the deal with those fuckers, and I intend to make good on my promise to keep your town safe."

"Mine Squire is learning, you see Nurse Care. She knows that these Rangers will not stop until thou are all dead. Mine lance and sword are ready for battle," Grey Knight said. My eye twitched at this. What was up with this whole squire thing?! I made a mental note to ask him about it later, but instead looked over at Lilith and Nixis.

"What about you two?" I said. Lilith grinned.

"I didn't say I was out," she replied. "I can beat up some Steel Ranger assholes any day."

"You know my answer already, Star," Nixis said. Nurse Care rolled her eyes.

"Crazy. You're all crazy," she said, holding up her hooves. "But... if you really want to do this, fine. The armory has been sealed since we got here. We're not sure how to get in, so if you can get the door open, feel free to have whatever is inside." I grinned widely.

"You're in luck then, I just so happen to specialize in *breaking* locks," I said.

"Well... that's... definitely locked," I said, looking at the sealed armory doors and groaning. The massive doors appeared to be made of a very thick steel, and as hard as I had tried to force them open with my magic, they weren't budging. I growled under my breath, igniting my horn again and latching onto the metal.

"Maybe we should try the terminal, sweetie," Violet said, pointing at the screen attached to the door. I groaned.

"Alright, fine..." I said, feeling defeated as I let my magic drop. My love stepped up to the terminal, hooking her PipBuck up to it. I sat down next to her, rubbing my aching horn and watching her work. Patch and Lilith had opted to come with us, the others staying behind to rest. I hadn't let myself get too much relaxation. I wanted to get back out and take care of the Rangers. I owed it to Nurse Care and the rest of the townsfolk of Arlington. Patch and Violet tapped at the keyboard, both of them grimacing.

"The security on this thing is locked down pretty tight," Patch said. "Whatever is in this place, they sure as hell didn't make it easy." The mare looked back at Nurse Care, who was standing back down the hall next to Lilith. "And you said you couldn't find any way to open this in the Overmare's office?"

"Nothing. We searched all over the terminals, but absolutely nothing," Care said. "It's almost like they wanted this to be sealed even from the Stable ponies... wherever they went to."

"There weren't any bones, or bodies?" I said, cocking my head. Care shook her head.

"Nothing. Place was clear. The information on the Overmare's terminal was even more vague," the white mare replied. "So many of the files on the terminals were corrupted or deleted."

"I see," I said, looking back at Violet. "Any luck finding anything?"

"There's references to something, but everytime I try a password it tells me it's denied," my love said, tapping in another set of keywords. The terminal flashed red. "Shit! Now it's locked out. Looks like we're not getting in any time soon."

"Great," I groused. "I wonder what's inside, that they locked it up like this." Violet shrugged, disconnecting her PipBuck. The terminal suddenly lit up green.

"Well, now that's odd. It was just locked out a second ago. It's back on now." Violet grimaced and reconnected the PipBuck. The screen flashed red again. "What the...?" My marefriend disconnected the PipBuck again and the terminal went back to its normal state. "Star, give me your hoof. I want to try your PipBuck." I complied and my own device was connected to the terminal. Surprisingly, the screen stayed green.

"Is that... good?" I said. Violet grinned.

"It's... perfect. Apparently this terminal is set to lock out a specific PipBuck after too many attempts at a password, but if you hook another one up you can use it. I bet they did it like that to make it so ponies could still get in if somepony messed up the password," she said.

"So there's still a chance?" I said hopefully.

"Not much of one, but it's better than no chance," Patch said. "We still don't know how to crack the encryption, though." The green mare tapped a key and her eyes lit up. "Wait... we're thinking about this the wrong way here. The encryption is tough, no doubt about that. But instead of trying to break it, let's see if we can't find the right key."

"And how do we do that?" I asked. "I thought that's what we were trying to do...?"

“Yes... sort of,” Patch continued. “Violet, are there any programs on there that are accessible without a password?”

“I... I didn't think to check,” Violet replied. She tapped a key, bypassing the login prompt on the terminal. “Huh... there is. Just one, though. It says 'Games'.”

“Click it. I bet that it's the right way in,” Patch said. Violet clicked the icon, and what appeared to be a series of foals games appeared on the screen. They were even complete with a bouncy purple pony character that spouted silly catchphrases. I was somewhat surprised that the character wasn't Pinkie Pie. These kinds of games seemed to be her thing.

“Are you... sure about this?” I said looking at the current game, where the player was supposed to match up face down cards from memory.

“Absolutely,” Patch said. “Why else would there be this sort of program on here?” I nodded. It made sense. There was no practical reason for a door terminal to have foal's games on it. It had to be a part of the door lock.

“Alright then, how do we beat it then?” I said.

“Well... if it's anything like the foal games we used to have on our old computer, this should be a breeze,” Patch said. “Let me sit down here and I'll see if I can take a stab at it.” Violet shuffled over, letting the green earth pony at the keyboard. Patch began to tap and click, playing along with the card-matching game. “It looks like I've got three errors before the game restarts itself. So... let's see...” The screen lit up and showed her where all the cards were initially. She clicked two cards, coming up with a match. The bouncy purple pony on the screen cried out in glee as Patch continued on, tagging card after card. The green mare moved with inequine speed, progressing through the game easily. The screen lit up with confetti and fireworks when she clicked the last card pair. The terminal went dark as soon as the game finished.

“Well, did it work then?” I said, cocking my head. Before I could say anything else a loud clicking sound interrupted me. The door began to hiss and whirl, sliding forward and opening. Patch cried out triumphantly as she stepped out of the chair.

“See? Told you we just didn't have the right key,” she said, grinning. “Now let's see what the heck was so important they stuffed it away in here.” Violet disconnected my PipBuck and we stepped up to the door.

“Care, you might want to stay out here, just in case,” I said. The white mare nodded as Lilith stepped up behind us. She smiled coyly.

“Took you long enough,” the black mare said. “Thought I was gonna have to beat up the door myself.” I chuckled, stepping around the cold metal and into the dark armory. The massive room spread out in all directions. Shelves of items lined the walls, filled to the brim with weapons and boxes of ammunition. At the far end I could see several glass tubes. Inside of them were suits of combat barding.

“Alright, be on the lookout for more than just whole weapons. If there's any parts, I can use them to upgrade our other stuff. Well, everything except Stargazer. Even I'm not dumb enough to try and crack that thing open,” Patch rambled as she stepped into the room ahead of me. I nodded. A crackle of static greeted our ears and a loud blaring alarm stopped us dead in our tracks.

“WARNING! WARNING! INTRUDERS!! INTRUDERS!!” A computer voice echoed from inside the armory. *“DEPLOYING SECURITY COUNTERMEASURES... PLEASE WAIT...”* Ceiling panels slid away, revealing two banks of three laser turrets each. They circled around, spraying fire across the room at us. I threw up my shield instinctively, causing the first wave to deflect off to the ground. I floated out Stargazer and quickly shot a burst of bullets back at one of the turrets. It sparked and exploded. Five left.

“Everypony, get down!” I shouted. The turrets spun about, tracking where I was moving as I tossed myself to the right and dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time slowed to a crawl and I started picking targets, queuing up as many shots as I could. When I was satisfied, I released the spell and Stargazer flew into action, spewing hellish fury at the turrets. Each shot struck with a spark, and eventually the entire array of turrets exploded violently. I stood carefully, preparing myself for anymore hostile activity. The alarm was still going off, but

there didn't seem to be any more security. I sighed, glad that the only thing we had to deal with was turrets. A few seconds later, the alarm shut off. I glanced over to see Patch at a terminal nearby.

"Managed to find the kill switch," she said with a smile. "That seemed to be the only security."

"Seems... sort of lackluster doesn't it?" I asked. Patch shrugged.

"Well, you never got far enough in to step on the mines or activate the pitfall," she said. "Now then, let's see what we've got here." We moved deeper into the armory, picking through the shelves. Numerous rounds of ammunition, some pulse and frag grenades, and multiple firearms ended up in our haul. Patch started rifling through the pile we had set up, pulling aside any scrap that could be used to modify our weapons. Nurse Care had been moving through the armory herself, picking out anything that the tribals could use, such as spare barding or any utility jumpsuits.

I trotted past the racks of combat armor, floating them out and adding them to the pile. I stopped when I came across a glass tube in the back of the room. A smile came to my face.

"Hey, Patch," I said. "Check this out. You might want to call Steeljack down here. He'll want to see this."

The green mare's ears perked up and she trotted over to see what I had found. She grinned widely and called over to Lilith. The black mare nodded and left the armory to go find Steeljack. Moments later, the stallion himself along with the others reappeared. Steeljack glanced inside the tube and grinned ecstatically.

Inside the tube was the most perfect suit of power armor one could have ever seen. Instead of the normally bulky nature of most power armor suits, this one was sleek. It was a stark gunmetal gray color, striped with blue highlights. It came with a helmet that sported two visor-like eyes. Attached to the battle saddle on the suit's back was a scoped assault rifle. Steeljack stepped forward, tracing a hoof on the armor.

"Wow... it's... it's incredible," the stallion said. "It's like... like nothing I've ever seen before."

"I don't think any of us would fit into that, Steeljack," I said, smiling knowingly at the stallion. "So... try it on!" The stallion looked down for a moment and then nodded. He tapped some of the buttons on the armor, opening it up so that he could slip into the suit. The suit clasped itself around his body like a warm glove, the legs wrapping around his PipBuck as if it were always there. The helmet lowered onto his head, and the eyes lit up a fierce blue. Steeljack looked around for a few moments and then spoke, his voice crackling.

"This is... wow. This suit is so light, but I can feel how strong it is. And this rifle... it's just too much," the stallion said. He took a few steps, and I could just tell he was grinning inside the suit. Patch took a set of combat armor that she had slated for the scrap pile, and motioned for us to follow her. At the far end of the armory was an indoor firing range. Patch set the armor down on one of the target mannequins on the other side of the range. She hit a button on the wall, sending the target soaring back several yards.

"Come on, Steely, try it out," she said. Steeljack nodded, turning towards the range and stepping up to the lane that Patch had set up the target on. The rifle turned about, aiming the weapon and firing. The bullet sang as it soared through the air, striking home and completely obliterating the mannequin's head and taking the combat armor with it. Patch cried out with cheer. "Alright, that's awesome! What are you gonna call that armor?"

"What?" Steeljack's voice echoed out of the armor. "I... I don't know."

"Oh come on, you've gotta have a good name for it," Patch said.

"Well... I guess... if I had to call it anything... I think Tempest would be a good name, right?" The stallion replied.

"I think that's an awesome name," I said, smiling. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, how's about we get this stuff distributed. Patch, you do what you can to modify the weapons we have, and fix us up some better barding." Patch saluted, setting to her task. I glanced over at Nurse Care. "Care, if you'll come with me. We have much to discuss. I think I've got a plan to counter attack those Rangers." The white mare nodded and trotted out of the armory as I followed behind. Violet and Grey Knight followed as well, leaving the others to sort through the armory's stock. We arrived shortly to the Infirmary, which had become our temporary home given the state we had come into the Stable in.

“So... what are you thinking of, Star?” Violet said.

“Well. We know a few things. We know that Cotton Candy probably knows by now who his Rangers nearly killed earlier. I'm almost certain that we can get to talk to him first,” I said.

“Talk? But I thought you wanted to wipe them out?” Nurse Care interjected. I grinned.

“Yes, but the problem is, if we go out there guns blazing that robot of theirs is sure to show up immediately. No... we need to speak to Candy first, find out what the fuck he wants down here so bad,” I said. “I'm not saying I want to solve this non-violently, but if we can get him to talk, then we can set up an ambush.”

“Ohh... so while you've got him talking, we get ponies into position to ambush the Rangers in case things go south?” Violet said.

“That does... not seem honorable,” Grey said softly.

“And what does, Grey? Does getting these ponies slaughtered sound honorable?” I snarled, before breathing deeply and sighing. “Look, I'm sorry, but you have to understand. We don't stand a chance in straight up combat. I mean, sure... I've got some magic tricks, but even I can't take on a whole contingent of Steel Rangers by myself. Besides... this robot of theirs worries me. If it's capable of that kind of destruction, I'd rather not have to deal with it.” The stallion sighed, and nodded.

“Thou art forgiven, Squire,” he said. “But if it were up to me... I would see those foul Rangers driven before me in honorable combat.”

“Well, you may just get that wish, Knight,” I said, grinning. “Cuz you're gonna be right there on the front lines with us.” I motioned for the others to come closer with a flick of my forehooves.

“So... here's the plan...”

“Shit!” I shouted, dodging another spray of gunfire from a particularly nasty Steel Ranger wielding a minigun. Suffice to say, my plan hadn't gone well at all. Cotton Candy had indeed responded to our request for contact, but he wasn't interested in negotiations. We had even tried offering him the transponder the Minotaur gave us, but the stallion had known that it was a ruse after taking one hard look at the device.

Thankfully, we hadn't managed to reveal the entrance to the Stable to the Rangers, but that didn't stop Candy from ordering his contingent to attack. Chaos rippled across the battlefield like heat waves from a wildfire, the metallic pings of bullets striking power armor sounding out among the cries of battle. The remnants of the town around us continued to burn as more fires were added due to the fight itself.

My plans officially suck, I thought as I spun about, igniting my horn and casting my gravity spell at the Steel Ranger. The Ranger's armor glowed for a brief moment but nothing happened. *What the...? What, does their armor have protection against magical enchantments or something?* I thought. Snarling under my breath, I lifted Stargazer to fight this pony minigun to minigun. Shot after shot slammed into the Ranger's side, putting the armor-clad pony to the ground. It's own fire sprayed wide as it fell, striking another nearby Ranger. I took a moment to take stock of the battlefield, using the moment's peace to find my friends.

Patch and Steeljack were working together as always, the two earth ponies using Patch's ingenuity and Steeljack's new armor to disable the Rangers. Steeljack would use Tempest's rifle to strip away a Ranger's weapon, then Patch would flip a pulse grenade directly onto the Ranger's armor with her freaky earth pony skills. Even as another Ranger crumpled to the ground in a shower of sparks, I could tell they were beginning to get overtaken. Lilith soared high above, leveraging her flight abilities to dive and slash above the Rangers arc of fire. Occasionally the shrieking howl of the Bitch would send a missile into a group of Rangers, scattering them in an explosion of dirt and rubble. Nixis lumbered near to me, the hellhound clearly frightening enough of a combatant to keep several Rangers at bay. Grey Knight and Violet stood side by side, my love providing cover fire for the white stallion with Thunder Flash while he charged in, thrusting wildly with his weapon. His energy lance was amazingly effective, shredding weapons almost instantly and drawing huge showers of sparks when it dug into the sterner armor of the Rangers. Beyond our own group, several dozen tribal ponies who had wanted to fight stood vigilantly against the steel-clad Rangers. They

were wearing combat armor that had been scraped together from the Stable's armory.

Despite how well it seemed that we were doing, it wasn't going to be good enough. We weren't trying to kill them, just keep them away. But things were beginning to escalate, and the Rangers just seemed to be everywhere. Driving them off was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. A bullet pinged off of my barding and I spun, growling as I floated out Stargazer. The pink stallion at the far end of the battlefield grinned widely. It was Cotton Candy. His visor was retracted, and his expression was... smug. He lifted his hoof in a jaunty wave, smiling as he spoke into his armor's radio.

"Cotton Candy, dammit!" I shouted, charging up at the stallion. "Stop this, already. I told you, we just wanted to talk!"

"I don't think so, Ministry Mare. After what you did in Chicacolt, I'm not willing to negotiate anything with you."

I startled, flaring my wings in shock. "Yes, I know all about you and your exploits. As much as I loathe that disgusting abomination, the Minotaur is still a useful source of information," Cotton Candy said. "No matter, though. What you did in Chicacolt, you won't be doing here. This Stable will be ours."

"There's not even anything good down there!" I cried out. Cotton Candy sneered.

"There's always something good," he said. "Water talismans, weapons, even Stable jumpsuits. Not to mention, more spark batteries and power cells to keep Equestria Prime running."

"Equestria Prime?" I said, cocking my head. Cotton Candy grinned and pointed with his forehoof. A shadow fell over the battlefield as a loud clunking noise came sounding over the next ridge. My eyes widened.

A massive pony-shaped robot stomped into view, its legs armored with cold steel. It was larger than any other robot I'd ever seen before. Its body was a sleek gunmetal gray, with a single red tracking sensor where its eyes would be. It had no mouth, and I could see the cabling connecting the neck and legs to the main body. Emblazoned on the robot's flanks, much like where a cutie mark would be, was the symbol of two alicorns, one white and one blue, circling each other. The mark of the flag of Equestria. The robot scanned the battlefield for a brief second and took a step into the fray.

"Enemy threat assessment. Initiating strike sequence. Zebra scum must be annihilated," the robot proclaimed, in a voice that thundered across the battlefield. Its tracking sensor lit a fierce red, a blast of laser fire emanating from it. It struck one of the tribal ponies with a flash, turning the poor pony into nothing but sizzling goop on the ground.

"You see, Ministry Mare. I'm going to get what I want, and I want that Stable," Cotton Candy said. "And Equestria Prime here is going to ensure my victory." The robot strode forward, its hooves clunking loudly. I growled loudly, turning back to Cotton Candy. The stallion grinned, not even remotely afraid of me. "Yes, you see how futile your efforts are? We found that hunk of metal in a nearby abandoned pre-war bunker, and now it serves us."

"This isn't over, Candy," I said, pulling away from the armor-clad stallion and flapping my wings and taking to the sky. "Fall back! Everypony, fall back!" The robot continued to move forward, spraying blasts of laser fire everywhere it looked. My friends began to pull back towards the Stable entrance, doing the best they could to keep the Rangers and the robot at bay. The tribal ponies with us now numbered less than half, many having fallen to the Rangers or obliterated by the giant metal pony.

"Threat assessment: minimal. Acquiring targets," the robot rumbled in its monotone voice. Its eyes flashed, firing another round of lasers and hitting two more unlucky tribals. The thing lifted its head to the sky, where I was flying around and monitoring the retreat. A blast of laser fire whipped past me, and I growled, floating out Stargazer and taking several shots at the massive robot. The majority of them went wide, but a few struck home. Unfortunately they didn't seem to do any good. The thing ignored my fire and took another massive step forward, spreading chaos and destruction wherever it went. Cotton Candy just stood and watched as the metal monstrosity fired another laser beam, melting three more tribal ponies into goop.

“Star!!” Violet shouted, waving at me. A laser blast struck the ground next to her, causing her to jump back. I snarled, soaring down to my friends and tossing up my alicorn shield. The next blast of laser fire struck the shield with intense force, pushing me back. Thankfully the shield held. It broke under the next blast, but managed to deflect most of it. I reached into the back of my mind, pulling out Shining Armor's shield spell to the forefront. Already feeling my horn begin to sear with pain, I released the spell, the purple wall appearing in front of the retreating ponies. I felt every punch of the laser fire as it struck the shield, but I was able to keep it going. I started shifting backwards towards the burning section of the town that held the entrance to the Stable.

I hissed in pain at the burning in my horn, every step back a mile of effort. I tried to keep moving, but it was difficult. I felt Violet's magic tugging on me, and I spared a moment to glance back. My love was doing her best to keep me moving along, her horn glowing a soft green. She grimaced, but kept up her spell. I looked back at the advancing horde of Rangers, the Equestria Prime robot now at the forefront. I knew somehow it wasn't going to be enough. Eventually I couldn't keep up the shield spell and the robot would get through our defenses. I only hoped that we would make it to the Stable's entrance before that happened.

“Target engaged. Detecting high resonance shielding, compensating,” I heard the robot say above the chaos. The thing's eyes lit up a solid blue and fired another blast of fire at my shield. I struggled beneath the barrage to keep the spell going, but I was feeling drained. I groaned as the shield dissipated, holding a hoof to my horn. It burned fiercely, and my vision went black for a second. Shaking the blurriness out of my sight, I growled loudly.

“Keep going!” I shouted hoarsely. We were roughly ten feet from one of the concealed entrances to the Stable. Laser fire hit the ground around us, igniting the earth in a blaze of hell and fury. I could see the ground beginning to lift behind us, the tunnel opening up to allow us entry. Nurse Care stood at the entrance, watching with fear in her eyes. She was shouting at the retreating force as the tribals filed down into the tunnel.

“Hurry up!” Nurse Care called. Steeljack and Patch dove into the tunnel after the tribals, followed closely by the rest of my friends. Violet helped me hobble into the tunnel's entrance, and I managed a brief smile at the white mare. Nurse Care smiled back.

Then she was gone. She didn't even get a chance to scream. A laser blast struck the tunnel's entrance, completely obliterating the white mare. A pile of glowing goop hit the ground in her place. My eyes widened as the tunnel began to shake around us.

“Care!!!” I cried, scrambling to where the glowing remains of the mare were. Tears filled my eyes and I glared at the advancing Rangers and lifted Stargazer. My horn burned with the fury of a thousand suns, but I didn't care. All I cared about was seeing the Rangers pay for what they had done. “You... I'll fucking kill all of you!”

“Star, get your head together!” Violet shouted, grabbing onto me with her own magic. “There's nothing you can do for her now!”

“I can tear these assholes limb from limb!” I snarled, trying to pull myself free of my love's telekinesis. Violet grunted and pulled harder.

“Star, if we don't pull back down into the tunnel now, we'll lead the Rangers right into the Stable! More will die!” She argued, her eyes flaring with rage as she strained her horn more, yanking me back into the tunnel. I took one last look at the glowing goop on the ground and sighed angrily before turning to follow Violet. My horn seared in pain, and I panted with the effort it took to just limp along with Violet. We made it eventually to the shaft that would take us back down into the Stable, where Steeljack and Patch waited. Violet shouted something, but I didn't exactly hear what it was. The tunnel behind us began to rumble as the explosives that we had laced inside of it began to go off. Stone and rock tumbled down, sealing the passage and hopefully taking a few of those asshole Rangers with it.

I glanced behind me and gave up a silent prayer before trudging into the shaft after the others. *Luna... if you're even real... please protect her in the afterlife... she deserves that much.* My prayer went unanswered

as I turned back to the long walk down the tunnel.

The Infirmary seemed lifeless without Nurse Care, I had decided. With the mare's demise, the morale of the rest of the tribal ponies had waned considerably. My horn still hurt like hell, and we were currently licking our wounds, so to speak. Violet and the others were sitting in the far corner, looking over the maps of the area. They were talking about a counterattack. I sighed, standing.

"Violet, I'm gonna go lay down for a little bit. Let me know when you've got something," I said, my voice dull. Violet looked up and nodded, trying to put on a smile. I trotted out of the Infirmary. I couldn't stay there. All I could see was Care disappearing in a flash of light. I closed my eyes and shook the thought away and began to walk. Finding an abandoned room in the living quarters of the Stable, I stepped inside and plopped down on the dirty but still functional mattress. I sighed and closed my eyes, attempting to meditate. I had tried several times already without Envy, but every time felt like grasping at mental straws.

I let out a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling to try and slow my thoughts down. Stray thoughts of Twilight and Spark filled my mind, preventing me from getting close to true meditation. I groaned, opening my eyes. Why was this so bucking hard? Why couldn't I wrap my head around this?! Sadly, I knew why. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw them. I couldn't keep my mind off of the two. Twilight... infuriated me as much as she intrigued me. What could have driven a mare like her to the depths that she had plumbed. Was I so different? It seemed like all I had seen lately was death and more death. I had caused much of it myself. I felt horrible, and couldn't even begin to wrap my mind around this whole meditation thing because of it.

I sat up, placing a hoof to my temple. My horn was still burning slightly. I was certain the burning ache wasn't helping me meditate. A knock at the door caught my attention. I looked up, seeing Patch standing there. She smiled.

"Hey, I found something I think you need to see," she said, motioning for me to follow her. I stood and sighed, but complied. We walked out of the room and down the hall, but not towards the armory. The twists and turns of the Stable's featureless hallways met our steps along the way. I cocked my head as we rounded another corner.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Overmare's office," Patch replied. "I was doing some hunting around the terminal that Nurse Care --" I winced at the mare's name. Patch faltered for a moment, but continued. "The terminal that they had said there was nothing on. Well, they were wrong. There's something on there, and I think it explains why the Rangers want in here so bad." We soon arrived at the office, pushing open the door. The terminal inside was lit up, showing a full map of the Stable. Before I could say anything, Patch hit a few buttons on it, bringing up a menu. "The reason they didn't find anything was because this terminal was just like the one on the armory door. It was locked by a series of foal's games."

"Foal's games?" I said. Patch nodded.

"Perusing the logs on the terminal, this Stable was meant to house children. That's why everything is so much smaller. There must have been some older ponies too, but very few," she said. "Chaperones, probably."

"But wouldn't a foal know how to play these games?" I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

"They would know how to play, but not necessarily how to *win*," Patch said. My eyes widened as I realized she was right. "And for any--"

I held up a hoof. Patch stopped talking, looking at me. I felt my face twist as I tried to make words out of the horror that had just popped up in my thoughts.

"Patch... What happened to the children when they grew up?"

Patch paled, her eyes going wide. Taking a step away from the terminal, she looked down at it as if it was poisonous.

"I... I don't know, Star."

"What? Doesn't the terminal say anything about what happened to them?" I said, pointing at the monitor. Patch shook her head solemnly.

"The logs only go so far. The rest of them are corrupted," she said. "I have absolutely no idea what happened to the inhabitants of this Stable."

We stood silent for a long moment, staring at each other. Patch closed her eyes with a shudder, and I stepped forward to lay a comforting hoof on her shoulder. As much as I hated to just ignore this, the past had to take second place to the future.

"Patch, I hate to say it, but we just don't have the time. Let's just worry about this later. Tell me, what did you find here?" I said. Patch tapped a few more keys, bringing up several diagrams. They were designs for a robot. A robot we were all quite familiar with.

"Equestria Prime?" I asked. Patch nodded.

"Designs, schematics, the whole kit 'n kaboodle. It's all here," the green mare said. "I think that Candy must only have the robot's basic functions up and running. If he had access to this..."

"He could get all of its weaponry and functionality working," I finished for her. The other mare nodded. "So... this is bad."

"Very," Patch said. "Based on the logs, Equestria Prime was supposed to be a shining light in the darkness of war. The first of its kind. It was a joint effort between the Ministry of Technology and the Ministry of Peace."

"But I thought Fluttershy's Ministry wanted to end the war peacefully? Why help design a tool of war?" I asked.

"My only guess there is that Fluttershy thought if the robot was fighting, it could save ponies who would otherwise be dying on the battlefield," Patch said. "All of these schematics and data had to have been put into this Stabled before it closed up. It had to have been a backup so that if the original bunker the robot was housed in was compromised the data would be worthless."

"And of course, with the tech the Rangers have amassed, they mostly figured it out on their own," I said, drawing the same conclusion Patch had. "So, Cotton Candy found out that there was more to this thing, and wanted more control over it?"

"That sounds about right," Patch said. "Looking over the designs of it, this thing meant serious business. Applejack really put a lot of thought into its design and what it would do for the war. If the Steel Rangers got ahold of this information... I shudder to think what they could do with it."

"Does it give you anything on how to reprogram the damn thing?" I said. Patch looked back at the terminal, grimacing.

"Well..." she said. "It's gonna take me some time to process it all, but if I can get near that thing, I should be able to access its neural network interface and attempt to reprogram it. I really won't know until I'm in front of it."

"I'd say that sounds like a bit of a dangerous plan," I said. "Getting close to it is going to be no easy feat."

"If I may, I may have an idea on how to do that," a voice said from the door, startling both of us. I looked up, seeing Grey Knight standing there. His eyes were cold and he had a smile on his face.

"Grey?" I said. "What idea?"

"It's very simple, mine Squire. As thou have already pointed out, getting near the robot in face to face combat is quite difficult. But..." Grey said, pausing for a moment. "What if I were to give thine friends a chance to sneak young Patch here onto the metal pony?"

"What do you have in mind?" I said. Grey flashed a smile once more.

"I intend to challenge this Cotton Candy to a duel," he said matter of factly. I blinked.

"You want to do *what?*!" I exclaimed. Grey nodded.

"We will send a message to the vile Rangers, formally challenging Candy to honorable combat. The stakes will be the Stable, with the promise that the robot will be shut down during combat," he said. "Of course, this is but a ruse. While I am dueling, the young miss Patch will sneak onto the robot and reprogram it."

"Grey, I appreciate you putting yourself out there like this, but isn't this kind of against your whole... honor code thing?" I said.

"It appears I myself still have lots to learn from thou, faithful Squire. For these ponies, I would lay down mine life to see them safe once more. I owe it to Miss Care," Grey replied coolly. "Dost thou not think I can handle it?"

"No... I just..." I started to say, my mind flashing back to Nurse Care's final moments alive. "I just don't want to see somepony I consider a friend dead again." Grey nodded before closing the door. As he trotted away I swore I heard him say 'Me too.' I sighed, looking over at Patch. The green mare's lip trembled.

"Wow..." She said. I waved a hoof in front of her face, getting her attention. She blinked and stared at me, quickly regaining her composure. "Sorry, just... that was really brave of him."

"Either really brave or really stupid," I snorted. "I'd better get back to the others and tell them what's going on. When do you think you can be ready?"

"Shouldn't take me more than a few hours," Patch said, returning her attention back to the terminal. I nodded and smiled.

"Good, because I have the feeling we're going to need every bit of help we can get," I said, trotting out of the office.

"I must admit, I am quite intrigued by your offer," Cotton Candy's smug voice rang out over the Stable's radio. It had taken a few attempts to get ahold of the Steel Ranger, but we finally managed to get him to respond. Grey had done much of the talking, issuing his challenge to the Ranger. "And how do I know that I can trust your word on this... challenge?"

"You have mine word as an honorable stallion, and as a Knight of the Holy Celestial Order," Grey replied.

"If you lose, you will leave this place. If I lose, the ponies of this town will vacate the Stable peacefully and allow you access."

"And what's to stop me from just taking it from you?" Candy challenged. I nearly groaned. The stallion was insufferable.

"I would expect better from an honorable opponent such as thyself. The Steel Rangers pride themselves on their code of honor, do they not?" Grey said. The radio went silent for a few moments and my breath caught in my throat. I halfheartedly expected the stallion to decline.

"Accepted," Candy said finally, lifting the awkward silence. "Equestria Prime will be shut down, and kept in our camp. We shall each bring three ponies to bear witness to this challenge, which shall take place tomorrow at noon."

"Acceptable," Grey Knight replied, hitting the button and cutting off the radio transmission. "There. It's done."

"I still think you're a mite crazy for doing this," Steeljack said. "But if it gives us the edge we need to beat these Rangers, I'll do what I can to help."

"Have you decided who you want to come with you?" I asked. Grey nodded.

"Mine faithful Squire, thou shalt join me as witness," the stallion replied, motioning to me. I rolled my eyes at the mention of me as his Squire once more. "I would also appreciate it if Steeljack and Nixis would join as well." The hellhound and the earth pony nodded in response. "Excellent. Now, if you shall excuse me... I

must prepare for the trials ahead.” Grey trotted out of the communication room, leaving us alone once more. I sighed.

“Alright, that leaves Patch, Violet, and Lilith to get into the camp and reprogram that robot,” I said. “Based on what we know from Lilith's surveillance, the Ranger camp is located here.” I pointed at the crudely drawn map on the table. A red x was marked on it. Lilith nodded.

“Violet, I want you to hang outside of the camp and stay low. You're backup support in case anything goes wrong,” the pegasus said. “I'll fly Patch in and drop her off onto the robot. I should be able to fly silently enough to get her in and out.”

“Patch? How's progress on the program?” I asked.

“I think I've got a fair idea on what to do,” the mare said. “I won't know for sure til I'm in Equestria Prime's computer core, but I should be able to do it.”

“Good enough for me,” I said. “Just remember, if you can't reprogram it, use the explosives and blow that thing to kingdom come.” Patch nodded.

“Are you sure this plan will work?” Nixis said, the hellhound shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I'm not doubting you, Star... I just worry that Cotton Candy will expect the deception.”

“We're going to have to try, my friend,” I said, placing a hoof on the hellhound's shoulder. He smiled toothily. “For Nurse Care and for the ponies of this town. We owe them much, and I intend to rectify my mistakes. Now then... I am going to rest.” I trotted out of the room, heading towards the Atrium and the rooms that we had claimed as our own. A few tribal villagers passed by me, averting their eyes as they walked on. The villagers had become noticeably scarce since Nurse Care's death. None of them had dared approach us, and I understood why. They felt we were responsible. I certainly felt responsible. I sighed, pushing open the door to our room and plopping on the bed. I closed my eyes, letting myself fall away into dreamland.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The same scene kept playing over and over in my dream. Nurse Care was shouting at me one minute, and the next... she was gone. Then she would reappear and it would happen all over again. I kept watching and watching, unable to stop it. I screamed until my throat was raw.

“So... this is what one of your nightmares looks like,” a voice said, cutting through the agonizing pain of watching Care die. I glanced up, seeing a purple alicorn hovering over the scene. She smiled softly at me.

I tried to say something, but my voice was silent. Twilight landed in front of me, placing a hoof up and dissipating the memory. The dream world went black for a moment, returning in a flash with the familiar scenery of the mare's library. The purple mare turned and ignited her horn, fixing several of the books that had fallen seemingly in her absence.

“I apologize for the interruption into your dreams, Star, but I needed to talk to you and you don't need to do this,” Twilight said. “You can speak now, by the way.”

“Why? Why did you stop it?” I said angrily. Twilight snorted.

“Because you know damn well that it wasn't your fault,” she said. “You didn't bring this upon these ponies anymore than I did.”

“It is my fault! I led them out and I got them all killed!” I shouted.

“Star, please understand. You helped these ponies. You're helping them now. Don't let this get you down, you have to keep moving forward,” Twilight said, plopping to her haunches and turning to face me. Her lavender eyes sparkled in the soft light of the library. “Besides, there are bigger things going on that need your attention!”

“Is that all you brought me here for? A pep talk?” I asked, snarling. Twilight sighed.

“No, not really. I wanted to talk to you about something,” the purple mare said. “Your magic. I'm sure

you've noticed by now that you are running into magical burnout.” I opened my mouth to scream at Twilight, but stopped and made myself let go of my anger. Yelling at Twilight wouldn’t benefit anyone.

“I... I have,” I said softly. “Everytime I try to access certain spells, it feels like my horn is being set on fire.”

“I figured as much. It's as I suspected. Spark left something behind before she left you. Something that's causing the burnouts,” Twilight said.

“She did what?” I asked, cocking my head in confusion. Twilight nodded.

“I believe that whatever it is, it's one of the things that is responsible for the decay of our connection,” the mare said. “Regardless... I felt it was prudent to approach you about this.”

“Is there anything that I can do about it?” I said. Twilight smiled.

“Right now, I'm not sure. I'm still trying to locate the photonic spell resonance that's causing the problem. It keeps shifting between sub-quantum space/time and ---” The mare started to say before I coughed. She chuckled and sighed. “Right. Equestrian. I'm having problems trying to find the cause of your magic drain. Better?” I grinned.

“Better,” I said. “So why now? Why interrupt my dreams?”

“Like I said before... you looked like you needed it,” Twilight replied. “This connection between us... I'm feeling your pain just as much as you feel mine through my memories. This was... this was important to you.”

“I watched somepony I made a promise to die, and there was nothing I could do about it,” I said, an edge of anger returning to my voice.

“And yet, you are not truly at fault. It was no action or failure to act of yours that killed her,” Twilight said.

“Here you are Star, still moving forward. Don't ever forget that. You are stronger than you think you are. Now... if we're going to solve this problem with your magic, you are going to have to clear your head and get it in the game. Only you can undo the thing blocking it.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked. Twilight smiled coyly.

“First things first,” the purple mare said. “This block is being caused by a foreign matter that Spark left here when she escaped your body. In order to get rid of it, you're going to have to face it. It won't be easy, but I know that you can do it.” She motioned with a hoof, pointing at a door in the back of the library. It led down to the tree house's basement level. “There. You'll find the block down in the basement.”

“Are you sure about this?” I said hesitantly. Twilight nodded.

“Trust me,” she said. I sighed and trotted past the purple alicorn. I reached out with my magic, grasping the doorknob in a soft purple glow. The door opened, revealing a set of stairs that went down. It seemed like they went on forever. Sighing again, I started down at a brisk trot, making sure to watch where I stepped so that I didn't trip. The stairs curved, turning into a spiral that led down into darkness. The further I moved, the less light that I had available to me. I finally reached the bottom, my hoof striking wet concrete. I nearly slipped as I moved out into the dark and dank room that stretched out before me. My eyes widened.

It was the maintenance level of the Ministry of Technology hub. The sprawling labyrinth of pipework tunnels lay before me. I shook my head, remembering quite clearly what had happened here.

“No...” I whimpered softly. “No, no, no... Not here...” Tears filled my eyes, and I nearly couldn't keep moving. I hung my head for a brief moment before picking myself back up again. No. I couldn't stop now. It was too late to go back. I needed to see this through to the end.

A foul stench assaulted my nostrils from deep within the halls of the complex. Snarling and snapping sounds filled the air as I pressed forward. Water dripped from the old pipes onto the concrete below me, the plip-plip accompanying the soft *clip-clop* of my hooves. Where was this supposed block at? Somehow deep in my heart I already knew where it was. The tunnel I was following rejoined the main shaft, and it was there that I saw it. Two ghouls crouched in the middle of the tunnel, feasting noisily on the body of a green and purple

pony. She was whimpering as the two ferals bit into her, her eyes locked directly on me.

“Why...?” The mare choked out through the blood, her voice raspy. “Why did you leave me...?”

“I didn't... I didn't leave you...” I replied, turning my head to try and look away from the green mare. Every time I tried however, I found my attention being brought back to her. She had stood up, the two ghouls still continuing their feast. Her mane was tattered and pieces of her flesh were simply missing. Her eyes were soulless, filled with darkness and rage.

“You **LEFT ME!!!**” The creature shouted. “You're pathetic! A weakling! Failure! You don't deserve to live!”

“No... I'm sorry, please...” I said, dropping to the ground in front of the thing. “It wasn't... Wasn't my fault... please...” The zombified mare howled, her raspy voice lending an inequine feeling to it. She moved forward, the two ghouls moving with her somehow. She appeared within a few inches of my face, rage painted all over her face.

“Wrong! You're wrong! It's all your fault! You left me... you left Nurse Care... you left Cranky, Diamond, and everypony else that you care about! You left them to DIE!!!” The thing growled. Tears filled my eyes as I tried to move away from the beast. Was this what was blocking my magic? Did I truly blame myself for everything that had happened to those close to me? I realized that she was right. It was my fault. I was to blame. The thing moved closer and closer, and I sat there, ready to let it take me. Take me to where to I could no longer be blamed.

“No,” a voice shouted, cutting through the air like a knife. I looked up, seeing the perfect vision of the mare I had lost. Her purple mane fell in waves across her pristine green coat. Lucky's brief smile was a beam of sunshine chasing away the shadows, a breeze blowing away the cobwebs. All too soon it faded, and Lucky glared at the zombified version of herself. “You're wrong. It was never your fault. I chose to be here. I chose to become Star's friend. I chose my fate. Just like all the others. We all chose. We all chose to believe in the Ministry Mare.”

“L-L-Lucky?” I said, scrambling to get away from the ghoulish mare. “What are you...?”

“I'm not *really* Lucky,” the green mare said. “I'm the part of your mind that's rationalizing this thing's existence.” She pointed at the ghoulish-Lucky. “Star. You can do this. Stop her. Show her what it means to know love, to know friendship. All of us, all of those you've lost that you think you are at fault for... we're all here, we're all rooting for you.”

“But I... I left...” I said softly.

“And since when did you get to make the decision that included us in the first place? Like I said before. We all chose to be here,” Lucky snapped. “We all came of our own volition. Sure, it was you that drew us here, but we stayed because we wanted to. But in order for us to give you strength, you have to learn how to give yourself strength. Now please... let us help you, for Celestia's sake!!”

“Lucky, I --” I started to say. The green mare stomped a hoof, startling me.

“No, Star. No excuses. Stop crying about what's gone wrong, and think for one second! Think about Violet, about Patch, Steeljack, Nixis, and Lilith! Think about all those ponies back in the city,” Lucky said. “Most of all, think about me. Don't give up, and don't give in. You have to... for us.” My eyes burned with tears as I stood to face the pristine mare. I nodded silently.

“O-O-Okay,” I stuttered. “I... I will.”

“Good, now get ready. You need to overcome this thing, and it isn't going to be pretty. But you have to do it, or else you'll never be able to move forward and face Spark,” Lucky replied. I turned away from the green mare, glaring at the ghoulish specter in front of us. It howled and sucked at the air violently, each moment descending further into pure rage and madness. I put a hoof up and flared my horn.

“Stop. Begone foul beast from my mind,” I said, grasping the thing with my magic. It howled louder, snarling and snapping as it fought against the telekinesis holding it in place. “I am the sum of my friends.

They give me strength. For those I've lost, and for those I still hold dear I will banish you!" The light from my magic overwhelmed the monstrosity, until finally it was no more. The dripping of pipework was all that was left of the ambient sound, and the foul stench lifted from the air.

"Good job, Star," a familiar voice said. "I knew you could do it." I glanced back, seeing Twilight there instead of Lucky. I narrowed my gaze at the purple mare as I realized I was back in the library.

"You knew?" I asked. Twilight hung her head and nodded.

"I knew that this would test you greatly, but I had every confidence that you would succeed," she replied, smiling.

"So it's gone now?" I asked.

"Yes. Can't you feel it? The connection between us... it's stronger now that the blockage has been removed," Twilight said, nodding. I closed my eyes, feeling the spirit mare's presence. She was right. Where there had been just a hint of her magic, it was now flooding my senses, overwhelming them even. "You've given us a bit of time, Star. The connection will still degrade, but now that you've slowed the rate of its decay, we can take care of Spark properly."

"What about the burnout?" I said, cocking my head.

"You will have to acclimate yourself to using the new power levels available to you, but the blockage being gone should allow you to experiment without fear of burning your horn out," Twilight said. "However, there is still a chance of damaging or injuring yourself if you overuse such spells, so practice with caution."

"I... Thanks, I guess," I said, trying to smile. Twilight nodded.

"Now... it's time for you to awaken. You have much to do, Ministry Mare..." the purple mare said as the world around us filtered into nothingness.

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I awoke with a start, realizing where I was and wondering just how long I'd been out. The room was still dark, and a warmth next to me made me realize that I wasn't alone. I sighed softly as I glanced down at the green mare snuggling up next to me. I smiled. I felt good. Alert and rested like I couldn't remember being, not since I'd left my home in Fort Knowledge. The encounter with Twilight had given me a new perspective, and the removal of the block had me feeling bursting with energy. I wish I understood the purple mare better, but every time I tried I couldn't quite place where she was coming from. She acted liked she wanted to help me, but she wanted to kill Spark. I couldn't just let that come to pass.

"Star?" Violet said as she awoke, bringing me out of my thoughts. I smiled down at her.

"Hello, my dear," I said softly. "How long was I out?"

"For a while," she replied. "The others are in the Infirmary, getting ready. It's almost time to go." I nodded, pushing myself up away from my love. She stood as well, lifting her things with her magic. I grabbed Stargazer and we exited the room. A short walk later and we arrived at the Infirmary. Nixis and Steeljack stood outside the room with Grey Knight. The white stallion nodded curtly at our arrival.

"Ready to go?" I asked. Grey nodded solemnly. I reached down and nuzzled Violet closely. "Be careful out there."

"You too," Violet replied, planting a kiss on my cheek and trotting down the hall after Grey and the others. The armor-clad stallion led us through the drab gray of the Stable's hallways to the main entrance. None of the tribal ponies dared to approach us as I pressed the button opening up the large gear-shaped door. The door hissed as it slid away, revealing a dark cave tunnel. This particular Stable was cleverly disguised beneath a foal's school in the town. Granted, said school was now burnt to the ground mostly, but even the rubble served to hide the Stable. We moved through the tunnel swiftly, coming to the metal stairs leading up to the hidden door. I checked my E.F.S. and listened carefully, then cautiously pushed it open.

"Coast is clear," I whispered. The trap door lifted up and we stepped into the afternoon air. A breeze

whipped its way over us, filling our nostrils with the scent of burning ash. Most of the fires had subsided thankfully, but the damage was extensive. I hoped that there would be enough material to rebuild the town once this was all said and done. There was no way the tribal ponies could stay in the Stable forever. We made our way silently through to the center of the small town, to where Cotton Candy had established our meeting place. Grey pushed forward to the front of our group, his eyes darting back and forth. There was no sign of the Steel Rangers yet. I couldn't tell if this was good or bad. My eyes narrowed as four red blips appeared on my E.F.S. *Perhaps I spoke too soon*, I thought as Cotton Candy and three Rangers appeared at the far end of the area. The stallion was wearing his power armor, a massive sledge hammer latched to his battle saddle. His helmet was hanging from another latch on his side.

"Well, now why I am I not surprised at this," Cotton Candy said, sneering at the sight of me. "Welcome, Ministry Mare. I trust you are here to witness this little... contest?"

"I'm here to support my friend," I spat venomously. "Something you wouldn't know much about, Candy." The Steel Ranger growled under his breath.

"No matter, soon I shall be the victor, and the Stable mine," he said. "But enough of this... banter. I'm certain that you are here for more important business." He glanced over at Grey Knight, who nodded in response.

"Indeed. Let us begin," the silver armor-clad stallion said. "The rules of this battle are quite simple, even for one such as thou, Paladin Candy. There are no rules. This fight is to the death." I glared at Grey, my eyes widening.

"What? You never said --" I started to say.

"Agreed," Cotton Candy interjected. "Did you really think that simple defeat would be enough, Ministry Mare? I know this stallion's kind well enough. He would not be happy with anything less than an honorable death."

"Mine Squire does not understand these concepts too well," the scarred stallion said. I snorted. "Now, my friends. You would do well to stand back." Steeljack and Nixis nodded, moving to stand next to a pile of rubble. I stopped close to the white stallion, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Be careful," I said. Grey smiled softly.

"I... Thank you, Squi – I mean, Radiant Star," he said. I trotted across the clearing to sit down next to Steeljack and Nixis. Steeljack was still wearing Tempest, the eye visors retracted so I could see the worried look in his eyes. Candy nodded at the three Rangers behind him, and they retreated to their own corner of the small clearing. The pink unicorn grinned, unlatching his helmet and placing it on his head. Unlike other Steel Ranger helmets I had seen, this one didn't completely cover the stallion's face. It served more as a guard than anything else. He flared his horn and the sledge floated free in the pink glow of his magic.

Grey stepped forward, placing his own helmet upon his brow. His lance came ripping out of its harness, the metal coming alive with blue energy. An eerie silence fell over the clearing as the two stallions circled around each other, waiting for somepony to make the first move. It was tense, and at the same time somewhat serene.

Candy broke the silence first, rushing forward at the white stallion with hellish fury in his eyes. The pink unicorn's sledgehammer came around in a blur of metal, swiping horizontally. Grey ducked as the massive sledge ripped through the air over him, barely missing his lowered form. Grey rolled to his left, using his momentum to come up to Candy's side. The scarred stallion charged, bringing his glowing lance in line with the Ranger. Candy grinned, his horn flaring again as the sledgehammer came up, placing its head in front of the lance. A flash of blue erupted from the clash of the two weapons, forcing the combatants away from each other.

Wasting no time, Candy surged forward again, this time bringing his massive weapon into the air above him for a downward strike. Grey leaped to the side, his natural earth pony ability bringing him out of harm's way. The Steel Ranger roared as the sledgehammer slammed into the ground where Grey had been, several cracks appearing in the burnt rubble. Grey retaliated, bringing his lance about in a slash along Candy's side. The

white stallion struck true, showers of hot sparks sheeting away from the Ranger's armored shoulder. Candy snarled, lifting his sledgehammer again with his magic. He batted away the pointed weapon, using his magical advantage to knock back Grey as well. The Ranger glanced down at his shoulder blade, grimacing at the damage to his armor from the blow.

"Not too bad," he said. "I can't quite remember the last time an opponent got that close to me." Grey said nothing, merely glaring at the Ranger around the lance in his teeth as he stood. He motioned with a hoof at the other stallion. Candy sneered, lifting his sledgehammer again. "Forgive me, I shall oblige your death wish." The pink unicorn swung out with the sledgehammer in a sweep, looking as if he was hoping to catch my friend in the legs. Grey grunted and jumped back frantically, thrusting his lance down at the metal blur that was Candy's sledge. Metal rang out against metal, sending Grey spinning through the air as the two weapons clashed. The white stallion struck a pile of rubble hard. He stood shakily, coughing as he spat out the lance. A thin trickle of blood rolled down his chin.

"Do you submit?" Candy said, stepping towards the stallion, his sledgehammer held loftily in the air. "There is no shame in admitting when you've been beaten by your better."

"Thou... thou art not better... thou art vile. You and your kind have no place in this world," Grey spat as he reached down to pick up his glowing lance. "And I will see to it that the ponies of this town are protected from the like of stallions such as thou."

"Do you truly think you can beat me? My, my... how naïve you are," Candy replied casually. "You see, Grey Knight. I've been toying with you. You are weak. Pathetic. A failure. If you want I should be serious, then serious I shall be."

"Do thine worst, foul villain. I shall stop thee!" Grey shouted, latching onto the handle of this lance once more. The scarred stallion snarled, charging forward and thrusting at the Steel Ranger. Candy sneered, igniting his horn and bringing his sledgehammer around in a wicked slice. The weapon's blow rang on Grey's barrel, sending him flying again. Grey hit a pile of rubble with a grunt of pain. The stallion tried to push himself up, but couldn't in time before Candy was upon him. The Ranger swooped his sledgehammer upwards in an uppercut that caught Grey on his barrel, launching the Knight into the air.

I growled, but a hoof on my side stopped me. Steeljack looked up at me and shook his head. I sighed and returned my attention to the battle. Grey coughed, sending blood spattering and his lance clattering. Candy's sledgehammer came back around to strike him, sending him into another pile of rubble.

"Pathetic!" Candy shouted, galloping towards the earth pony. Grey tried to get up, grunting in pain. He held a hoof to his side, blood pouring out of his wounds in a pool beneath him. The white earth pony slumped back to the ground as Candy towered over him. "See what I mean? You honorable types are all the same. So idealistic. So *weak*. I shall show you the error of your ways."

"No..." Grey choked out. The injured stallion thrust upward with his hoof, catching Candy across the face and knocking him back. Candy scowled as Grey pushed forward, spinning on his front legs and delivering a spectacular buck to the Ranger's chest. Grey's hooves connected with a resounding ***thud*** against Candy's power armor, denting the heavy steel chestplate. Candy dropped back again, his horn flickering under the assault. His sledgehammer fell to the ground. Grey used the opportunity to dash past the Ranger, snatching up his lance. He spun about, snarling as he charged. The lance came up, its blue energy arcing from the metal blade to the Steel Ranger's armor. He struck true, the lance's tip piercing Candy's leg. The pink stallion howled in pain, his own life force streaming from the wound.

"Fuck!" Candy shouted, flaring his horn. His sledgehammer came up in the soft pink glow of his magic, swinging wide of Grey as the white stallion withdrew his weapon. Grey ducked underneath the massive hammer and brought his lance around for another strike. The stallion grunted as he raked the tip of the weapon across Candy's chest, blazing a trail of blue electricity. I narrowed my eyes as I watched the two trade blows. Grey was beginning to suffer, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the stallion couldn't go on. Candy on the other hand, while he was injured, was also doing much better than his opponent. I suspected it had something to do with his power armor's repair spells. An unfair advantage after all, made worse by Candy's nature. As a unicorn, he wasn't slowed as badly by simple physical damage. I couldn't fault Grey's

effort, though. I could only pray silently to Luna that he would be victorious.

Grey leaped back, deflecting another of Candy's blows. The stallion winced against the force of it, as his lance was ripped out of his mouth and out of his reach. Candy sneered as he stalked forward, his sledgehammer held loftily in the air.

"How long are we going to play this game?" The Steel Ranger asked. "Let's end this now, Knight. I'll give you that honorable death you've been seeking." Grey stumbled, dropping to his knees. I gasped. His wounds were more serious than I initially had thought. He coughed again, blood pouring from his mouth. He gazed up at the Steel Ranger towering over him.

"And I told thou before... do thine worst," he managed to say as he pushed himself up. He extended his legs, no matter how much he looked like he wanted to fall. Grey glared at the Steel Ranger, panting as he struggled to stay standing. Candy grinned evilly, lifting his weapon into the air.

"My pleasure," he said, bringing the sledgehammer down onto the white stallion's head. A loud ***crack*** echoed across the clearing. Tears filled my eyes as I watched the pony who had called me Squire slump to the ground, his blood pouring from his head where Candy had struck. He hit the ground and lay there, unmoving. I snarled loudly as I pushed myself up from my position next to Steeljack and Nixis. It was unfair! It was unfair that somepony so selfless had to die like that! Blind rage replaced rational thought as I flared my wings and lit my horn, speeding across the clearing towards the Steel Ranger that had killed my friend.

"Candy!!!" I roared. The stallion's eyes went wide as I closed the gap, striking the armor-clad pony directly in the chest. My horn burned with intense fury as I lifted Candy's own weapon against him. The sledgehammer came around, striking Candy in the neck and knocking the buck to the ground. "You... you fucking monster! You killed him... He was a good pony, and you killed him! You... you don't... you don't deserve to live!" I screamed loudly, allowing my anger to cloud every amount of judgment I had ever had. I wanted to see this stallion pay for what he had done. He deserved death for all the pain he had caused.

Nurse Care, Grey Knight, he was responsible for all of it. I was going to dismantle him, turn him into paste on a wall.

An explosion shattered the air, shocking me out of my rage for a moment. I glanced behind me, noticing the three rangers that Candy had brought with him. One of them was brandishing a missile launcher. The ranger aimed again, unleashing the payload of the launcher. My horn ignited, raising up my shield spell. The missile struck the shield, exploding harmlessly against my magic. The sharp retort of Tempest's rifle filled the air as Steeljack leaped into action. His first shot took care of the missile launcher, blasting the heavy weapon into two smoldering pieces. His second shot took care of the Ranger's head. Nixis loped behind the earth pony, leaping into the fray with wild abandon as he sliced into the remaining two Rangers with his wickedly sharp claws. I returned my attention back to Cotton Candy, who was slumped over on the ground, wheezing and gasping for breath.

"It's just you and me now, Candy," I mused. "You know... you could have tried. You could have done better. You could have worked for the ponies of the Wasteland!" Candy hacked and spat, staring up at me with hatred in his eyes.

"You don't think I tried?" He hissed. "I was there... I was there when Paladin Steelhooves took control of the Rangers. I saw what trying did for them. The Wasteland doesn't want ponies who fucking try, it wants ponies who take. I tried once... and all it ever got me was nothing. I lost... I lost everything I ever cared about, Ministry Mare. I tried to do better, but better isn't me."

"Then we have nothing more to discuss," I snarled. "Prepare for the end you gave another, foul beast." I lifted the sledgehammer above the pink stallion's head. I was very prepared to bring it down, just like he had done to Grey. I struggled against my better self, feeling at war within. Candy looked down at his hooves solemnly, and I understood. If I did this... did that make me any better than him? I wanted to do it so badly, for Grey, but is that what he would have wanted? For me to taint his memory through more senseless violence?

There was no honor in it, I decided. Just like there was no honor in taking revenge for Nurse Care's death.

The lesson I'd learned in the recesses of my own mind with Twilight hit home. Grey knew what he was getting into, so did Care. They all wanted to make their own piece of the Wasteland a better one. I thought for a brief moment that I had actually figured this out already, but nothing was ever that easy. I closed my eyes, letting my magic fall away and the sledgehammer drop to the ground beside me. I opened them again to see Candy staring up at me, incredulously.

"Go," I said, dropping my shield. Battle swirled and crashed behind us. Steeljack and Nixis had downed the Rangers accompanying Candy, but off in the distance I could hear explosions and gunfire. I prayed that Violet was alright. I glanced back at the pink stallion beneath me. "Before I change my mind. There is no honor in killing you. Grey would have understood that." Candy scrambled away, pushing to his hooves and stumbling off with his sledge in tow.

"Star?" I heard Steeljack say. I glanced back at the earth pony.

"I'm alright," I replied, flaring my horn. Grey's broken and bleeding body floated away from where he had fallen. I composed the battered warrior and set him on a rough bier of rubble. "We should check on the girls, make sure they're alright. I'm worried." I smiled as I placed a hoof over Grey's glassy eyes, closing them.

"Rest well my friend. You deserve it. We will be back for you."

It didn't take long to find the rest of the fight. Just over the next ridge, the fires started again. Explosions filled the air and we found ourselves overlooking the remains of the Steel Ranger camp. The Rangers were firing at something. I glanced over at where they were firing. My eyes widened when I noticed a large group of Arlington's tribal ponies were attacking the camp. At their head was Violet, laying down a steady stream of silver fire. The robot, Equestria Prime, stood tall over the chaos. It appeared to still be shut down. A part of the Ranger's fire was diverted at the top of the robot, where a black speck flew back and forth to draw their attention.

"Looks like they need some help," I said. Nixis and Steeljack nodded. "Let's go give them some help." I charged forward, unlatching Stargazer as I ran. My gun came up, spraying a field of bullets at a nearby group of Rangers, striking the ground in front of them. A few of them glanced up as we launched into the fray, clearly surprised at our presence. I roared, smashing the first Ranger to dare come close in the face with Stargazer. Running through the small group, I managed to catch up with Violet while Nixis and Steeljack took point.

"Star?" She said, her eyes wide. I smiled softly as I came up next to her. We fell back into the ranks of the tribal ponies, taking a minor breather amidst the chaos of the battle.

"You alright?" I asked. She nodded.

"We're doing our best to try and give Patch the time she needs," she said. "I'm not sure what's going on up there. What happened to you guys? Where's Grey?" I averted my gaze.

"He... he didn't make it," I said quietly. Violet's eyes widened.

"What? How?" She asked. I gritted my teeth, lifting Stargazer and firing at a nearby Ranger.

"Cotton Candy," I simply said. "It was... it was how he would have wanted it. But there's no time for that, we have to help Patch." Violet nodded, her expression fearful. I moved to open my wings, but stopped after a hoof landed on my shoulder.

"Star... you didn't...?" My love said. I sighed and shook my head.

"I... I wanted to," I said. "I... We'll talk later, okay?" I fled into the sky, pushing all the pain and anger from the duel into my ascent. Equestria Prime was my target. Lilith hovered over the massive robot, firing off missile after missile from the Bitch. I soared towards the pegasus as swiftly as I could, dodging shots from the Rangers below. "Lilith!" I shouted, catching my friend's attention. Below the black mare I could see Patch, her muzzle buried in an open panel on the back of the robot.

"Star? What are you doing here?" Lilith shouted back.

"I came to see if Patch needed any help," I said. Lilith nodded.

"She's trying her best, but I don't know if she can get it working or not," the pegasus said. "At the very least, we've managed to keep the Rangers from powering it up." I nodded in response, folding my wings and landing next to my earth pony friend. She was muttering to herself under her breath.

"Come on... work dammit!" Patch shouted, pounding on the panel with her hoof. "Why won't this stinkin' thing work?!"

"Patch?" I said softly. The green mare looked up, sighing.

"Star... I'm not sure I can do it," she said. I smiled softly.

"Then I guess it's plan B," I replied. "If the computer isn't going to bend to your will, let's plant the explosives and pop this thing." Patch drooped, kicking a twist of wire off the sloping hull.

"Yeah... I planted the explosives while I was working my way into this thing, but..." She sighed, staring down at the open panel. Wires and electronic thingummies ran in every direction, a cosmic puzzle in literal technicolor. Patch smiled wistfully at the inner workings of the robot. "To think though... a piece of history... gone down the drain."

"Better that it's gone than in the wrong hooves, right?" I offered. Patch nodded.

"You're right," she said. Her hooves moved in a flash, switching up the diodes here and there. She closed the panel with a grin. "It's done. I sent the signal to power on the robot. We'd better get out of here, and pronto. This thing is gonna blow up bigger than a skyscraper I'm guessing."

"Hop on," I said, extending my wings. Patch grinned and leaped onto my back. I took to the skies once more, calling out a warning to Lilith to follow us. Equestria Prime's eyes flickered to life, and a steady hum began to emit from the metal monstrosity.

"INITIATING STARTUP SEQUENCE... WARNING... INITIALIZATION SEQUENCE ERROR... POWER CORE CATASTROPHIC FAILURE IMMINENT." the robot suddenly spouted. A flash of silver erupted from below us as Violet shot off Thunder Flash at the Rangers, who had begun retreating at Prime's declaration. The tribal ponies began to pull back as well. I surged forward, landing among the crowd of tribals next to Violet. Patch leaped from my back to the ground and continued galloping. We had just crested the next ridge when the hum emanating from the robot began to get louder.

"POWER CORES AT CRITICAL TEMPERATURE... OVERLOAD IMMINENT... OVERLOAD IMMINENT... GOOD-BY--" the robot screamed. It never got a chance to finish before its head exploded violently. The rest of the robot's body followed soon after, the metal spraying outward from the epicenter of the explosion. Those Rangers who had been dumb enough to stay near the robot were decimated in a matter of seconds. I glanced back, seeing the rush of debris and shrapnel heading towards our group. We weren't going to make it very far before the stuff impacted. I gritted my teeth, spinning about and igniting my horn. It was as good a time as ever to see if Twilight was right about my magic.

"Everypony, stay down!" I shouted as I released the spell. A massive purple wall flared into existence around the group, managing to appear just as several large pieces of metal struck it. The shield held under the stress of the shrapnel, dissipating the force of the blows across the entirety of the surface of the glowing wall. I grinned. My horn felt perfectly fine! Twilight was right after all! I breathed a sigh of relief as I stood tall against the onslaught of metal and fire.

Then I felt it. It was there in the back of my mind. Something didn't feel right about this. The shield spell, while it was no longer causing me pain... was doing something else to me. I couldn't quite place what it was, but I felt all the voices, all the memories, all the emotions... they got stronger. I grunted, sending the message up into my mind to cut off the spell. My horn dimmed as the purple wall disappeared. Thankfully, the chaos that had split the air seconds ago had subsided. The intense feeling I had went away. What was that? I thought, shaking my head. Was it some sort of residual energy left over from Spark? I wasn't sure, but I bet Twilight knew about it somehow. Granted, she had said to take it easy with my magic and practice before I did anything stupid. Chalking the problem up to my own inexperience, I slumped to my haunches and gazed

out upon the burning ridge. The robot's legs were still intact for the most part, standing absurdly ponylike and smoldering smokily. There was no sign of any of the Rangers. They were gone! I sat there watching the wreckage burn, not sure for how long.

Grey... I thought, sighing. We were victorious... but we lost so much in the process. So many of this town's good ponies died. You... you died. But we helped them.

"You did it," a voice said from behind me finally. I turned around, seeing a muddy brown earth pony mare. It was one of the tribal ponies. I managed a soft smile, a soft gasp escaping my throat as I realized that the townsp ponies were carrying a body under a red cloak. It was Grey.

"No," I said, trying not to cry. I stood shakily, pointing a hoof at the body of the stallion. "He did it. He's the real hero. Now... let's see what we can do to help you get back on your feet."

The next day felt like things had returned mostly to normal. A cursory sweep of the area had revealed that the Rangers had indeed fled the area in the aftermath of Equestria Prime's destruction. I was sure they wouldn't be coming back anytime soon. Once we had known for sure, we started helping the ponies of Arlington move back out of the Stable and onto the land once more. Medical supplies, weapons, and even furniture were brought up from the underground bunker. Tribesponies raided the now cooled metal pieces of the robot and had begun working them into crude walls to start rebuilding the town.

I trotted along next to Muddy Waters, the mare who had spoken to me and brought me out of my thoughts the day before. The earth pony had taken to a leadership position amongst the Arlington ponies, and apparently was a close friend of Nurse Care's. Muddy explained how she had sent the force in to assist Violet when she realized that the Rangers had found my friends out.

Our journey led us a short ways outside of the town proper, where a small group of ponies (and one hellhound) waited for our arrival. The group had gathered around two crude stones placed in the dirt.

Beyond these two, several rows of the same types of stones littered the small area. I stepped forward into the crowd, catching Violet's eye and smiling softly. My marefriend had a pained look on her face, but she nodded all the same. The silence was unnerving as I stopped finally in between the two stones. I turned to the others, doing my best to keep spirits high.

"I didn't know either Nurse Care or Grey Knight very well, I must admit. I couldn't tell you what their favorite color was, or whether they liked Sugar Apple Bombs or not..." I started to say, breaking the awkward silence. "But I knew the most important thing about them. They had heart. Nurse Care... she did her best to fix us up when we first came here and even when we returned. She was truly loyal and caring to the very end, sacrificing herself to bring peace to us all." I ran a hoof over the stone that belonged to the deceased friend and smiled. I glanced down at the other stone and grimaced.

"Grey... Grey was a good pony. And furthermore, he was a good friend, even if he acted strange or if he said weird things. He strove to do the right thing always. To preserve his honor. I know that somewhere... he's with Celestia. Both of these ponies died to protect this town, seeking only to do what was right and just, not what was fast and easy. That my little ponies... is what we call fighting the good fight. And so... we must carry on, for them. And though it may hurt our hearts to say goodbye, we must remember... you never really do say goodbye. Only 'see you later'." I stopped, tears filling my eyes. The silence of the moment permeated everything around us. The tribals and my friends stepped forward, saying what little words they could to the graves before heading out. Violet and the others waited nearby as I sat in front of Grey's stone.

"Thank you... Knight..." I said softly, touching the cold hard stone with a hoof. "Thank you for showing me the right way to do things. And not the easy way." I steeled my gaze and stood. If I was going to follow an example, I was going to do it the right way. I had to take my own advice for a change, and fight the good fight. And I was going to start by going after Spark.

"Star?" Violet said, placing her hoof on my shoulder. "You ready to head back?" I nodded solemnly, turning away from the stone and trotting beside her. As we trotted along, I let myself fall back into the familiarity of our little group, my little family. Patch and Lilith were bouncing along, giggling like schoolfillies, while

Nixis and Steeljack appeared to be in deep conversation about something or other. Violet strode next to me, keeping close watch over us all. I could see it in her eyes, her resolve. The mare would die before she would let another friend of ours perish. I knew it in my heart. I simply hoped that it would never come to pass.

We made our way back down into the Stable, where our things were still laid out in the Infirmary. We all needed rest from the exhausting trials we had endured. I flopped down onto the bedroll and sighed as I rolled over. Violet laid next to me, while Patch and Lilith watched as Steeljack and Nixis pulled out a board of some kind, playing a strange game of strategy using bullet casings for game pieces. The two mares were discussing the calibers of the casings while the hellhound grinned toothily at the earth pony. Yes... my own little slice of family.

"Violet," I said softly. "I... I know we talked already, but I want you to know something..."

"What is it?" My love replied.

"When I was fighting Candy, I wanted to kill him. I wanted it so badly I could taste it. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't tarnish Grey's memory like that," I said, my voice shaking with every word. "I know that sometimes this world... this Wasteland... it makes us do things that we shouldn't do. Was I... was I somehow wrong to not kill him? Would I have been doing the Wasteland a favor?" Violet rolled over and smiled softly.

"That's what makes you a good pony, sweetie. You question yourself, and your own actions," she said. "You are a good pony, Star. Grey would have been proud of what you did." I nodded, yawning. I was more tired than I had realized. Laying my head next to my love, I closed my eyes and let the world drift away into dreamland.

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The library door swung open before me. I wondered just what Twilight was playing at, seeking me out again. Still, I wasn't as upset. I had something I needed to ask her. I pushed through the doorway, glancing about the empty and dark library. The purple mare appeared at the far end of the aisles, her horn bristling with light as she rearranged the books on the shelves. She glanced up, seeing me and smiling.

"Star," she said curtly. "What are you doing here?"

"You tell me," I replied. "Why am I here?"

"I honestly have no idea. You must have subconsciously traveled here," Twilight said, cocking her head. I sighed.

"I did want to talk to you, Twilight. Something... something happened," I said finally. "When I used my magic, I felt something... terrible. Something in the back of my mind. It wasn't burnout, but it didn't feel... right." Twilight smiled wryly.

"Oh?" She said. "I'm certain it was nothing, Star. You're probably just getting used to your magic being more powerful again."

"I... I suppose you're right," I said, placing a hoof up to my face. I chuckled. It seemed rather silly once I had thought about it. "Alright then, so... I suppose I'll be going then." Twilight paused, motioning at me to follow her.

"Actually... there is one thing," the alicorn said. "A memory if you will. A rather important one." She pointed at a book on the shelf. The spine was emblazoned with her cutie mark. She lifted it off the shelf with her magic, opening it. A moving picture appeared on its pages.

"What is it?" I said curiously. Twilight pointed at the picture.

"Touch it. It will allow you access to the memory," she said. I looked at the other mare curiously, but decided to do what she had said. My hoof touched the page, color and light pouring out of the book all around me. I fell into the memory and everything went white. My eyes reopened and I felt myself in a familiar body. My host's wings flexed as she flew through the air. I sensed that this was one of the only times that the mare got to actually fly. She soared over Canterlot's spires, the wind whipping through her mane.

"Enjoying yourself this morning, I see," a voice from back in my host's mind said. It was a very familiar voice.

"Of course," my host said. "I never get to just fly. No pony's up, so it doesn't really matter."

"Don't forget that you have a meeting in a few hours," Spark said. *"A joint meeting of the Ministry Mares, no less. I'm surprised you six are actually getting together. Aren't we on bad terms with Laughter?"*

"It's just business, Spark," Twilight said, snorting. "You know that. I'm sure that they'll bring up Shining again though. I don't know why they don't just leave well enough alone."

"They do care about us," Spark mused. *"That's why we're doing this, remember that Twilight. When we're done with the spell to bring your brother back, we can help all of your friends."*

"I know that, I do. But I just can't keep telling them that I'm fine. They know, Spark. They know something is up," Twilight replied, flapping her wings slightly as she landed on the roof of the Ministry of Arcane Science Canterlot hub. Her wings snapped to her sides, the appendages disappearing with a flare of her horn.

"Let them talk," Spark replied. *"They'll know the truth soon enough."* Twilight snickered as she tapped a button on the elevator that took her down into her office. Twilight sat at her chair, pulling up a document on her terminal. The writings on it were archaic in nature, and I couldn't exactly understand them.

"These artifacts are difficult to translate," she said aloud. "Even with Daring's notes, I'm not even sure I can figure them out. What the hell do they mean?"

"This is the last crucial piece before you can cast the spell, Twilight," Spark said. *"I believe you can do it. I know you can."* Twilight sighed.

"I sure hope you're right," she said as the memory faded away. The colors and light surrounded me once more and I found myself in front of Twilight in the library once more. I cocked my head at the alicorn.

"That was... rather short," I said. Twilight snorted.

"Spark thought she had me figured out," she replied. "Right after that was when the other Elements tried to... you know already..."

"The meeting?" I asked. Twilight nodded her head solemnly.

"I wasn't expecting it. My friends had nothing to do with it, of course," she said. "That was when I really knew that something was wrong with Spark, and that it was up to me to stop her. The other Elements tried, but she was too strong. I felt her in the back of my mind all the time after that, always prodding me, always pushing to finish the spell. I wanted you to see that because you need to remember what you're up against. She sounds nice, and she acts like she wants to be your friend, but she's not. She's bad news, Star."

"Twilight, I understand how you feel," I said. "But that still doesn't change my mind. I'm sorry. I think I have to go now." I turned towards the door of the library, ignoring the mare's cries of indignation. I glanced back at her. "Next time, don't call me. I'll call you." The library filtered away, and I woke up.

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I awoke in darkness once again, sighing as I luxuriated in the warmth of the bedroll. I glanced around the dark room. I was alone. Stretching out my legs, I pushed myself up. It appeared that most of our things had been packed. Stargazer sat next to our saddlebags, looking as pristine as ever. I smiled. I guessed that Patch had decided to keep herself a little busy while I was sleeping. The door opened as I turned to leave, revealing Violet.

"Hey," she said. I waved. "You alright?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Rested, at least. How long was I out? You guys already packed."

"You were out for only a few hours. Don't worry," Violet said, chuckling. "We just figured that you'd want to be ready to head out to Manehattan." I nodded.

"I... I am," I said softly. "I think that we need to go. These ponies will be fine with all of this tech to back

them up. They don't need us anymore.”

“You'd be wrong, but I'll understand if you don't want to stay,” a voice from behind Violet said. Muddy Waters stood in the doorway, smiling. “We could still use your help, of course. A place to stay, roof over your head. You'd be more than welcome.”

“Muddy, I'm sure that would be excellent. But there's some bad things going on out there in the Wastes. I have somepony I need to save,” I said. Muddy nodded.

“Well then, this is where we part ways then,” the brown mare said. “Safe travels to you, Ministry Mare.”

“And to you,” I said, igniting my horn. My saddlebags flew into the air, landing on my back. “Violet. Let's get back to the others. We're getting out of here.” My love smiled, her horn flaring as well. Her bags latched to her back, Thunder Flash attached to her harness. We made our way beside Muddy towards the Stable entrance. I stopped for a second, noticing a familiar green mare sitting in the Overmare's office. I motioned for Violet and Muddy to go on ahead and stepped inside.

“Patch?” I said cautiously, startling my friend. She had tears rolling down her face. “Are... you alright?”

“I... Sorry, Star... I was just thinking about this Stable and reading the logs... it's just...” She said, blubbering. I smiled softly and laid a hoof on her shoulder. Patch pointed at the screen.

“By Celestia, they were only foals, Star. Children. They were children when they were sent into this place, and they didn't understand why... And I still can't figure out what happened when they grew up, Star...” My friend continued. “It's just... too much.” I laid my wing around the poor crying mare and nodded.

“Patch... I know that this is hard for you. We may never know what happened to the ponies here,” I said.

“But we can take this knowledge and remember them. Their existence will not be forgotten.” Patch glanced down at my PipBuck, and I smiled. I connected the device to the terminal, downloading all of the information to it. “There. Anytime you want to read them, let me know.”

“Thanks, Star. I just... I just...” My friend said, tearing up again. I pulled the mare into a hug. We sat there for several moments before I spoke once more.

“I know. Now clear those tears, and let's get out of this place, alright?” I said. Patch nodded, wiping away the tears with a fetlock. I disconnected my PipBuck and we trotted out of the office. We made our way shortly out into the day ahead of us. The others were waiting outside. Patch silently walked up to Steeljack and gave him a brief hug. The stallion smiled, returning the hug. I leaned into Violet and beamed at the rest of our little group.

“So... everyone ready to go?” I asked.

“As always, my friend,” Nixis said, grinning toothily. The others nodded and we began to trot out of the town. The ponies working waved as we left, moving back into the Wasteland at large. We stopped briefly at the graveyard outside of the town. A few moments of silence later, we were on our way. The sun had risen overhead, shining brightly upon the Wastes. We moved with purpose, heading towards the map marker I had made for Manehattan. We passed through the swampland we had first met Cranky in, making our way back into the main part of the country. We stepped out onto an old highway, the cracked road stretching on beneath our feet as we passed several abandoned buildings. On a whim, I decided to flick on my radio, seeing if I could pick up a certain unicorn's broadcast. After a while, a brash voice filled the air around us.

“Hellooo children! That's right, it's me again, your good old pal DJ-PON3. And it's time for some news!

Wasteland children of the Manehattan area, beware. I'm getting reports of attacks on the outlying settlements of the city. I don't have much specifics on what's going down, but all I know is that the attacker is some sort of rogue alicorn with a green coat and black mane. Now I know what you all are saying out there, are the alicorns bad once more? I don't think so, children. Our friends in the Followers of the Apocalypse are still right here with us. They're good ponies, through and through.

This one though? She's bad news children. Steer clear of the outlying settlements, and keep your assault rifle loaded and handy. Do not, and I repeat, do NOT engage this thing if you have a choice. Run, hide, do

anything.

In other news, I've gotten a message from my counterpart up north in the city of Chicacolt. It seems our old friend the Ministry Mare was in the city for quite some time, and boy oh boy did she shake things up! If you're ever in the area stop in, Ministry Mare. We'll share stories of good times.

Thanks for listening children! Now have some music."

I glanced over at Violet, raising an eyebrow. Her eyes were wide.

"An alicorn with a black mane and green coat?" She said. I nodded.

"There's only one alicorn I know that is like that," I said. "Spark."

"What is she doing down in Manehattan?" Patch asked, voicing the obvious question. I shook my head.

"I'm not sure, but I intend to find out," I said. A rustling noise from a nearby ruined building caught my attention, my ears perking up. "Did anypony hear that?"

"Yeah," Steeljack said, spinning about, Tempest's rifle swinging out onto the stallion's battle saddle. I looked cautiously at the nearby building, flicking on my E.F.S. Two blue blips appeared directly in front of us. I lifted a hoof.

"Stand down, Steeljack. They're non-hostile," I said softly. The stallion nodded, stowing away the rifle. I stepped towards the building, when suddenly a flash of fur and feathers zipped out from the ruined entrance. It was a little griffon cub, a female. Her feathers topped out in a light shade of dyed blue. She stopped in front of us, smiling brightly and her eyes wide with awe.

"Touch! It's them! We found them!" She shouted behind her. "Come on out!"

"Who...?" I said, cocking my head in confusion. *Something* moved out of the building's only entrance. A purple puddle of ooze lifted out of the ground, forming into a vague shape with holes for eyes and a gaping maw for a mouth. It settled next to the griffon cub, quivering with excitement.

"Featherjoy, it is them!" The thing's voice erupted. I blinked.

"Smooze?" I said. The Smooze glanced over at me and frowned, extending a pseudopod pleadingly.

"Radiant Star. I'm so glad we found you - we need your help."

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached.

Quest Perk! Broken Block: All of your spells are increased by one rank, and no longer causes magical burnout.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

New Weapon/Armor! Tempest: Your DR is increased to 80, and your new rifle packs quite a wallop!

Patch: Level Up!

New Perk! Robot Overloader: Your experience in attempting to sabotage a giant robot has done you some good! You gain +20 to your Science and Repair skills when dealing with robotics and robotic systems. Turrets shake in fear of your mighty talent!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 24: Return to Dust, Part 1

She's getting bored, and we have to buy Rarity some more time. I'll see if Shining Armor can come help. Can't one of you other ponies take over in the meantime?

Innocence. Innocence is something that most don't see in the Wasteland these days. Even with things getting better all the time, nopony is truly innocent. Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, some dark secret that proves that they aren't all good. Celestia knows I have my fair share. Even if my sins burned away with the Goddess, the clean slate I had been granted in a blaze of balefire was covered in black marks...

I wonder, though. Was I ever truly innocent? I don't remember anything before my time in the Goddess, so I can't rightly say. How then, do I know what innocence is? Is it some intangible virtue that says I am pure and uncorrupted? Or is it something far greater?

I wish I had some idea, but I don't. All I know for a certainty is that I am not innocent. I have spilled blood, and it rests upon my hooves. I do not know how much more I can take.

"Smooze?" I asked, blinking my eyes. "Is it really you?" The purple goo's face contorted, what appeared to be a smile surfacing on its slimy features. The thing's head shifted, nodding slowly. The griffon cub that the Smooze had called Featherjoy stayed deathly silent, looking up at me with awe in her wide eyes.

"It is," the Smooze said. "However, that is no longer my name. I would like you to call me Finishing Touch now. It is so good to see all of you again."

"You too," Patch said, grinning. The others nodded in response. "Where the heck have you been?"

"It's... it's a long story. Best to tell it someplace safe, however," the purple being replied. "This building appeared safe enough when we arrived. Follow me." He began to trudge towards the building's entrance, which had been blown inward. As we entered, I realized that it used to be a school. We made our way to one of the building's ruined classrooms. The dust of centuries covered the room, an untouched film of age.

Featherjoy loped along behind me, her eyes still drawn to me every chance she got. Whenever I looked over at her, she would avert her gaze. I smiled softly as the young griffon followed me to her friend, sitting quiescently in the middle of the room. Finishing Touch appeared to be lost in thought, the black holes where his eyes were closed up. Featherjoy poked him in the side, and he looked over at where we were all sitting.

"So... We're safe here, for the moment," I said. "How can I help?"

"It's probably best that I start at the beginning," Touch said. "You see... after I left you at the museum, I wandered the Wasteland for a time. Whenever I would come near other ponies, they would either run in fear or try to shoot at me."

“Boring, get to the part where you met me and the Professor!” Featherjoy said impatiently. Touch's features shifted into an expression of annoyance.

“Now, Featherjoy, what did the Professor say about being impatient?” He said. Featherjoy slumped.

“That good things come to those who wait,” she replied glumly. “Sorry, Touch.”

“It's alright, I was getting to that part,” Touch said. “In any case Miss Star, I wasn't quite sure what to do. I tried to offer my friendship to others, following your lesson, but I couldn't seem to get anypony to stick around. That is, until I ran across the Professor and his caravan.”

“The Professor?” Violet asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Professor Osmosis,” the purple thing said. “His caravan was trapped inside an abandoned building that I happened upon in my travels. The structure of the roof had weakened, collapsing in on the group while they were scavenging the ruins. I used pieces of my body to remove the rubble, freeing them. They were certainly astounded by their rescue! The situation was developing poorly, as I had accustomed to. But the Professor told their guards to stand down. Afterwards, he explained that he was working for a group of educated ponies from Canterbridge, known as the Seekers of Truth.”

“I've heard of them,” Steeljack said. “They're a buncha eggheads who scavenge dangerous ruins.”

“Indeed. As it turns out, the Professor was actually headed into Chicacolt to attempt to scavenge the ruins of the museum that you found me in,” Touch said. “I... I told him that I came from there. He said that he knew. He knew that I was special somehow, and that I held some sort of connection to the past. That's also where I met young Featherjoy here. It was she who gave me my name.” Featherjoy beamed at the mention of her name. “The Professor was extremely excited to be able to study me. He even taught me how to speak more clearly, so I could be better understood by others. Everything seemed like it was going well, until...”

“Until what?” I asked, noticing that Featherjoy had become extremely uncomfortable all of a sudden. The purple being placed a dripping hand on the griffon's shoulder, smiling.

“The Professor... he wanted to go back to the Museum. Where you found me,” Touch said after a few moments of silence. “He wanted to find out where I came from. He kept saying something about there being a 'missing piece'. It wasn't until we made it to the Museum itself that things... went wrong.”

“What happened?” Violet said, narrowing her eyes.

“We spent several days searching through the museum's ruins. Of course, we found nothing. We couldn't even locate the room that you had found me in. It was... strange. It was as if the museum itself prevented me from finding it,” Touch continued. “After three days we decided to leave. On our way out, we were confronted by several ponies. The Professor... he told Featherjoy and I to hide. We heard shouting.”

“Who were they?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, I don't know who they were. Neither did Featherjoy, but the Professor acted like he

did. After a few minutes I heard the most terrifying thing I'd ever heard in my life. Loud blasts and screaming came from where the Professor was. It was inequine," the purple creature said. "We dared to peek out. The Professor's leg had been shot off. There was... blood everywhere. The Professor shouted at us to flee. I grabbed Featherjoy and we ran as far as we could deeply into the city."

"So... how did you end up here?" I said.

"We kept running as far as we could. Our pursuers came after us, but we were able to use the alleys to get away from them," Touch replied. "We were thankfully able to lose them, but we got lost. For several days we kept to the shadows, moving only at night. It was... difficult. I spent much time trying to explain to Featherjoy what had happened, but I did not fully understand it myself. I'm not sure how long it took us, but we finally reached a small settlement called Theater."

"Theater?" Lilith said. "As in the MMMM outpost?"

"Correct," Touch said. "The ponies there were friendly, but cautious, having never seen one of my kind. I remembered your friend, the cream colored one known as Apple Danish. Featherjoy managed to convince the guards to let us see him. Apparently this was right after you had left. Danish gave us a place to stay in a nearby building, and provided Featherjoy with food and drink. It was the first safe night we'd had in days."

"And now you're here. I assume that means you've been following us," I said. Finishing Touch nodded slowly.

"I didn't know who else to turn to. I fear that these ponies, whoever they are, are still after me," he said. "And... I've grown attached to young Featherjoy here. She is... my first true friend. I do not wish for any harm to come to her."

"Do not worry, my friend," I said with a soft smile. "I will not allow anything to befall you and the young one." Touch nodded slowly.

"Then, I feel it is prudent to mention that just a day or so ago, I came across a small group of these ponies in the area," he said. "They did not see me, but I overheard them talking about us. I would... I would ask if you might consider talking to these ponies and find out why they want us." Featherjoy stood, her expression indignant.

"Touch, you didn't tell me about that!" She crowed. Her small wings flared.

"Featherjoy, I didn't tell you because we were alone. I couldn't risk approaching them, with or without you," Touch replied. "I didn't want you to worry." Featherjoy slumped to her haunches, looking defeated.

"I... I know, but I still do. You're one of my best friends. I don't want them to take you away," she said. I smiled softly, inching forward to lay a wing over the young griffon. Her eyes widened as I touched her.

"And I won't let that happen," I said. "We will go to these ponies and find out why they have been chasing you. No matter what, I will not let them take him. But you have to be strong for both of us, and stay here."

“But – “ Featherjoy started to protest.

“Agreed,” Touch interjected. “Featherjoy and I will remain in this building. If we went with you, there is a chance that things could go wrong, and neither of us are fighters. We would be in the way.” I glanced back at the others and smiled. I looked over at the Smooze.

“So... where are these ponies now?” I asked, placing my PipBuck in front of the purple thing and turning on its mapping function.

“They should be... here,” he replied, pointing at a location on the map. I placed a marker on the location and nodded. Featherjoy was continuing to watch with a gleam in her eyes. The young griffon hesitantly stepped forward.

“I didn't really get to say it before, but... wow,” she said quietly. “You're really her. You're the Ministry Mare.” I flashed at smile at the young cub.

“Yes, I suppose so,” I said. To be honest, I didn't feel like I deserved the title, but it was mine nonetheless.

“Touch has told me all about you, and we listened to the radio a lot in the caravan, so we heard everypony talking about what you were doing,” the griffon rambled. “You're like... the coolest pony ever!!” Her eyes were wide and she smiled even wider. I couldn't help but chuckle.

“I... I don't know what to say,” I said. “Say Featherjoy, before we leave, would you like to meet all my friends? Seeing as how the radio doesn't exactly talk about them too much.” Featherjoy lit up and she nodded ecstatically. I smiled widely. How often would I get the chance to talk about my friends for a change? They were the best part of my life. Touch nodded and smiled as well as he molded back into the ruined couch. I motioned over at Violet. “This is Violet. She's pretty much one of the coolest ponies I know.” My lover rolled her eyes.

“Please. I'm not *that* cool,” she said. I grinned.

“Yes, you are. Anyways, Violet's special talent is protecting the ones she loves. She's pretty smart, and tough too,” I replied. I glanced over at Steeljack, who had removed Tempest's helmet, and Patch. The two were talking quietly in the corner. “And that is Steeljack, and his marefriend Patch. Steeljack is strong, and he has a good level head on his shoulders. Patch, well... she's a little impulsive. But she's very smart, and knows a lot about weapons. She built her own rifle all by herself.”

“Wow...” Featherjoy cooed. I pointed over at Lilith. The black mare was pushing against the wall, dipping her wings in a peculiar pegasus stretch.

“That's Lilith. She's a pegasus. She used to go by a different name, but now she's changed. She's a fierce friend, and very agile. No pony can take her in a straight fight. I doubt even I could,” I said. Lilith grinned at hearing my praise, raising a bladed wing in a wave at the young griffon. I heard Nixis behind me, and turned to greet him with a smile. Nixis nodded a greeting in return, eyes on the grifflet. Featherjoy pulled her rapt gaze off of Lilith to turn with me, and squeaked in alarm. My smile widened into a grin as the young grifflet dived behind me with a squawk. I nudged her out of hiding with my wing.

Nixis had squatted, his big knuckley hands loosely clenched to conceal his wicked claws. He smiled, taking care to not show any teeth as he spoke to the cowering Featherjoy.

“Do not fear me, dear child,” he said softly.

“W-W-What are you?” Featherjoy replied.

“I am a hellhound,” Nixis said. “A sort of... dog breed, if you will. But while my body is fierce and intimidating, my soul and mind are not. Take heart, little one. Though many bad things rule this Wasteland we live in, I seek the path of the Lightbringer to show others that I am not one of them.”

“The... The Lightbringer?” Featherjoy said, sounding less scared as she pushed herself up to look at Nixis more clearly.

“Yes. It is by her example that I live, in hopes of the day that all races of the Wasteland can put aside their differences, and live in peace,” Nixis said. I smiled softly.

“You see, Featherjoy, all those things you heard on the radio? I never could have done them without my friends. They're as much a part of this as I am. I owe them everything.” I said, lowering my voice so that only she and I could hear each other. “That's why I want you to promise me something, between you and me.”

“What?”

“Never let go of your friend there. He's going to need you, and you will need him.”

An abandoned power station sat in the bowled terrain below the next ridge. Despite this area not being part of a major city, there were still plenty of old buildings around. Many of them were either industrial production sites or old warehouses that companies stored items in during the war. My E.F.S. lit with several amber blips. From our vantage point in a nearby office, we could see a few guards standing outside the entrance to the power station. Strangely enough, my E.F.S. wasn't marking them as hostile. I narrowed my eyes.

“Lilith, Nixis. You two hang back in case there's trouble. If we need to escape, we'll need your support,” I said. The hellhound and pegasus nodded, the latter tapping a button on her power armor to unload the Bitch from its casing. “Steeljack, Patch, Violet. You three are with me. Let's go say hello.” I stood, igniting my horn and enveloping us in a teleportation spell that dropped us in front of the building below. We started moving forward towards the power station, cautiously and openly approaching so that the guards could have ample time to see us. I wanted to talk to these ponies, not shoot them. The two standing outside perked up as we trotted up.

“Halt,” one of the two, a blue unicorn stallion, called out. “Who are you?”

“I'm... a friend,” I said. “I wish to speak with your leader.”

“Inquisitor Truth Seeker is busy at the moment,” the unicorn replied.

“And when might we be able to see him then?” Violet asked. The unicorn shook his head.

“The Inquisitor will be busy for some time. No pony just gets to see him,” he replied brusquely. I sighed.

“Look, all I want to do is talk to your leader about my friend. You're chasing after him,” I said. The unicorn's ears perked forward.

“You have information on the creature?” He said. I nodded, not sure what else to do. The unicorn looked over at his compatriot and nodded. The other guard, a white earth pony mare, trotted to the door of the power station and disappeared inside. A few moments later the door opened again. The blue unicorn smiled. “Please enter. I apologize for the brusque behavior. All who seek knowledge are welcome to the Magisterium.”

“The Magis-what?” I said, cocking my head. The unicorn chuckled.

“I believe the Inquisitor can explain further,” he said, motioning for us to follow him. We fell in line behind the blue unicorn, trudging into the dark hall of the power station. The hall ended in a door that led into a series of stairs going down. The unicorn stopped, pointing down the stairs. “Down the stairs, and first door on the left. He will be expecting you.”

“Wait, how does he --?” I started to ask, turning to the unicorn. My eyes widened when I realized that he was gone. “Where did he...?”

“I don't know, but I don't think we have any choice but to go meet with this Inquisitor,” Violet said. I nodded and started down the stairs. The soft clapping of our hooves was the only sound in the dark stairwell. Another hallway met us at the bottom. We moved down the hall with purpose, stopping at the first door to the left like the unicorn had told us. I lifted a hoof to rap at the door. The steel door swung open before I could touch it, revealing a small room lined with equipment. In the center of the room was a red unicorn stallion, sitting with his back to us. I stepped into the room.

“Hello?” I said. No response. “Umm... my name is --”

“Radiant Star,” the unicorn said. He stood, turning about. His dark black mane fell off his shoulders in waves and a flash of white accompanied his grin. A bright light emanated from one of the pony's eyes. The soft glint of metal could be seen in the low light. He was a cyberpony! My eyes widened. “Yes... I know who you are. There are not many that haven't been to the broken city who do not.”

“If you know who I am, you also know why I am here,” I said. The unicorn chuckled softly.

“Always to business, I see. Forgive me for being a rude host. I am Inquisitor Truth Seeker. I am the leader of the Magisterium,” he replied. “We are the seekers of forgotten knowledge, the hunters of lore long lost to this world. In short, we are scholars and archaeologists.”

“And cold-blooded murderers as well,” I said angrily. “Or did you forget what happened to my friend's friend the Professor?” Truth Seeker sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

“Yes... that was most unfortunate business. I admit that was not one of our better moments, but our

current mission must not fail, lest the world suffer for our efforts,” he replied.

“And just what is your mission?” Violet said.

“We are seeking a creature that has the potential to destroy the world as we know it,” Truth Seeker said calmly. “It is a being of great power, comprised of a material that can corrupt all that it touches.” He grinned as he saw our expressions. “Yes... you call it the Smooze.”

“And... what do you want with him?” I asked hesitantly.

“Him? How interesting, you have assigned a gender to it. Do you know what this creature truly is?” Truth Seeker asked in response. “It will overtake the world. Everything will suffer under its cruel power.”

“I don't believe you. He's not evil. He's more of a child than anything else,” I said.

“A ploy, nothing more. I have seen the truth, Radiant Star. The thing is the myth come to life, the ancient Smooze come to take the world for its own unknown intentions,” Truth Seeker said. “If we do not do something, we will all fall.” I narrowed my eyes at the unicorn. I had no intention of letting another friend go. I had failed Grey, Cranky, and Diamond. I had failed Lucky. But the lessons I had learned from those failures kept me strong, kept me sane. I would not let a friend die. I couldn't.

“Truth Seeker,” I said finally. “May we have a moment to discuss this, in private?” The red unicorn nodded.

“Of course, of course. You have no idea how refreshing it is to deal with somepony who has a basic level of civility,” he said. “I have to attend to business. You may stay here as long as you would like. I will return within the hour.” The unicorn stepped past us and left the power room. I sighed and slumped to the ground.

“I don't like this,” Patch said. Steeljack nodded in agreement.

“If the Smooze was such a great and terrible thing, why would it run? And with the young cub no less?” Steeljack pondered aloud.

“He wouldn't. I don't know about this Truth Seeker, but I do know that Touch isn't bad. I doubt that he's even close to being the Smooze that these ponies think he is,” I said.

“Then what else is he?” Patch said. “I mean, if he's not this legendary evil poised to take over the world, what is he really?”

“He's a friend,” Violet said softly. “He helped us get out of that museum by destroying that security system. We can't let these ponies get to him.”

“I agree,” I said. “We've got to convince Truth Seeker to leave him alone.”

“And how do we do that?” Steeljack said. “They don't seem bad, but if they won't stop, how long before it escalates into a fight?”

"I... I don't know," I said. I glanced at the ground, and sighed. "But we'll think of something." A loud sneeze emanated from one of my saddlebags. My eyes widened as I looked back at them. "Did... anypony just hear that?"

"That sounded like...", Violet said, her horn glowing as it unclasped the saddlebag. Tucked inside was a young female griffon. Featherjoy looked up at us, grinning sheepishly.

"Umm... hi?" She said. I groaned loudly.

"Featherjoy?" I asked. "What in the world are you doing here? Touch is going to be so worried about you! Angry, too!"

"I'm quite angry, yes," a voice from nowhere said. I blinked. My other saddlebag popped open and I glanced back at it. It was filled to the brim with purple goo. A face appeared in it.

"How did... how did you get in there?" I said. The face pushed itself into a crooked smile.

"I slipped in when you weren't looking," Touch said.

"But wouldn't I have seen you in my inventory?" I asked aloud, flicking through my PipBuck's inventory spell. I stopped at the last entries.

Featherjoy Wt 10, Val 20

Smooze Wt. 100, Val 10

"Ah... never mind," I said.

"Indeed," Touch said. "And Featherjoy, I'm still mad at you. You shouldn't have snuck out on me."

"I'm sorry, Touch!" Featherjoy chimed from my other saddlebag. "I just wanted to see what they were up to, is all."

"Still, you should have at least said something," the purple face said. I sighed.

"Look, we can wax poetic about this later. Right now we're in big trouble," I said. "We're in the middle of a potentially hostile situation. If those ponies return and find you, things could go real bad real quick. Touch, you just... stay right there. Featherjoy, you too. And try to stay quiet." Violet snapped my bags shut and I wiped the sweat off my brow with a fetlock as the door opened again. Truth Seeker reappeared in the doorway.

"Well, have you made a decision then?" The unicorn said. I narrowed my eyes at him.

"The answer is no," I said. "We will not allow you to come near our friend."

"That's too bad," Truth Seeker said. "I had hoped you would see the error of your ways. However... there is something that you should see. Even if it doesn't change your mind Miss Star, it will certainly give you food for thought."

"I don't care," I said forcefully. "I have things to do, and we will not let your words sway us."

“Well, should you change your mind, there is a place nearby you may wish to see,” the unicorn said. “In days of old, this area used to be a forest of vast beauty. When the war came, ponies ravaged the forest for its riches. However, there were many things held inside the forest, including ruins of times that predated even peaceful Equestria. Located deep in the Wasteland now, is a temple. Inside it, you will find your answers.” He waved at my PipBuck, which beeped obligingly as it loaded a new map marker.

“If it's all the same to you, we'll be going now,” I said, pushing past the unicorn. Truth Seeker grinned, stepping aside and gesturing to the door.

“Remember, Radiant Star. You have the opportunity to make things right,” he said. “You should take it.” I glared back at the unicorn and kept walking. The rest of my friends followed behind me. We walked in silence until we had left the power station and were up the ridge. Lilith and Nixis waited patiently in a tiny hollow, both of them watching our backs intently until they were certain we weren't being followed. Lilith nodded her head and I ignited my horn, opening my saddlebags.

“Alright, you two - out.” I said. The purple goo bubbled out of one bag and onto the ground, reforming into my friend. Featherjoy hopped out of the other bag. She shook briskly, ruffling her feathers.

“It kind of stunk in there,” she said.

“Yes... well. I think what we need to do is find some place for you two to hole up. If we can make it down to Manehattan, we may be able to put you up near Tenpenny Tower,” I said, starting to trot away.

“No,” Touch's voice rang out across the clearing. I stopped in my tracks.

“Huh?” I asked.

“No. I want to see it,” Touch said. “Star... I heard everything that he said. I'm not bad. I know I'm not. But I have to know. I have to see.” I sighed, shaking my head.

“Star,” Violet said. “I know that this is important, but so is Spark. We just need to find somewhere safe --”

“Okay,” I interjected. “We'll go to this temple.” Violet's eyes widened. She frowned, shaking her head.

“Alright, alright. We can do this,” she said. “I just wanted to make sure, is all.” I stepped forward, nuzzling my love.

“I know, sweetie. But Touch is right, this is important. At least to him, and he's my friend. You know what that means, Violet.”

Violet sighed, smiling sheepishly. “I understand that, you can't walk away from a friend.”

“Absolutely,” I said, laying my neck against the green mare's. “And these Magisterium ponies... they rub me the wrong way. I don't think they're going to stop until they capture him.”

Violet nodded, her neck warm and solid against mine. “And this Temple is the only real option we have to find out what’s going on here.”

“Yup. I don’t see any other way forward, since Touch won’t do the safe thing.” I shot a wink at the purple being, and he smiled.

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” Patch said, grinning. “Let’s get going!”

“Do you think we’re close yet?” Violet said quietly as we walked along the broken path. I glanced at my E.F.S. The arrow marker pointing to the location that Truth Seeker had given me was still glowing brightly. Every so often it wavered as we made our way through the dreary Wasteland terrain. I sighed.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” I said. “I don’t even see anything that looks like a temple.”

“You don’t... you don’t think that Truth Seeker is setting us up do you?” My love whispered under her breath so that only I could hear. A twitch from Nixis’ ears indicated that he probably heard her as well, but I knew that the hellhound could keep quiet.

“I don’t know,” I replied, hanging back behind the others to walk alongside Violet. “He didn’t seem the type. True, he wants to destroy our friend here, but he was very polite about it.”

“I got the same impression. He was very eloquent, that’s for sure,” Violet said quietly. Ahead of us, Patch and Steeljack walked next to each other. They were engaged in some hushed conversation. I thought for a brief moment about eavesdropping, but decided better against it. Whatever it was, it was obviously private for them to be speaking about it so quietly. In front of them Touch sloped along, Featherjoy perched high on his gelatinous mass. Nixis took point ahead of them, padding through the Wasteland under Lilith’s soaring overwatch.

“Star,” Lilith’s voice broke through our conversation. I cocked my head in response. “I think we’re getting close. I can see some ruins ahead.” I nodded, smiling at Violet before flapping my wings and taking to the sky with the black pegasus. Ahead was a low hill, sloping down to some old stone buildings. They were strange, they didn’t appear pre-war or even post-war. I couldn’t tell anything about them other than that they were very very old.

“Alright, let’s be careful,” I called out as Lilith and I descended. “We don’t know what’s here.” We made our way down the hill towards the first stone outcropping. The small building was merely part of what appeared to be a larger complex. The ruins were half dug up, ancient stone protruding from the disturbed soil. Tattered fabric that had once been tents littered the area. Broken columns made of rough stone formed a path to the end of the slope, which ended in a large black hole in the side of the rock. The silence of the place was overbearing. It was deathly quiet, almost as if the entire area was waiting for something to happen.

Something happened.

Gunshots rang out in the distance, kicking up the dirt in front of us. From behind one of the stone outcroppings a blue unicorn appeared, floating out a carbine rifle. I narrowed my eyes. It was the

guard from the Magisterium. Accompanying him were several other unicorns, each of them floating out deadly assault weapons. At their head stood Truth Seeker. His own weapon, a combat shotgun, lifted lazily into the air beside him. I snarled under my breath. Of course it had been a trap. How could it not be?

“Well met, Ministry Mare,” Truth Seeker called out across the clearing. “How I knew that you couldn't resist coming here. And look, you brought the creature with you. How... generous.”

“Truth Seeker,” I said, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. “I really should have seen this coming. I told you before that we aren't turning him over.”

“And that is where we disagree,” Truth Seeker said. He glanced over at his guards. “Take the creature alive. I wish to deal with it myself. The rest of them... kill them.” The guards grinned widely, lifting their rifles and opening fire as they moved forward. I stepped in front of the others, igniting my horn. My alicorn shield came up just in time for the first bullets to deflect harmlessly off of it.

“I can do this all day, Truth Seeker,” I said, a wry smile crossing my face. Truth Seeker flashed a grin of his own, flaring his own horn. I suddenly felt my magic dissipate as the shield flickered out of existence. My eyes widened. *What in the Sorrel Hells just happened?! I thought frantically.*

“And I can do that longer,” the unicorn replied. “You see Ministry Mare, my special talent is somewhat of an oddity. I'm quite the expert at canceling magic spells. Now then, where were we? Oh yes, you were about to surrender or die.” I growled under my breath.

“Everypony, make for that big hole,” I said. “We'll lose them in the tunnels. Lilith, you take Featherjoy. You're the fastest out of all of us besides me. You get her there first, alright?”

“Right. Come on kid, hop on,” Lilith said as Featherjoy slid up onto the mare's back. “Hope you know what you're doing Star.”

“Me too,” I said, gritting my teeth as I watched the guards fan out to surround us. They were toying with us, thinking they had us cornered since Truth Seeker could just cancel out any of my magic spells. A grin formed on my face as I realized just how wrong they were.

“Now!!!” I shouted, leaping forward into the fray. Stargazer went into high gear, unloading a payload of fire at the nearest group of guards. The bullets went short into the ground, but served their purpose in forcing the unicorns to fall back. Lilith shot off like a rocket, heading towards the far end of the stone quarry. Patch and Steeljack began their usual brand of teamwork, earth pony ingenuity driving every attack as the green mare rebounded off of her lover's back and laid down a vicious hoof strike on a nearby guard. Nixis loped through the battle silently, using his razor sharp claws to try and tear the weapons away from the unicorns. Violet fought by my side, the silver fire of Thunder Flash keeping any guards from approaching. It was a tactic meant to buy time for Featherjoy and Lilith to get away and for us to eventually follow.

In the center of it all was Finishing Touch. The purple being was trying to follow where Lilith had gone, nearly getting caught at every turn by Truth Seeker's guards. Violet and I galloped to his aid as one wayward guard slammed into Touch's side. The Smooze, while a little perturbed at the bodily intrusion, didn't appear to be hurt. A scream erupted from where the guard had struck, his body dissolving into purple goo. Touch's eyes widened and he looked up at me. All that was left of the

guard was his gear.

“What did I do?!” He said. “I... I didn't mean to... I didn't!”

“Worry about it later, let's get out of here!” I shouted, taking a few more shots behind the being. Truth Seeker watched silently from his vantage point. I locked gazes with the unicorn briefly, and he nodded as if acknowledging something. I narrowed my eyes and turned to Touch. “Come on!” Touch shuddered as he pulled away from the guard's gear and began to follow Violet and me. We pulled back towards the large black hole, where Lilith held onto Featherjoy. Steeljack and Patch came along shortly thereafter. I pointed down into the hole.

“Everypony in!” I shouted. Lilith jumped down into the inky blackness, followed by the others. I turned back, seeing Truth Seeker at the head of the attack. I flashed my horn. “Cancel this, Truth Seeker.” I unleashed my magic at the ground beneath me, causing the ground to tremble and shake. Rocks shot forth from the earth, enveloped in the soft glow of my magic. I grinned, jumping into the hole after my friends. I grunted as I slid down the tunnel, unable to see a thing. I felt like I was going too fast. I dug my hooves into the loose scree, trying to slow myself down. The tunnel opened up into pure black and I felt the sensation of falling. I tried to open my wings to slow myself down, but it was too late. I hit the ground hard, and I blacked out.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

“Star?”

“Where... Where am I?”

“Star, you can't be here. Not yet. Not now.”

“But... but where...?”

“Trust me, Star. You have to go now.”

“But --”

“Go!!!”

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

“Is she awake?” I heard a voice from above me say. I groaned, my eyes fluttering open.

“What's... What's going on,” I said as I looked up. Violet stood, hovering over me in the darkness. A soft smile graced her face, illuminated only by the light of her horn and her PipBuck.

“The tunnel above caved in,” she said. “For the moment, we're stuck here.”

“Is everyone alright?” I asked as I pushed myself up from the ground. I extended my wings, working them through their range as I flared my horn to give us some light. Everything seemed to check out okay. Violet's expression turned grim.

"Yeah, mostly everyone. There's a bit of a problem," she said. "It's Touch. He's freaking out about what happened." I sighed.

"I'll talk to him," I replied. "Any idea where we are?"

"Best as I can tell, we're in the outer ring of some larger structure. I'm not sure if that was the only entrance or not," Violet said as we walked through the tunnel into the next clearing, where I could see the soft orange light. The others had managed to scrape together a passable campfire, illuminating the stone walls. Patch poked at the firewood, causing the flames to spark. Lilith and Nixis sat next to the two earth ponies, while Featherjoy and Finishing Touch were in the far corner. I sighed and peeled away from Violet, trotting up to the two. Featherjoy's eyes widened at my approach. She moved to meet me before I could get to Touch.

"Missus Star, you've gotta talk to him," the young griffon said.

"What is it?" I asked. Featherjoy sighed.

"He... he won't talk to me about it. He's acting all depressed, and I don't know what to do," she said.

"Well, maybe he will talk to me," I said. "Why don't you go hang out with the others. I need to talk some sense into him." The young griffon nodded, bounding over to Violet. I slumped to my haunches next to Touch and smiled. "Hey, Touch."

"Go away," the purple creature rumbled. I frowned.

"Touch, you know... what happened... it wasn't your fault." Touch stayed quiet for several long awkward moments before speaking.

"I... I killed someone, didn't I?" He said. I hung my head.

"Yeah. You did. But it was an accident. Even so, you wouldn't do it intentionally, would you?" I said. Touch shook his head solemnly.

"No, I suppose you're right," he said. "But what if it happens again? What if Truth Seeker was right? What if I'm just a monster?"

"You're not a monster, Touch. You deserve a chance to prove that you aren't," I replied. "But right now? Featherjoy needs you." Touch sighed, rumbling deeply.

"Alright. You're right. I need to know more. I need to see what's in this place, if there is anything. I'm not sure. What if this was just a clever trap to catch me?" He said. I smiled.

"Even if there isn't anything here, does it matter? As a friend of mine once said... it's not the land that defines a pony, it's the pony that defines the land. You may not be a pony my friend, but you still make your own fate," I said. "Now come on, let's get going." Touch nodded and I stood, trotting back to the rest of the group. "Okay, if we're going to get out of here, we're going to need to keep ourselves moving. There has to be another entrance to this place, we just need to find it."

"I figure if we head through to the center ring, we should have a chance of cutting across and up,"

Violet said, pointing at a crudely drawn map based on her PipBuck's auto-map.

“Would it be possible for me to dig us out?” Nixis asked. I glanced over at Violet, who merely shrugged.

“I don't know. Everything is a little shaky. It might just fall down all over us,” she said.

“Not worth the risk, Nixis. We'll move through the center ring, and try and find another way out,” I proclaimed. We started through the tunnel, the dark walls illuminated only by PipBuck lights and horns. As we walked, I noticed that my own PipBuck had started to click. I blinked, pulling up the radiation meter. It was increasing at a steady, but slow rate.

“Hold up, everypony,” Steeljack said, holding out a bottle of Rad-X. “We've got some radiation in this area. Before we go any further, we should be prepared in case it gets worse.” I watched as the others took a pill and chewed it. The only ones who didn't need any medicine were myself and Finishing Touch. Steeljack then pulled out a few packets of RadAway, and handed them out to the rest of the group. He glanced sideways at Patch, who was starting to place her packet in her side pocket. “Umm... honey, do you need to take any now?” Patch glared at him.

“No, I'm fine,” she said curtly. I blinked. What in the world was going on there?

“Are you sure?” Steeljack said. “You should keep yourself healthy.”

“I'm *fine*,” Patch replied. “Can we get going? I want to get out of this place.” The green mare tossed her mane with a huff and trotted off. I looked over at Steeljack with one eyebrow raised questioningly. The stallion shrugged, his expression hidden by Tempest's helmet. He started after the other earth pony, silently walking up next to her. I moved in line next to Violet, while Finishing Touch and Featherjoy walked in silence behind us.

“Do you know what that was about?” I asked quietly as we continued to walk through the tunnel. My PipBuck's radiation meter continued to click, ticking slowly upward. Violet shook her head.

“No idea,” she said. “Patch has been off since we left Arlington.” I nodded, thinking back to the Stable that we had found there. The green earth mare had been hit pretty hard by the revelation that the inhabitants were mostly foals. Still, that didn't explain her behavior towards Steeljack... He wasn't a foal. I pushed it out of my mind for the moment. There were more important things to deal with.

We walked silently, the tunnel taking a downward slope which opened up into a larger section. Long dead torches lined the dark stone walls. My radiation meter slowed its clicky, indicating that the rads in this section weren't as bad. Still, the accumulated heat made me feel warm and fuzzy. We trotted into the long hall, making it about halfway through when we heard the loud sucking sound. *Ghouls*, I thought, unlatching Stargazer and nodding at Violet. Thunder Flash slid out of her harness on her own magic. A soft glow filled the hall as the first ghoul came barreling down towards us. It was covered in a glowing green slime that made my radiation meter begin to tick wildly. I floated out Stargazer and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up a string of shots at the ghoul's torso. Time fell away and my gun unleashed its payload, the bullets slamming home into the feral beast's chest. It hit the ground hard, green slime drooling out of the carcass onto the floor.

“What the hell?” Patch said. “Never seen a ghoul like that before. Still, went down easy enough.” I

nodded. I was about to stow Stargazer away when movement caught my eye. The ghoul lying in the center of the floor got up, sucking loudly and groaning. It roared as it lurched into a stumbling charge.

“Shit!” I shouted. Violet answered my curse by unloading Thunder Flash's silver fire into the feral's head. The energy weapon took the appendage clean off, disintegrating it into a pile of silver goop. Violet grunted, lowering her rifle. She coughed, ejecting blood from her mouth. My eyes widened. “Violet? What's wrong?”

“I'm... I'm fine,” she choked out, floating out a packet of RadAway. “Just too much rads, that's all.” She tore open the packet, sucking down some of the orange liquid. I looked over at the others. Everypony else was looking quite ill as well, despite having taken Rad-X. Was the radiation here worse than I had thought? I looked down at Featherjoy. The young griffon had keeled over, coughing uncontrollably.

“Featherjoy!” Touch shouted, putting a goopy hand on the back of his friend. He looked up at me, fear etched in his purple face. “What's wrong with her?!”

“She's got rad poisoning,” I said, trotting over to the two. I ignited my horn, levitating out a packet of RadAway. “See if you can get her to lie down. She needs to drink this.” Touch nodded, helping the griffon to lay on her back. I floated the packet up to her lips, doing my to not spill any of the precious orange stuff. Featherjoy gurgled as she tried to drink, her coughing subsiding. I forced another Rad-X pill down her throat along with the rest of the RadAway. “Come on, Featherjoy. Stay with us...”

“I... I'm okay,” the young griffon managed to say. “Just need... to rest a bit...” She closed her eyes, breathing hard but peacefully.

“Featherjoy!” Touch exclaimed, reaching out to pick up his friend. I put up a hoof to stop him.

“She'll be alright. She's just resting. Violet, keep an eye on her if you could,” I said, flaring my horn. I lifted the young griffon and laid her on my marefriend's back, using Thunder Flash's harness to hold her in place. “But it isn't going to last long. We need to get out of here, or everypony else is going to be in the same shape as her.”

“Star... I don't... I don't feel so good,” Patch said, lifting a hoof as she used Steeljack for support. She closed her good eye, breathing heavily. The other earth pony lifted his visor, his eyes full of concern for his love.

“Patch...” he said softly. “Come on. We can do this.” He glanced up at me. “This is bad, isn't it?”

“No. We'll get through this. We just have to keep moving,” I said, motioning at the others. We began to move forward again, slowly but surely. My friends who were susceptible to the radiation were trying to be tough and ration out what little RadAway we had left. Meanwhile, Featherjoy squirmed in her sleep on Violet's back. I felt warmer and fuzzier with each tick of the rad meter, and I realized that this had been the first time in a long time that I'd been exposed to such heavy radiation. It was disconcerting to say that it felt kind of nice.

Eventually the tunnel opened up into a massive circular chamber, centered around a dais in the middle. The walls were tarnished gold and large pillars of rusted copper were spaced out every few feet in a circle around the room. Two more pathways went up into other parts of the temple on each side of the

room. I looked up as we walked silently down the stairs. The room extended upward for several stories, where gloomy balconies overlooked the chamber. Half of the torches in the old chamber were still alight, providing some light to the immediate area. I breathed a sigh of relief as I noticed that my PipBuck's radiation meter had finally stopped clicking.

"Wow..." Violet said, her eyes glancing upward as well. "This place is huge..."

"Yeah... at least we're safe from the radiation for the moment," I said. "I think we should stop and rest. Try and do what we can to purge the rads."

"I agree," Steeljack said, helping Patch to lay down. The green mare heaved a breath and smiled.

"Thanks," she said quietly. My ears perked as I overheard the two. I couldn't really help myself. All of my senses had been increased a little bit due to the radiation, and I could hear them clear as day. "Sorry about earlier. I just..."

"It's alright. I understand," Steeljack replied, pulling his helmet off. He nuzzled his love, smiling. "We'll get through all of this. We'll be alright, you'll see."

"Are you sure...?" Patch whispered.

"Hey, I would never let anything bad happen to you," he said. "Especially not now." I blinked. *What did he mean by that?* I thought. Patch nodded in response, and I turned away. I would have to ask her what he had meant at some point, but right now it was more important that we find a way out of this hellish place and got away from the Magisterium. I wasn't sure Truth Seeker had planned on us escaping this way, but I figured he wouldn't try and follow us through the radiation. Still, I had a bad feeling about everything. My friends were resting as well as they could, but the prickling energy of the radiation exposure wouldn't let me. Without anything better to do, I trotted over to the dais. Resting on the pedestal was a large purple book, bound in what appeared to be... leather? Curiosity piquing, I lit my horn to provide a little light so that I could see things clearly and opened the book.

My eyes widened as I flipped page after page. The book was an old history account, detailing a creature that was so powerful, so unbeatable, that nothing could stop it. It was apparently indestructible, and could absorb whole ponies with nary a thought. Eventually, the only thing that could stop it was the Elements of Harmony. They had banished the creature to the far regions of space and time where it could never hurt anypony ever again. I stopped at the middle of the book, gasping softly under my breath. A rendition of the creature had been painted on the pages. It was an incredibly large purple creature with dozens of sinister eyes and a cruel grin.

It was a Smooze.

"Star?" A voice from behind me echoed. I hung my head. Finishing Touch had chosen the worst possible time ever to talk to me. My reluctance to answer must have really shown, because the purple creature pressed on. "What's wrong? What are you --" His voice cut off and I heard him cry out softly as well. He had seen the pages. I flared my horn, forcing the book closed. I cast another spell, setting the book on fire. I watched silently as the flames consumed the book and then flickered out of existence.

"Touch," I said, turning around to face the Smooze. His sunken eyes appeared to be surprised and

unsure. "Do not pay attention to this. It doesn't mean anything."

"But... that book. It was... it was me..." he replied. I shook my head fiercely.

"No. It wasn't. It was something far worse. It was a creature that existed eons ago. It was not you. You were in that lab under the museum, remember?" I said angrily.

"I don't... I don't remember anything though before I woke up, though. What if... what if I was this thing and I was put there to be imprisoned? What if I really am the mythical Smooze, destined to destroy everything? I don't want... I don't want to be that way, Star!" Touch spouted frantically. I closed my eyes. This was going from bad to worse. If I wasn't careful, we'd have a panicking Smooze on our hands, and that was the last thing we needed. I lifted a hoof, setting it on my friend's shoulder (at least what I think was his shoulder).

"You... you're not it. I know you're not. And you know how I know that?" I said softly. Touch shook his head in response. "Because I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you care greatly for that little griffon over there. If you really were some mythical monster of great evil, would you have friends? Would you care for another?"

"I... I never..." Touch said, fidgeting with his goopy hands.

"Trust me, my friend. Friendship is an important thing. But so are second chances. Even if you were this... Smooze of legend, you aren't now. You deserve the chance to live your own life. To be your own Smooze," I said. "Now come on, lets --" I stopped speaking as I noticed that my PipBuck's radiation meter had begun to start ticking again. In fact, it began to click louder and faster, the radiation levels increasing at an alarming rate. I glanced over at my friends. "Everypony, we need to move now!!" Violet scrambled to her feet as best as she could, holding the sleeping Featherjoy on her back with a gleam of magic. The others began to move as well, and we all funneled up towards the left pathway, hoping it would take us away from the intense radiation. I wasn't sure what had brought on the rads, but I knew I didn't want to stick around and find out.

We got within ten feet of the door when a large pillar struck the wall, causing the entrance to collapse in on itself. Rock and debris sprayed everywhere, knocking me to the ground along with my friends. I grumbled as I pushed myself up immediately, the radiation filling the room letting me ignore any scrapes and cuts from the rubble. I turned back to see what had happened. A deep chuckle echoed throughout the room.

"Yessss.... *It has been a very... very... long time... but I finally have you...*" a rough voice croaked from above. I glanced up to see something crawling down the pillars. The creature was massive, and not only that... glowing bright green. I could see its bone structure clearly through its glowing flesh, which was hanging off in several places. It had hind legs much like a dog's legs and forelegs like those of a large ape. Its tail was completely bone, revealing a grasping hand at the end of it. The beast's head was vaguely similar to Nixis', except for the longer muzzle and closer set eyes. The thing's eyes glowed an unnatural green, and its lips curled back, revealing pale green teeth in an evil grin. A glowing green tongue curled out of the creature's mouth, licking its dry and rotting lips with anticipation.

"Yesss... *you are mine... now...*"

I glanced up towards the glowing beast over the collapsed entrance, and back to the last remaining passage on the far side of the chamber. There was no way we were going to be able to get past this thing in the state the others were in. I looked back at my friends. If I didn't get them out of here soon, the radiation would cook them alive. Even now, they were struggling to move, sweat pouring from their brows. Violet coughed violently. The rad meter clicked wildly, steadily increasing. At this level, anypony who was normal was not feeling well at all. Patch was doubled over, using Steeljack as support. Her free hoof was clutching her stomach. I grimaced. The massive glowing monster cackled madly as he neared the floor, the stone spalling away from his claws.

"I have been waiting for you..." The monster snarled. I narrowed my eyes, a plan forming in my mind. I had only one shot at this to get the others free.

"Finishing Touch," I said. "When I say to, you take the others and you get them the fuck out of here. Do you understand me?"

"Star?" Touch asked. Violet cried out as well.

"Don't, just don't, Violet. You guys need to get out of this radiation and you know it," I snapped. "I can hold this thing off until you can get out of here. I can survive anything in these rads." I ignited my horn. "Be ready to move, Touch. I'm going to teleport you into the entrance up ahead."

"Can you even do that?" The Smooze said. I nodded silently, the spell enveloping my friends in soft purple light. A flash of light wrapped around them, and they disappeared. At the far end of the chamber, they reappeared. The giant glowing monster glared hatred at them, snarling as it leaped from pillar to pillar to give chase. Finishing Touch was already up, wrapping the others in his smoozey appendages. My friends disappeared through the doorway and out of sight.

I flapped my wings, taking to the air as I unlatched Stargazer. A spray of bullets slammed into the wall, drawing the monster's attention.

"Hey," I snarled. "Come play with momma, you glowing bastard." The creature howled and leapt, soaring off its pillar straight at me. My eyes widened. *Shit!* I thought, forcing myself backwards with a buffet of my wings as the glowing beast reached out with its razor sharp bone tail. The beast missed, but its tail striped my shoulder and barrel, leaving a gash across my hide. The radiation filling me with its warmth and power instantly healed the wound, and I grinned. The monster roared in fury as its attack failed. It landed in a crash of rubble and debris, coming out of the cloud in an instant with a chunk of rubble. It spun once, whipping the stone at me. I flared my horn, batting at the rock with my telekinesis. I sent it hurtling back with a mere thought, striking the creature directly in the face. It howled loudly.

"You... you are her, aren't you...? Even she couldn't fight as well as you..." It said. This thing was starting to become a broken record. It kept talking like it knew me somehow.

"Who are you? WHAT are you?" I asked, the radiation giving me strength. I was confident that I could stall this creature long enough to give my friends time to escape. I hoped they were alright. "And why do you keep acting like you know me?"

"You are my oldest enemy... Daring Dooo...." It replied. I blinked. *What,* I thought. This thing

thought that I was... Daring Do? What the hell was this thing? *"You don't remember...? It is I, Ahuitzotl. I am your greatest enemy..."*

"I don't know who you think I am, but you've got the wrong pony," I said. The ghoul's eyes brightened and it roared again.

"No... you must be her... I will rip your body apart and pull your entrails out!" it screamed, leaping into the air again. This time it tried to wrap its bony tail around my barrel. I cast my shield spell instinctively, and Ahuitzotl bounced off it screaming. The thing slammed into a pillar, grunting as debris showered it. The chamber shuddered under the force of the blow. I glanced up, feeling dust fall from above. This place wasn't going to last much longer under this punishment. It was eventually going to fail, and I'd be trapped here. A grin formed on my face. A trap would be just fine, just fine, indeed - if I wasn't the one caught in it.

"Come and get me, Ahuitzotl!" I challenged, flapping my wings and speeding away. Ahuitzotl howled again and leaped. This time I flipped behind a pillar, actually running around the curved surface to dodge his attack. I couldn't restrain a peal of completely inappropriate laughter as I leapt off the pillar myself, soaring into the center of the chamber as my foe slammed into it. The grinding groan of rock shifting was louder and longer this time, and I hoped I had this right.

"It's been fun, dear Ahuitzotl, but I have to go play with someone who knows how to fight now." I taunted, swirling through the dusty air. Ahuitzotl cried denial as I arced towards the door, and my peripheral vision just caught him lifting another massive chunk of rubble.

I saw the debris fly through the air, enough rubble to easily block or destroy the entrance. I ignited my horn, visualizing the hallway and cast a teleportation spell. Space warped around me, the radiation bleeding off as I deposited myself into the hall. I spun about just as the thrown rubble smashed into the entrance, firing a wave of telekinetic force at the structure above me. I backed away as the hall rumbled, pushing and shoving at the grumbling stones. More fell from above the collapsing tunnel as I retreated. A glowing green arm thrust its way through the rubble as it fell, clawing furiously and trying to push its way through.

"No... no... No!!!! I will find you, Daring Do... I will find you!" Ahuitzotl roared through the rubble and debris. *"I will find you, and when I do... I will pull your insides out and feed them to my cats!!!"* I grinned as the shouting became faint and the glowing appendage was completely covered in fallen stone. I breathed a sigh of relief. I glanced at my PipBuck, pulling up Violet's tag to track her. I turned about, galloping hard. According to my automap, my friends were in another part of the temple's network of tunnels. My body still felt warm from the radiation, having not bled it all off from the teleport and the telekinetic wave. I turned down the next hall, seeing the others at the far end. Violet's eyes widened as she saw me. She started to rush forward, but I put up a hoof to stop her. I could see Featherjoy still squirming on her withers.

"Hold it, I'm a little too lit up for you to approach me," I said. "I need to bleed off a bunch of radiation. How are the others?"

"Still not doing so hot, but I think we found a way out of here. There's a tunnel that leads up towards some outer ring," my love replied. I nodded.

"Get out then. I will be right behind you. Once we are out we can find someplace to treat everypony,"

I said. "If I could teleport us to the surface I would, but I can't if I don't know where I'm going. You need to get everypony out of here and fast, before that thing down in that chamber claws its way out. I kind of pissed it off."

A roar echoed down the hallway from behind me. I spun about, debris and rubble striking my shield as I brought it up. I glanced back at Violet. "Run!!" I shouted. The other mare nodded and hurriedly returned to the others, frantically grabbing them up as they scurried down the hall. They were out of sight when a glowing claw appeared around the side of the tunnel. I pulled out Stargazer, and grimaced as Ahuizotl's lithe form appeared. The glowing monstrosity was in a bad way, cradling one of its forearms to its chest. It even looked less glowy. I fired up E.S.A.T.S., and stared at the spatters of glowing blood on the floor behind him. Ahuizotl was determined to end me and my friends. Creature of legend or not, I wasn't going to let that happen.

Stargazer's full payload was a torrent of hellfire in the room, stripping more life from Ahuizotl in sprays of green and chunks of flesh.

A bony tail shot through the air at me, shattering the shield I had forgot to pay attention to. I dodged enough that the blow slid along my shoulder instead of through my neck, but the shock of pain was enough to drop my focus. Stargazer hit the ground with a clatter and my shield dissipated. I growled under my breath as I shoved the beast backwards with a hard push of telekinetic force, making enough time for me to put Stargazer back on target. E.S.A.T.S. hadn't recharged, but I put a wave of fire on the roaring ghoul without it, stripping bone from its face. I narrowed my eyes. This thing was no longer interested in talking. It had gone completely feral. The cruel glint of intelligence was gone from its made, glowing eyes. I needed to end this, and I needed to end it fast. Any more exposure to this thing and I'd be able to light up Tenpony Tower all year long. I was out of time to play nice. My horn lit, grabbing hold of the tunnel around us, pulling the rocks and stone from the structure and bringing it down onto the glowing monster's back. I strained as I kept the spellwork going, using all the strength I could muster to continue dropping the rubble.

Ahuizotl dropped to the ground as hundreds of pounds of debris rained on him. The ghoul snapped and snarled as a particularly large stone dislodged from the ceiling above, striking him the face. Glowing blood oozed from its eye sockets as the rubble pinned it into immobility. It screamed, a cry of rage and fury that was painful to hear. I stepped forward with Stargazer, slamming the multi-barrelled front of my weapon down on his screaming face. Ahuizotl yelped, and I slammed Stargazer down again. And again. And over and over again until I was pounding my minigun into the stone, a shallow crater covered in slime where his head had been. I staggered backwards, staring at my gory weapon as the radiation and overuse of magic took its toll. I stumbled on a pebble and keeled over, Stargazer falling to the floor as my head hit the ground, and blackness took me.

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I groaned, pushing myself into a sitting position. I knew for sure that I wasn't in the temple ruins anymore. Of course, I had to be right. The familiar door to the library stood open, waiting for me to enter. *What does Twilight want with me now?* I thought angrily as I stood. My thoughts drifted to my friends. I hoped they were alright, that they had gotten out of the death trap the Magisterium had forced us into. I wondered briefly if they had planned for us to take refuge inside the temple, or had planned to kill us all outside and take Finishing Touch for themselves. I pondered also what I had seen in the temple's central chamber. Was it true that Touch was the mythical Smooze?

I decided that it didn't matter. Still, that meant we were left with the problem of keeping the Magisterium from taking him. As I tried to come up with a plan, I stepped inside the dark library. At the far end of the center room, Twilight Sparkle toiled away at a report, several books floating around her in the grip of her magic. I regarded the alicorn for a moment. I was beginning to get tired of seeing her, but I knew that she was my only way I was going to find Spark and finally figure out how to end this spell that she had cast. I stepped onto the hard wood, the tick tock of my hooves drawing Twilight's attention. She looked up at me, a grimace on her face.

"Star," she said, sarcastically. "You know you really have to stop coming here like this. Do you really just get yourself knocked out all the time, or what?"

"Gee, I dunno. Do you sit in your library reading your books all the time?" I replied with just a hint of venom in my voice. "Besides, I thought you said I wouldn't burn out my magic any more."

"Under normal circumstances only. I think we can both agree that sucking up that much radiation and using it to blow a temple apart *and* fight off the remnant of an immortal demigod is hardly normal," Twilight said, her horn flaring as it closed the book she was reading.

"And you didn't think to try and help me at all?" I complained. Twilight scowled.

"I told you already, Star. The connection between us is tentative at best. We need to disable Spark to even get close to fixing anything," she said. "Speaking of fixing, why are you wasting your time with this current venture? The longer you wait to find her, the more time Spark has to enact her plan."

"Are you suggesting that I let a friend get taken, and possibly killed?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "You would condone such an action?" Twilight's eyes narrowed.

"I would condone any action that would save the world," she replied. "This seems... Pointless. This creature that you have chosen to befriend... it's not natural."

"Touch is more than just a 'creature'," I argued. "He's a kind soul. There's nothing evil about him."

"And yet he absorbed a living pony by complete accident?" Twilight countered. I sighed. "Does that not strike you as evil?"

"It wasn't an intentional action, Twilight. If these ponies hadn't been chasing him, he wouldn't have done it in the first place," I said. Twilight trotted over to her bookshelves, placing the books she had been studying back in them. She motioned for me to follow her.

"And yet, he still did it. What if the next time it happens to one of your friends? To the young griffon?" She said. "What would you do then?"

"That won't happen," I said flatly.

"And what if it does?" Twilight replied as we stalked through rows of books. I stopped, pondering the mare's words. What would I do if Finishing Touch turned evil? Or if he inadvertently hurt Featherjoy... or even Violet. Twilight stopped too, not looking back at me. We stood there in silence for several moments, neither of us speaking. Finally, I broke the calm.

"I would do what was necessary," I said softly. "But that still doesn't mean I will let Truth Seeker have him. I don't trust that pony, Twilight. He has other plans for Touch, I can just feel it."

"Do you think he would try to use this creature as a weapon?" Twilight said. I shrugged.

"Maybe?" I said. "If that's the case, then shouldn't I do my best to help my friend?"

"Or you destroy him yourself," Twilight said. "And eliminate the problem altogether." I blinked. Was this really the same Twilight Sparkle? I narrowed my eyes at her.

"Not happening," I said. "I think it's time that I go now. I have *friends* I need to get back to." Twilight nodded, pointing at the door.

"Then go, Star. And don't come back until you've found Spark," she said angrily. The mare turned with a huff, leaving me alone in the sea of book shelves. I sat there, wondering what in the world had just happened when the black came rushing back in.

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A hoof shoved my shoulder hard as my eyes fluttered open and close. I groaned.

"Mom? Five more minutes, really..." I whispered, rolling over onto my side. The hoof jabbed into my side and my eyes shot open wide. I looked up, seeing Violet standing above me. "Violet? Oh... sweetheart you gotta get back, I'm all irradiated..."

"You're not," Violet said softly. "At least, not anymore. It bled off." I blinked. I realized she was right. My PipBuck was no longer clicking like crazy. I pushed myself up, glancing about. We were in a different part of the temple ruins.

"Where are we?" I said hoarsely. My throat felt like it had gone through the wringer.

"Further up in the temple. I found a way out. There's a tunnel that leads right out to the surface," my love replied. "The others are camped out a stone's throw from the entrance."

"And how is everyone?" I asked hesitantly. Violet smiled brightly, calming my nerves instantly.

"Well, once we got everyone away from the radiation, we were able to use the RadAway more effectively. We're completely out, but everyone is fine. Even Featherjoy is alright," she said. She motioned for me to follow her. I trotted next to the green mare, breathing a deep sigh of relief. Everyone was okay. The truth of the matter hit me like a ton of bricks. We rounded the next corner, which led to a set of broken stairs headed up. Light flooded in from above where the entrance was. At the foot of the stairs on the landing was the rest of our friends.

For the most part, everypony looked pretty strung out. Steeljack and Patch sat next to each other, the grey earth pony doing what he could to keep his love's spirits up. The two had smiles on their faces regardless. Nixis sat across from the two, looking ragged but in good cheer. Lilith was in the middle of watching the stairs intently. She looked better than any of the others. I idly wondered whether it was the power armor or the blessing of the statuette that gave her an advantage against radiation.

Featherjoy looked up from where she was sitting next to Finishing Touch and let out a cry of pure enthusiasm. The young griffon leaped from her position, fluttering across the clearing to wrap herself around my leg.

"You're alright!!" She exclaimed. I smiled, reaching out with a hoof and ruffling her head feathers.

"Of course I am," I said. "How are you feeling, Featherjoy?" The griffon disengaged from my leg, smiling widely.

"I'm feeling a lot better, Missus Star," she said. "Thank you for getting us out of there." I chuckled.

"There's no need to thank me, sweetie. You should thank your friend over there," I said, pointing over at Finishing Touch. The purple creature seemed to shift uncomfortably at my motion. "If it weren't for his quick moving, we'd still be stuck down there." I looked over at Patch and Steeljack. "What about you two? Are you alright?" The green mare nodded.

"I'm fine," she said softly. "Just a little shaken up, that's all." I smiled. I knew that she was lying right off the bat, but I decided not to press the issue further. We still needed to get out of the temple ruins and figure out how to evade the Magisterium. To that end, I turned to Violet.

"We should probably get moving then," I said. "Maybe we can get lucky and give Truth Seeker the slip," I said. Violet grimaced. *Uh oh, I know that look*, I thought.

"It's not that easy," Lilith interjected. "The Magisterium are waiting for us outside this tunnel. Their patrols have been just sitting there. I don't think they have the guts to come in after us." I groaned.

"Great. Out of the frying pan and into the fire," I replied, pacing back and forth. We needed to get Touch past those guards and away from Truth Seeker, but how? How were we going to do this? "We need a plan then. Either disable the guards or sneak past them."

"In our state, an open fight is just asking for trouble," Steeljack said. "It'd be a really bad idea to just go out guns blazing."

"I agree," Nixis said. "But we cannot stay here either. Eventually Truth Seeker will grow impatient and decide to enter the ruins." I nodded in response.

"So it seems we need an alternate route," I said. "How much food do we have left?"

"Enough to last at least two days, maybe a day and a half," Patch said wearily. "Anything that wasn't sealed needed to be tossed out. Too irradiated." I sighed. For the most part, keeping food hadn't been much of an issue for us, having left Theater and Arlington with stores of the stuff. Now most of it had been ruined. I grumbled under my breath at the harsh reality of this. We were trapped here until we figured out how to deal with the Magisterium and Truth Seeker. I needed to think on this more. In any case, if we did have enough time, then there was no time like the present.

"I... I know that this looks bad," I started to say. "But we'll get through this. We'll come up with something. In the mean time, let's rest up a bit and try to get some sleep. We'll keep rotating watch over the entrance and we'll all do our best to think up a good plan." The other nodded, weary but thankful to get any form of rest. It wasn't going to be much, but we had to do something. I trotted up

the hall to take first watch, glancing out of the entrance briefly into the bleak Wasteland. Several red blips appeared on my E.F.S., and I saw the gleam of assault rifles in the distance. I grimaced as I watched them shuffle about. Truth Seeker was toying with us. It seemed that he had infinite patience. In turn, I had even greater patience as I kept watch.

“Star?” I heard a voice behind me after several hours. I glanced back, seeing Patch standing there. I smiled.

“Hey,” I said. The green mare trotted up to me, slumping to her haunches. “Are... you alright?” I ventured to ask. Patch nodded.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” she replied softly. “Everything is fine.”

“Are you sure?” I said. “It's just... you've been a little...”

“It's nothing,” Patch said curtly. “Look, I just don't want to talk about it, Star. Please.” I sighed, hanging my head.

“Alright,” I said. “I'm sorry. But if you ever want to... I'm here for you, Patch. You know that right?” The green mare nodded slowly, meeting my gaze. “Good. I'm gonna go get some rest then, the watch is yours.” I trotted down the hallway, my mind growing with thoughts of my friends, of Spark, of Finishing Touch and Truth Seeker. I couldn't separate myself from them. I made my way over to where Violet was laying and plopped down onto the ground next to her.

I sighed, resting my head. Sleep did not come easily for me. I tossed and turned, and groaned when Violet awoke to take her turn at watch. I felt like I was missing something. There had to be a way out of this that didn't end with a big fight. I was loathe to admit it, but I did not want to see Finishing Touch do whatever he had done to that pony before again. He deserved better than that. Truth Seeker and the Magisterium, despite their trap, were merely doing what they believed was right. I was reminded by something I had said to Grey Knight, that the Wasteland was morally ambiguous. As I tried to allow sleep to take me, I was never so certain in my life that I was right. Eventually, I awoke once more, and decided to try and meditate.

I breathed deeply, trying to feel the world around me, to understand what Envy had tried to instill in me. Closing my eyes, I let my thoughts drift away. Oh, who am I kidding, I only tried to let go. I groaned as I opened my eyes and glanced about the dark clearing. I couldn't even begin to let go of my thoughts. I was never going to get this! I wished that I could talk to Envy some more. It would at least let me vent my frustrations over not being able to meditate. I certainly wasn't going to cast any zebra magic any time soon if I couldn't even perform simple meditation. I needed a release, and without Violet around I needed something tangible. I opened my saddlebags, trying to find a memory orb I could crawl into for several hours. I blinked when I saw one I hadn't seen before, and I couldn't recall it ever being registered in my inventory. Taped to the orb was a crude piece of paper, with a message comprised of magazine letters.

Watch Me.

I narrowed my eyes at the new memory orb. Who had put it there? At the very least, it would give me a bit of a distraction for a while. I reached out with magic, grasping onto the memory orb and falling away into darkness.

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I knew immediately whose host body I was occupying. It was a body I'd been in numerous times before. Twilight walked down the long hallway, her hooves making a sharp clip-clop sound against the marble floor. I recognized this building. It was the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub in Canterlot. The spires of Equestria's capitol rose into the sky outside the window beyond. My host had a pit in the bottom of her stomach, almost like she didn't want to be here. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors with a sign above that said **Conference Room**. My host pushed the doors open, stepping inside.

"Twilight!!!" A bubbly voice shouted. A pink blur zipped across the room, wrapping two forelegs around my host's neck. My host closed her eyes, sighed, and smiled softly.

"Hello, Pinkie," my host said. The pink mare extracted herself from my host, her grin wider than her face. There were bags under her eyes and there was a shocking amount of gray in her poofy pink mane.

"Pinkie, let her in the room, would ya? We've got business to discuss," a voice said from behind Pinkie Pie. My host glanced past the other mare to see an orange earth pony sitting by herself at the large table in the room. A white stetson hat rested on the mare's brow, and she wore a black suit. "Howdy, Twi. Take a seat. We're just waiting on the others to show up." My host nodded silently, pulling out one of the chairs across from Applejack and sitting down on her haunches.

"Applejack," my host said. Pinkie shrugged, plopping down on the chair next to Twilight. A knock at the door drew my host's attention. The large doors opened, and the rest of the Ministry Mares entered. Rarity came first, her swirling purple locks dancing in the light. She wore a simple business suit, accented by a feathered hat. Fluttershy trotted behind her, her face pinched and anxious. Rainbow Dash followed last, strutting confidently. She closed the door behind her. Each of the others took their place at the table. Silence reigned for several moments.

I don't like this... a voice from behind my host's thoughts. Spark sounded... anxious.

"So," Twilight started to say. "I'm sort of wondering how all of you managed to get away from your security details to schedule this meeting. It's not often that we get together without a bunch of guards breathing down our necks."

"Luna," Applejack said curtly, narrowing her eyes. "Gave her approval for this. That's all you need to know."

"And what, if I may ask, is the reason for this meeting?" My host asked. Awkward silence filled the room, almost as if the other five mares didn't want to say anything. Finally, the one pony I hadn't thought to speak raised her voice.

"We're... we're worried about you," Fluttershy said quietly. My host's eyes widened and she stood.

"I knew it," Twilight said. "I knew that you would try this." She started towards the door, attempting to push it open. It wouldn't budge. My host snarled, slamming on it with her hooves. "Let. Me. Out." Applejack was on her feet and across the room in an instant. She placed a hoof on my host's shoulder.

“Twi. Sit,” she said, pointing the other hoof at the empty chair. My host glared at her. She trotted back over to the chair and sat down.

“Fine, say what you have to say and then get out,” Twilight said angrily. “I have things to do.”

“Twilight, darling, please. Just listen to us. We're all worried about you. This isn't healthy, this way you've been treating yourself,” Rarity said.

“Yeah, Twi. You're really freaking us out,” Rainbow Dash added. Fluttershy nodded silently. Twilight narrowed her gaze at her friends.

“And I keep telling you, I'm perfectly fine,” my host said.

“But you're not...” Pinkie suddenly said. Her eyes had drooped and she looked quite sad. “You're sad, Twilight. And we know it.”

“Twilight,” Applejack said. “I'm gonna be right honest with you, sugarcube. It's been six months. Your brother is gone. You need to pony up and deal with this, and this isn't the right way for you to do it.”

“What do you know?” Twilight spat venomously. “I'm not sad, or frightened, or angry. I'm focused. And you can go tell Luna that. The things my Ministry are doing? They'll end this war and help everypony.”

“At the cost of your own life?” Rarity asked.

“Any cost is worth it to end this conflict,” my host said, glaring at her five friends.

“Twilight... I really don't like this. The others, they're here too,” Spark said from behind my host's thoughts. I felt time slow as I watched the six mares continue to speak. I suddenly felt the presence of five other entities in the room and I realized what I was witnessing. The Elements of Harmony. They were here, and they wanted to speak. I cringed. If this memory was what I thought it was, this was when the Elements tried to murder one of their own.

“Spark, darling! Long time no see,” a ringing voice echoed through the void. It was as if the Elements were sitting around a large round table of their own, in a different plane.

“Generosity,” Spark said. **“To what do I owe the pleasure?”**

“You've been a bad, bad pony Sparky-warky,” a bubbly voice replied. I knew that voice. It was Laughter.

“You're overstepping your bounds,” a rough voice that could only be Honesty interjected. **“Revealing yourself to your Bearer? What are you playing at?”**

“My Bearer is a little more in tune with harmony if she can see and hear me, Honesty,” Spark said. **“I can't help that.”**

“You’re lying. Or did you forget that I can tell when you do that?” Honesty said.

“Now, Honesty...” a soft and gentle voice said. ***“There must be some reason that Magic has done what she has done.”***

“I don’t buy it, Kindness,” Honesty said. ***“She’s hiding something.”***

“Yeah, Kindness. You agreed to this too, remember?” A brash and rough voice said. Loyalty sounded much like Rainbow Dash indeed.

“I know, but I think we should give her the benefit of the doubt,” Kindness said. ***“Ever since this war began, everypony has been so angry at each other.”***

“Then explain yourself, Spark,” Honesty said.

“You want to know why I’ve revealed myself to Twilight?” Spark said, her voice smooth and amused. ***“I’m going to immortalize myself. I will transcend this form and attain my own alicorn body.”***

“What?” Honesty said. ***“What do you mean?”***

“Twilight really is quite intelligent. There’s definitely a reason that she is a Princess and an alicorn,” Spark said. I could tell that she was grinning. None of this made any sense. I had been told by both Twilight and Spark that the other Elements had tried to kill her. But this didn’t seem like that at all. ***“She just needed a nudge, is all. Her brother gave her all the reason in the world to develop a spell to give me my own form.”***

“You can’t,” Loyalty argued. ***“Don’t you even know what that would do? That would break the Elements.”***

“Please... I know exactly what I’m doing. In case you forgot, I’m the ‘Spark’ that makes all of you exist,” Spark spat. ***“I can carry us forth into reality itself. Can’t you see that? I’m doing this for all of you. Once I am complete, I can use this power to bring you along as well.”***

“But we don’t want that, Magic,” Kindness said. ***“I just... I just want to hear Fluttershy be happy again. She’s so sad lately.”***

“And all I want to do is see Pinkie smile!” Laughter interjected. ***“Ever since this nasty war started, nopony smiles.”***

“You don’t understand, do you?” Spark said. ***“If I have my own form, we’ll be able to end this war. Everypony will have no choice but to bow to us as their Goddesses of Harmony. We’ll rule forever.”***

“That ain’t Harmony,” Honesty said. ***“That’s tyranny, and you know it.”***

“And this war isn’t? You don’t see it, do you? Luna, the Ministries? They’re going to end this world. It’s all their fault this conflict has gone this far. It’s time we did something about it,” Spark snarled.

“By forcing ponykind into servitude?” Loyalty said. ***“There’s no loyalty in that.”***

“Darling, this isn't at all like you. What happened to make you think like this?” Generosity asked, her voice filled with concern.

“Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do,” Spark said angrily. ***“I thought that you would support this. This will give you back your Bearers. You can laugh and play again as though nothing is even wrong.”***

“At the cost of the demise of everything else,” Honesty said. ***“I'm sorry, Spark. I truly am, but we can't let you do this.”*** A rush of energy accompanied the voice of the Element. It surged through the aether towards the spirit of Magic. I felt the power of the Elements assaulting one of their own and it was intense. Did the Elements truly have this strange and amazing power? Spark roared in the back of Twilight's mind, causing the mare to fall to her knees in front of her friends.

“Twilight?!” Rainbow Dash shouted. She was the first one to her fallen friend's side, placing a wing over her. “What's wrong? Are you alright?” Twilight shuddered, holding a hoof to the side of her head.

“Get away...” she breathed out, pushing the other mare away from her. Twilight's vision swam with pain as she struggled to stand. Her horn flared in defiance of the pain, cutting through it like a butter knife. “Leave me alone!” The mare snarled and cast her spell, disappearing into thin air before her friend's eyes. She reappeared in a bedroom, tumbling to the ground immediately.

“Thank... thank you...” Spark huffed in the rear of her mind. Twilight groaned as she climbed off the floor onto the bed.

“Don't... don't mention it. What happened?” She choked out.

“The other Elements. They tried to sever my connection to you,” Spark replied. ***“They tried to kill us both, Twilight. You can't trust your friends. Not anymore.”***

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I awoke with a cold start, breathing hard. A sharp pain echoed in the back of my skull. I realized quickly that I had probably hit my head on something. I sat there in the darkness, trying to process what I had just watched. Sure enough, Spark and Twilight hadn't lied about what the Elements had tried to do, but Spark had lied to Twilight. Spark's true intent was to control the Elements themselves, and to rule ponykind with an iron hoof. My thoughts fluttered back to what the Pinkie Pie hologram in Stable 180 had said. The world needed the Element of Magic. Did Spark deserve the second chance I was so desperate to give her? I shook my head, pushing that thought away. I knew deep down that she did. I had to believe that, I truly did.

I glanced down at the memory orb in my hooves and sighed. This wasn't the first one that had shown up without explanation. Who was leaving these orbs? What were they trying to get me to see? Was it Twilight? If so, what was her angle in this? I groaned, and glanced over at the others. They were still asleep. Steeljack was taking his turn to watch us. My eyes widened when I realized that one of our number was missing. Finishing Touch was nowhere to be seen, while Featherjoy was curled up next to Violet.

“Steeljack!” I shouted across the clearing, causing everypony to wake up instantly. The armored stallion looked back, his eyes hidden by Tempest's blue visor. “Touch is gone.”

“What?” He said, scanning the area. “But... how? He was just here a few minutes go.”

“Touch?!” Featherjoy called out, her eyes teary. “Where did he go, Star?” I narrowed my gaze at the young griffon.

“I don't know, but we'll find him,” I said, turning to Violet. “I'm guessing that he probably snuck past us, somehow. I'm not sure how he got by our E.F.S., but there isn't much we can do about that.”

“Something's not right out there. I can't see anything on my E.F.S. The Magisterium, they're gone,” Steeljack called out from near the tunnel entrance.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath. I had some idea of what had happened. Touch had turned himself into Truth Seeker. It was the only possible way that would get us out of this hellish temple and the Magisterium's hooves. Still, it was a stupid, stupid move. One that I myself would have probably done if I were in his place. “Alright, then. We're moving out. We need to find him and try and end this peacefully. But be ready. There's a chance that Truth Seeker already has him, and I don't want to risk anything.” Despite the fact that everyone was still not feeling too hot, the news that one of our own was in possible danger spurred them on like their own injuries and sickness was nothing.

I latched up Stargazer, stepping out of the tunnel and into the brightness of the Wasteland. The sloping valley that led away from the entrance showed just how large the temple really was. It was set in the side of a large mountain range, hidden away from normal prying eyes. I wondered briefly if the book that had been sitting in the central chamber was the only reason the place had been built. Who had even took the opportunity to build such a thing? And what of the monstrosity that had attacked us? How did it get there? What was its purpose? Why did it keep calling me Daring Do? My mind buzzed with distracting thoughts, and I tried to stay focused on the here and now as I started down the trail. My friends stayed close in behind me.

I narrowed my eyes at the mountainous valley below us. Nothing appeared on my E.F.S. I wondered just how far Finishing Touch had gotten. Had Truth Seeker made off with him? What if he was already dead? I closed my eyes. *No*, I thought. I refused to believe it. I would not let another friend get killed. I had seen too much death already. The trail led down deep into the valley, the shadows of the mountains behind us drawing over the land. There were signs here and there left behind by the Magisterium's guards, from hoof prints to scorch marks on crude targets hung in the dead foliage. Still, there was no physical sign of our friend. I grimaced, wondering if I was maybe wrong somehow. As we walked, I tried my best to formulate a plan of how to deal with the Magisterium. Truth Seeker was still able to cancel out any of my magic, so there was no chance of using any of my more advanced spells against him.

I was lost in my thoughts, trotting along until I saw it. Rather, until I walked into it. A large crystalline wall, scorched black by the megaspells and crumbling due to the ages of time, lined the ridge ahead of us. I cringed as I fell backwards from the impact. Rubbing my nose with my forehoof, I stood, placing the other hoof on the wall. It was cool to the touch.

“What the...?” I said.

“Whoah,” I heard Featherjoy say. “Where did that come from?”

“I... I don't know,” I said. “It wasn't here a second ago.” I glanced down the length of the wall, looking for any way past it. Down the ridge was what appeared to be some form of large crystal gate. Past the wall, several blips shimmered in and out on my E.F.S. Somehow, the wall was playing with the PipBuck's spell, preventing it from working properly. I grimaced. If this was the Magisterium's headquarters, it was certainly impressive.

We moved down the ridge to the massive gate, in awe of the smokey black crystal that made up the entrance. I stepped up to the entrance, pushing forward on it with a hoof. It wouldn't budge. I grimaced, flaring my horn and reaching out with my magic. I felt a sharp pain in the back of my mind as my telekinesis touched the black crystals, reeling back and cutting off the spell as quickly as I started it.

“Star?!” Violet said, coming to my side and holding me up before I could tumble to the ground. I groaned.

“Something with the... crystals. Hates magic...” I breathed. I put a hoof up to my horn, rubbing my forehead. A dull throbbing formed at the base of my appendage. “Door won't budge...”

“Step back then,” a voice from behind me said. I glanced back at Lilith, who had a grin on her face. The familiar whine of the Bitch punctuated her statement. I smiled softly and beckoned to Featherjoy to stand away from the black mare. Lilith snarled under her breath, letting loose at the crystal gate. The missile struck true, exploding in a shower of black crystals and roiling smoke. I put up a shield as best as I could, deflecting pieces of the black substance away from our little group. Each one that struck dimmed the shield a little more, until the magical barrier dissipated on its own.

“Did I do it?” Lilith said hopefully. The smoke cleared, revealing a massive hole in the side of the gate. My eyes widened as I glimpsed what had been hiding behind the wall. It was what appeared to be a city, the landscape transitioning from the gentle rise into another bowl valley, this one a lot larger than the one the temple was in. The buildings were crystalline in nature, shattered under the force of the war, or of time. Some of the taller structures had toppled over, resting on the smaller buildings. In the center of the valley was a tower made of sharp black crystal, jutting upward into the sky. Halfway up though, the tower had cracked, the rest of it laying across the far end of the valley. It looked like somepony had simply snapped the structure in a neat clean break and then set it at an angle on the other buildings. There were simple crystal structures popping out of the landscape, all of them the same black color as the wall and the gate.

“What the hell is this place?” I heard Patch say. I shook my head.

“No idea,” I said. “I've never seen anything like it. It's like something out of a story book.”

“A post apocalyptic story book,” Lilith uttered. “Freaky.”

“I... I have a bad feeling about this place, Star,” Nixis whispered from next to me. I nodded.

“Let's... be careful not to touch anything,” I said, glancing back at my E.F.S. The blips on it flickered in and out, reporting several non-hostile markers up ahead. Non-hostile? What was going on here? I was pretty sure the last time we saw the Magisterium they were seriously hostile. We moved

cautiously forward, and I floated out Stargazer just in case. The blackened crystal buildings loomed on each side of the main drag that led up towards the broken tower. As we walked, I glanced about nervously. I felt like we were being watched with every step. The silence was deafening, the sounds of our hoofsteps falling away without an echo. Eventually, the main plaza underneath the tower came into view. It had been converted into some form of a ritual area, a massive altar standing in the center. Several unicorns milled about the altar. They bore the same style of dress as the guards of the Magisterium. They paid us no attention as we made our way into the plaza. Featherjoy clung to my leg, clearly frightened of these ponies.

"I wonder if this is like their headquarters or something," Violet said quietly.

"Looks like some cuckoo crazy stuff to me," Patch replied.

"To you maybe, but to us, it is home," a voice rang out from across the plaza. I glanced up, seeing Truth Seeker. Here in the center of his power, the leader of this mysterious group of ponies was wearing a flowing white robe, illuminated by a bright orange sun standard. His crimson coat made the robe seem like it was a shining light among the blackened crystal structures. He wore a smug grin on his face.

"Truth Seeker," I said curtly. "Where is our friend? We know you have him." Truth Seeker's grin faded.

"The Smooze? We had thought he had escaped and that you had perished in the temple," the unicorn said. "He is not here."

"Liar!" Featherjoy exclaimed. She hopped off of my leg to stare indignantly at the red stallion. "You have him!" Truth Seeker hung his head.

"I wish that I did, little one. But it seems our search for the beast has begun anew," he replied. "If you are not with him, that means he left of his own accord, am I right?" I nodded in response. "I thought as much. Your so-called friend has left because he realizes what he is. He is a monster, destined to destroy everything. You must see that, Ministry Mare."

"You're wrong," I said angrily. "You're beginning to sound a lot like a broken record, Truth Seeker. If you don't have our friend, we'll be going then."

"Oh, I don't think you will. You see, I happen to know for a fact that the beast has formed somewhat of an attachment to the young griffon. I figure if I keep you here, he will be more apt to show his slimy excuse for a face," the unicorn said, grinning. He motioned to the guards in the plaza with a hoof. The unicorns pointed their rifles at us menacingly. I noticed that they weren't using any magic to hold them. I narrowed my gaze at the leader of the Magisterium. Truth Seeker had a smug grin on his face.

"Thy will be done, Inquisitor," one of the guards said.

"You won't get away with this, Truth Seeker," I snarled, flaring my horn. A sharp pain echoed through the base of my skull. I grunted in pain, the light from my horn dissipating as quickly as it had appeared.

"Funny thing about this place," Truth Seeker said. "The crystals in this place have a lot of history.

They exhibit... interesting properties. They steal magic, void it out. It's one of the major reasons we are here studying them. One of the greatest finds of the century, so to speak. Suffice to say, you won't be casting any spells while you are here." I hissed, the dull throbbing in my horn subsiding as I felt the void magic sap the strength from me. Truth Seeker grinned, his horn flickering black. "Thankfully, I have been exposed enough to them to resist their effects. My own unique brand of talent seems to help."

"What do you want, then?" Violet said. "You obviously have us where you want us."

"I only want the creature," the crimson unicorn said. "Nothing more. After I have him, you will be free to leave. However, should he not show his face... well I will be forced to kill you to prove a point."

"Let them go!" A voice from above shouted. We looked up collectively and I smiled widely. Standing atop one of the nearby broken buildings was Finishing Touch. He was pointing at the Inquisitor with one goopy hand. "You want me, Truth Seeker. Not them."

"Indeed, creature," Truth Seeker called. "Why don't you come down then? We have much to discuss you and I?" Finishing Touch shook his head fiercely.

"Tell me what you know about me first. What am I?" The purple thing said. Truth Seeker grinned wryly.

"Okay, creature. I will entertain your simple request. After all, all who seek knowledge are welcome in the Magisterium. You are a monster, plain as day. You are destined to cover this world in your eternal goo, destroying everything in sight," he replied. "You are an abomination that must be destroyed." Finishing Touch appeared to be lost in thought, processing Truth Seeker's words. I grimaced.

"Don't listen to him!" I shouted angrily. "You're not what he says you are, Touch. You're better than that! You have friends!"

"No. He's right, Star. All I am... All I ever was meant to be was to be destruction," Touch said, cutting me off. "And I'm ready to end this. I'm afraid, Star. I'm afraid that what I did to that poor pony I will do to one of my friends. To you, or to Featherjoy."

"You see the futility of your actions, Ministry Mare? Even the beast itself recognizes its own purpose," Truth Seeker said, returning his attention to Finishing Touch. "Now come, creature and meet your final judgement." The purple Smooze leaped from the side of the building, landing next to the Inquisitor. He looked over at me somberly. Featherjoy leaped past me, her eyes filled with tears.

"Touch!!" She shouted. I reached out with my telekinesis, pulling the young griffon back. The effort was futile as the void crystals sapped the magic out of my horn. "No!! Touch, you can't do it!! Please!! Touch!!!!" The Smooze mouthed the words 'I'm sorry.' as he slid up before Truth Seeker. Featherjoy began to sob at my feet.

"You are making the right choice, evil creature," Truth Seeker said, his horn flaring in a blaze of black fire. His eyes glowed with an unnatural light.

I growled under my breath, doing the only thing that made sense at the time. I ignited my horn, wrapping my magic around Thunder Flash on Violet's back. I grunted through the pain, leaping forward. The beam rifle unlatched from its harness and zipped up into the air next to me.

I lifted the gun, took aim, and fired.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 25: Return to Dust, Part 2

If he's staying calm and collected, I bet he's doing a terrific job as a leader.

Kindness. Everypony needs a little kindness, deserves to be shown some compassion. One day, it might even save the Wasteland. Even in these dark times, kindness prevails. It prevails every day in the hearts and actions of these ponies. You only have to look closely to see it. The ponies of Arlington, with their care and treatment of others. The MMMM, with their stalwart assistance of me and mine. These are the ponies who will shape the future of the Wasteland. They will give the land hope, and offer kindness.

I look forward to the time when ponies can set aside their hate for each other, when kindness and compassion rules instead of hatred and violence. As Nixis has told me on many occasions, the lessons of the Lightbringer live on past her sacrifice. Maybe one day. I only wish that I could see it, but right now... all I can see is failure. All I can see is Spark, Twilight, and the end.

I wonder... will I make it? Will I be able to see this through to the end?

Silver fire streaked across the clearing, the vector of the attack carrying it unerringly to its intended target. Truth Seeker's eyes widened as the fire veered through the air, and his horn began to glow black. Before the stallion could finish his spell, the blast slammed into his cape and knocked him to the ground. He grunted under the pressure of the silver flame, which dissipated as his spell took form. A large singed hole was left in his cloak, his crimson coat unscathed under it. His eyes narrowed as he moved to stand.

"I had hoped you would see reason, Ministry Mare," Truth Seeker said angrily. "But I see that I was wrong. You are a child, trying to be a grown mare in an adult's world. You will pay for your insolence." His horn flared fiercely. I dropped Thunder Flash into Violet's very surprised hooves, letting my own legs carry me forward. I accessed my magic, despite the fact that my entire forehead seared with pain, and fired first. A brilliant purple shield appeared, Truth Seeker's blast spattering off it as I wrapped my telekinesis around Finishing Touch.

"Come on, Touch. There's no sense in this. He's crazy, and you know it," I said. Touch's sunken eyes widened as I floated him before me. "I know that you think that you are bad, but you're not. But right now, if you don't do something, we're all going to be dead. Including Featherjoy."

"F-F-Featherjoy...?" Touch stuttered. The shield shimmered as another black bolt of energy struck it. Truth Seeker roared as he unleashed his magic canceling spell, the shield dropping instantly. My horn seared with pain, and I growled. Touch appeared to be frozen in place as the crimson unicorn strode forward, flanked by his guards.

"I told you, Ministry Mare. I can keep canceling your magic all day if I so desire. You won't get away from me," Truth Seeker proclaimed.

"No!" Finishing Touch shouted. "You won't touch her. You won't touch any of them!" The Smooze

creature leaped in front of Truth Seeker, expanding himself to shield us. “You won't touch Featherjoy!”

“And what do you think you are going to do to me, creature?” Truth Seeker challenged. “I can destroy you without thinking about it. Or did you forget that I have all of my guards with me?” Two unicorns appeared on each side of the crimson stallion.

“I only need to distract you long enough to let my friends go,” Touch snarled. A face appeared in the creature's back, shooting me an intense look. “When I tell you to run, you run.”

“But... this isn't what I meant at all!” I wailed. The face winked, before submerging back into the Smooze's body.

“Please hurry, Star. And keep Featherjoy safe for me,” the purple being said as its mouth disappeared. “Now... run!” The gelatinous mass that belonged to my friend began to expand at a rapid rate. My eyes widened and I spun about, charging back towards the group of ponies behind us.

“Come on, you heard the Smooze, let's hoof it!” I shouted. The others swiftly abandoned their own fights to follow behind me. Violet scooped Featherjoy up onto her back, the young grifflet glancing back at her friend with tears in her eyes.

“Touch!” She shouted. “What's he doing?!”

“Making a pretty big boom,” I said under my breath as the purple thing expanded to its breaking point. With a splattering crack, Touch's body exploded. Sheets of slimy purple covered the Magisterium's guards. The purplish goo blinded the guards, and even Truth Seeker was forced back by the wave of smooze. I turned my head back, continuing to run. I motioned towards the ruined city. “Head into the city! We'll lose them there and regroup!” Shots rang out behind us, indicating that the guards were attempting to give some form of chase.

“I hope you know what you're doing, Star,” Violet said from my side. I smiled hesitantly.

“I... I hope I do too! I hope HE does!” I replied. “Sorry for snatching Thunder Flash like that. I just couldn't think of anything else to do.”

“For what it's worth, I agree with you,” Lilith said from above us.

“Yeah, that Truth Seeker guy is bad news,” Patch said, a small hint of her joyous nature showing through the adrenaline of our escape. Eventually we slowed down to a trot once we realized that the Magisterium's guards were no longer following us. I huffed, my horn searing with pain thanks to the void magic in the air. A small abandoned crystal building appeared on our right, and we took the opportunity to step inside. It appeared to be somepony's home... once. Now it was just a dead mausoleum; a morbid reminder of how bad things had really gotten.

“Do you think Touch will be alright?” Violet said as I slumped to my haunches, rubbing my horn. Featherjoy looked at me expectantly. I smiled softly.

“I'm sure he'll be alright,” I said, rubbing the base of my horn. “But for now, we need to trust that he knows what he's doing and get the hell out of here. My horn feels like its going to explode any second.”

"I know what you mean," Violet replied. "I feel the same way. It must be this place."

"The touch of dark magic fills the air," Nixis said. "These... black crystals. They are sapping energy from us all."

"That's... bad, right?" Steeljack chimed in. I sighed, nodding.

"It means our magic is slowly being drained by the void crystals Truth Seeker mentioned. They're everywhere in this city, even the very foundation of the buildings are made out of them," I said. "Even with the distraction that Touch has given us, if we don't get out of here we'll be easy pickings for Truth Seeker and his guards." I groaned, pressing on my forehead. I certainly hoped that our friend was going to be okay, but I knew that we couldn't stay here for much longer. We had to keep moving.

"We should get going," Lilith said, echoing my thoughts. "We've got Magisterium guards incoming." I stood, using what magic I could to lift Stargazer out. It was beginning to get hard to hold things with telekinesis even. I nodded and we exited the small home. Several guards shouted from down the street at us, firing their assault rifles our way. I let loose a stream of bullets from Stargazer, forcing several of the unicorns to duck. How in the Sorrel Hells were these ponies capable of using their magic so easily when I found it increasingly difficult to do simple things like lift a gun? I pushed the thought from my mind, taking the opportunity to follow the route my friends took through the ruined city.

We moved swiftly down the street, hearing the shouts of the guards as we ducked down into a dark alley. Had Touch somehow failed? I grimaced, when suddenly a voice began to sound out amongst the crystal buildings. It reverberated off the hard crystal all around us. The guards were all but drowned out by their leader's voice.

"I know you are out there, Ministry Mare," the voice said. I narrowed my eyes. *Truth Seeker*, I thought. "Yes... Your friend gave us a great surprise, but it was ultimately for naught. I have captured him, and soon his power will be extinguished from this world. You are free to try to stop me of course. I will even give you a sporting chance of it, not that it will make any difference. In the ruined palace is where you will find me, preparing the ritual to remove the creature's existence. I invite you to come, come and witness the ultimate demise of this ancient evil." I growled under my breath angrily.

"They... they have Touch?" Featherjoy said, her voice tiny from her spot on Violet's back. I looked down at the small griffon, and nodded solemnly. "But... but..."

"Don't you worry, Featherjoy," I said softly. "We're going to get him back, and put an end to this for good." Violet smiled brightly.

"That we will, we owe that much to him. He's a friend, after all," my green love said. I nodded in response, glancing over at the others. They responded in kind.

"We won't let him down," Patch said. Steeljack pressed a button on Tempest's leg armor, sliding his helmet's visor back over his eyes. They glowed a fierce blue and he swung out his rifle.

"Let's show these Magisterium ponies what happens when they mess with our friends," he said. I sighed, chucking. Everypony glanced at me, giving me a bit of a funny look.

"I'm... I'm sorry, I just... I'm really glad you're all with me, you know that, right?" I said. "Just... thank you."

"Don't sweat it, Star," Lilith said. "Now, let's get moving. If we head down through into the city, I've got an idea. If we can get into the broken portion of the tower, we can take Truth Seeker by surprise." The black mare pointed out of the alley towards the massive palace, its broken spire laying across the rest of the city.

"Sounds like a good a plan as any," I said, glancing in the direction the pegasus had pointed. I cocked my head, listening for any sounds of Magisterium guards in our area, but heard nothing. "And if we're going to go, let's do it now. There's no guards around." We stepped out of the alley, cautious but confident that we could get to the palace and save Touch. As we trotted deeper into the crystalline city, I noticed that the roads and buildings around us began to get darker in color. What felt like night in the middle of the day surrounded us as dusty crystal rubble and even darker buildings rose up on each side of us.

I moved forward down the dark street, feeling as though something out there was watching us. Was Truth Seeker spying on us perchance? I couldn't tell. The feeling didn't feel like it was anything magical, but then again my magic was beginning to feel much more difficult to access. The drain of the void crystals in this area was far more potent than in the rest of the city. My horn burned with throbbing pain, but I pushed on regardless. A few glances over at Violet revealed she was feeling the same way. I stepped over to my love, placing a wing over her back. Featherjoy had taken to walking alongside since there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. Violet looked up, smiling.

"You okay?" I asked quietly. She nodded.

"Yeah. Horn hurts like a bitch, though," the green mare replied. "You?"

"Same. Probably worse," I answered. "I hope the others are okay. Nixis said this was affecting us all."

"Well, we can probably feel it more because of our horns," Violet said. "Pegasi and Earth ponies have inherent magic, but seeing as how Lilith can still fly it might not be affecting her as badly."

"I have a sneaking suspicion that has to do with a certain set of statues," I whispered. "Still... how long can we even last out here? We're no good if we can't use our magic, Violet."

"We'll have to make do, I guess. Until we can save Touch and stop Truth Seeker," my love replied. I sighed, nodding. The streets we found ourselves on now were deathly silent. My eyes traced the lines leading up to the ruined section of the palace. It was so close and yet so far away. The silence was killing me. There weren't even any guards chasing after us like there was before. What was Truth Seeker playing at? Why drive us into this part of the city?

A sucking sound from all around us told me everything I needed to know. *Ghouls*, I thought. *Of course*. A few red blips appeared on my E.F.S., showing up on each side of us. I unlatched Stargazer, struggling to hold the minigun up with my magic. Two crystalline feral ghouls appeared out of nowhere, sucking and howling. I fired a stream at the lead ghoul, hitting it directly in the chest. The bullets pinged off of the feral ghoul, and it continued to charge. My eyes widened. My gun had literally no effect on it! The sharp retort of Tempest's rifle cracked through the air, knocking the ghoul

to the ground. It twitched, and stood back up. Patch leaped next to her armor-clad love, letting loose with Para Bellum. The massive rounds from her rifle took the legs clean off of the monstrosity.

“Violet, grab Featherjoy!” I shouted. My love nodded, scooping the little griffon onto her back, while unlatching Thunder Flash. She unleashed several blasts of silver fire at the second ghoul, the crystalline creature falling back into a pile of glowing ooze. More sucking sounds came from all around us. We were surrounded by these things. “Lilith, Nixis, take point. Patch, Steeljack, take the rear. We'll keep Featherjoy here, and protect her. And keep moving towards that tower!” My friends nodded, the lumbering hellhound moving to the forefront alongside the black pegasus.

We trotted through the streets, keeping as close as we could to each other. My hooves clipped softly on the crystal streets, while the sounds of the ghouls surrounded us. More and more red blips popped up on my E.F.S. I grimaced. A pack of the deadly beasts burst out of a nearby building. They charged, snarling and snapping as they were met by a barrage of fire. It took several minutes before the ghouls were dispatched. I wasn't sure how long we would last at this rate.

We continued forward, the ruined section of the palace tower looming closer. We were beginning to drag at this point. I groaned under the pressure of the void magic in the air. A cursory glance at the others indicated that they were beginning to feel it too. A loud roar followed by an explosion cut through the air behind us. I glanced back to see the largest ghoul I was pretty sure I'd ever seen in my adventures. It stood easily three times my size, larger than even Ahuizotl. It was made of the same onyx crystal everything else was made of. It had burst straight through the wall of a building, and it looked *pissed*.

“Shit, everypony, run!” I shouted, feeling my strength return in a surge of adrenaline burst throughout my entire body. I began to run as hard as I could, the pain in my horn echoed by my aching legs. The others galloped next to me, the thunderous sound of our hooves ringing down the street. Nixis loped ahead of me, leaping into the air onto a building that had fallen over at an angle onto the tower's broken section. He motioned to us to follow him. The ghoul snarled, its onyx hide shining amongst the crystal streets. It plowed through the buildings behind us like they weren't even there. It was getting closer.

“Nixis! Take Featherjoy and get up to the palace!” Violet shouted. “I've got an idea!” The hellhound nodded, lumbering back down to grab onto the young griffon. Featherjoy's eyes were wide with fear as she wrapped her claws around Nixis' neck. The canine charged up the side of the building as fast as he could move. I turned to Violet.

“What's on your mind, sweetie?” I said. “We don't have much time before that thing plows its way up here.”

“Right,” Violet said, grinning. “And we're gonna use that to get rid of it. Lilith, Patch, we're gonna bait that monster into the building and then blow the building out from under it.”

“I've certainly got enough explosives to do the job, but are we sure it'll get rid of it?” Patch asked. Violet smiled amidst the roaring of the monster.

“Not enough time to second guess, girls,” she said. “Steeljack, Star, follow Nixis and keep watch. Patch, you and I will set those charges and Lilith, you'll be the bait. I don't know anypony else that can fly fast enough to escape. No offense, Star.” I nodded, flapping my wings to join the armor-clad stallion up on the ledge overlooking the ruined city. The ghoul was getting closer to the base of the

building. I watched while Violet and Patch descended into one of the open windows, disappearing from view for several tense moments. Lilith stood ready, the Bitch sliding out of its harness.

“Come on!” She shouted down at the ghoul, getting its attention. The onyx beast snarled and roared, placing its hooves on the base of the building. It started climbing up, growling and snapping. Lilith calmly waited as Violet and Patch reappeared. The two green mares galloped up the rest of the building as hard as they could, making it just in time as the ghoul loomed over the black pegasus. Lilith simply grinned, flapping her wings to push herself back as she unleashed the Bitch's payload. The missile shot forth from the launcher's barrel, striking the monster in its midsection. It howled in pain as it fell backwards, landing on the side of the building. Lilith shot into the air immediately, looking back at Patch and nodding.

“Got it!” Patch yelled, pulling out a small detonator out of her shoulder pocket. She pressed down on the button with a gleeful shout, and the whole world fell out beneath us as the explosive charges went off. The building began to crumble into pieces, the large ghoul falling through an open crack to the streets below. The tower section we were standing in shifted, groaning under the stress caused by the force of the explosion. Patch's eye widened. “Umm... that might have been a little too much...”

“What?!” We all exclaimed, glancing at her. The mare grinned sheepishly as pieces of crystal from the building below us cracked and began to fall. The tower section groaned before falling away under us. We all flinched as it smashed into the ground below.

“Shit!” I shouted. “We need to move, now!” My hooves moved before my brain could even process what was happening. The others were right next to me as the shelf we had been standing on fell away. The ruined tower shifted beneath the pressure. We galloped fiercely across ornate crystal walls that were now floors. They groaned beneath our weight, before cracking and disappearing as well. I tried to get a grasp on the situation as we ran. We'd somehow managed to single handedly destroy the point that the tower had been resting on. The blast was just enough. I flared my horn, the pain obvious but lessening. The void magic in the air was small here, it seemed. I reached out with my magic, tearing a hole what appeared to be a floor in front of us. Beyond that, a massive spiral staircase stretched out horizontally towards the main base of the palace.

“Keep running!” I shouted, adrenaline pounding in my veins. My legs burned from the action, but I pushed forward. I had to keep going. I only hoped that we would be there in time to save Touch. We moved as fast as we could, plowing through the crystal stairs that blocked our path. The tower seemed to stretch on forever. When was this thing going to end? Behind us the path fell away to the city below. The tower section shifted again, shuddering under the stress. I was worried that the whole thing was going to fall, but it held up as we ran.

I blasted through a large rotunda with a telekinetic blast, revealing that there was a large gap where the tower section had broken off from the rest of the palace. Below us, a large room lay a good ten to fifteen feet where the rest of the crystal tower was. It was apparent that the shifting had resulted in the tower completely separating from its base. I glanced back, seeing that the tower was still crumbling behind us.

“We're gonna have to jump!” I called out. “I'll try and guide us down as easily as I can. Lilith, you take Featherjoy and fly down!” Lilith nodded, snatching the young griffon and flipping her between her wings. She leaped from the broken tower and flew down towards the room, landing with grace. Nixis followed, jumping off with reckless abandon. He landed with a grunt next to the black pegasus.

“Steeljack, Patch, you're next!” The two earth ponies leaped off at the same time, and I flared my horn, holding onto them with telekinesis to slow their fall. They landed on the crystal floor safely. I looked over at Violet.

“Ready whenever you are,” my love said, fire alight in her eyes. I grinned, igniting my horn again and wrapping my magic around the green mare. We jumped just as the rest of the tower fell away, spraying shards of crystal everywhere. I hit the ground with an ***oomph***, groaning as I rolled over, a particularly nasty shard striking the floor next to where my head had been. The air above was filled with crystal debris. My eyes widened and I reached into my mind for the magic. I could feel it much more clearly here. I cast Shining Armor's shield spell, extending the purple bubble over the top of the room. Crystal shards struck the shield hard, but it held.

“Is everypony alright?” Lilith said. I grunted in response, finally dropping the shield spell when I was reasonably sure that the debris was gone.

“We're alright,” Patch said.

“I'm fine, too,” Nixis said. I stood, fighting against the tug of the void magic. “This place... it feels different.”

“I can feel it too,” I said. “It feels better, like there's none of those black crystals.”

“Yeah... I can feel my magic coming back,” Violet said, looking back up at where the tower section had been. “That... was not exactly something I'd like to do again, thank you very much.”

“Me neither. Now then, let's go pay Truth Seeker a visit,” I said, turning towards the only entrance in the room. The crystal door hung off the hinges, leading deeper into the palace. I stepped forward, unlatching Stargazer from its harness.

Time to set you free, Touch.

The stairs leading down from the room we had ended up in were quiet. As much as the cliché irritated, they were a little too quiet. I stepped into the hallway, cautiously looking around for where to go next. A few blips shimmered into my E.F.S, and I motioned for the others to follow me. The hallway ended in a large staircase that rounded down towards what appeared to be the old palace's throne room. An eerie light shone through the massive hall. I grimaced. In the center of the room, floating in air, was Finishing Touch. He appeared to be bound in a cage of magic energy. He looked... pained and forlorn. Standing next to an altar was Truth Seeker. The crimson unicorn was grinning as he pored over several scrolls in front of him. He was surrounded by his unicorn guards. There was no easy way to do this, I figured. I stepped forward onto the balcony overlooking the throne room.

“Truth Seeker!” I shouted, revealing myself. The red unicorn glanced up, a wry smile appearing on his face.

“Welcome, Ministry Mare. I've been expecting you,” he called out. “Did you enjoy your little adventure through the city?”

“Not particularly,” I snorted. “I’m here to end this. *Now.*” Truth Seeker chuckled.

“It’s a funny story,” the unicorn said. “This place used to be a mighty empire in the days before the war. It was ruled by a loving princess, defended by a powerful artifact. But as they say, war never changes. It was during the war that the regime fell. An ancient evil, once defeated by this very empire, took root, and on the final day he struck. He spread his influence throughout as the megaspells dropped, raining chaos and death over everything. Even he was unable to survive the end of the world... well... he didn’t, but many of his works did.”

“This is lovely and all, but you’re stalling, Truth Seeker,” I snarled. The unicorn’s eyes flared a deep black.

“Oh, I’m not stalling. I’m merely siphoning off the energy I need off of the creature,” he said, licking his lips. “You see... that evil left his mark on this very land. I found its power, taking it into myself. Imagine the possibilities! Imagine how much power I will wield when I use this beast to destroy everything!” My eyes widened.

“What?” I said, blinking. “What did you say? I thought... I thought...”

“I can be quite the actor sometimes,” Truth Seeker said. “Yes... I am going to siphon off your friend’s energy and then use that power to fuel a megaspell of epic proportions!”

“Star!!” Touch shouted from his magical cage. “You have to stop him! Don’t worry about me, I’ll be alright!” The others fanned out on each side of me. Featherjoy looked upset.

“You’re crazy,” I said. “You can’t be allowed to do this.”

“It’s far too late for that, Ministry Mare. I’m going to do it, and you can’t stop me,” Truth Seeker said. One of the unicorn guards suddenly stepped out of the shadows, lifting his rifle and firing, cutting off the Magisterium leader from moving forward. I looked up, seeing a blue unicorn with a black mane standing on the other balcony. One of his legs was cybernetic.

“No, Truth Seeker. You’re not going to do that,” he said. Truth Seeker snarled, and Finishing Touch cried out in surprise.

“P-P-P-Professor?!!” He shouted. Featherjoy whipped her head around, her eyes lighting up.

“It’s you!! Professor!” She called out. The blue unicorn nodded softly.

“Touch, Featherjoy. It’s good to see you both again,” he said. “I only wish that it were under better circumstances.” He glanced over at me. “Professor Osmosis, at your service.”

“Hello, Osmosis. It’s been a long time. I thought you were dead,” Truth Seeker interjected, his black eyes glaring hatred at the other unicorn.

“You heard wrong, Truth Seeker. I’ve been following the Magisterium since you attacked me at the Museum,” he said. “And now it’s time for us to end this little game. Let my friend go, now. Let all of them go.”

“All of them?” I questioned. Osmosis nodded.

“Truth Seeker is well versed in the art of mind control, or rather, the power that he holds is,” the blue unicorn said. “He's holding the Magisterium in his thrall. The group I helped build would never have sunk to this crude grave-robbing.”

“What? Professor, you never said anything about that!” Featherjoy exclaimed. Osmosis hung his head.

“I am not proud of this. But the Magisterium used to be so much more. We used to be the Seekers of Truth, dedicated to the secrets of the Wasteland, and how they could be used to help everypony,” the stallion said. “Until Truth Seeker assumed control, that is.”

“I had grand designs!” Truth Seeker roared. “Grand plans for the future!”

“Your grand plans all ended in the destruction of ponykind as we know it,” Osmosis said calmly. “When we found this place... Truth Seeker changed. He accepted the void magic as though it were a part of him. He took control, and I left. I started my caravan, seeking the secrets of the world.”

“And then you met me?” Finishing Touch interjected. Osmosis smiled softly.

“You are an amazing creature, my friend. You have the potential to be incredibly good, or to be incredibly evil. You only have to take the right path,” he said, his voice light and happy. “I wanted to see you have that chance.”

“And now, you never will,” Truth Seeker spat. “You'll never stop me, Osmosis.” His horn glowed a vicious black, firing a blast of energy at the blue unicorn. Osmosis leaped to the side, dodging the blast. He grunted, hitting the ground hard. I started to move forward to help him, but the blue stallion lifted a hoof.

“No, I'm fine. Let me handle this. It's my responsibility. I let him get this far,” he said. “You see about freeing Touch.”

“Fine, but don't get yourself killed,” I said, flapping my wings and taking to the sky. Osmosis turned back to send a blast of raw magical energy at Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion jumped back, the blast striking the ground in front of him. “Let's end this, Truth Seeker!” Osmosis leaped off of the balcony, flaring his horn to slow his fall.

“Yes.. lets,” Truth Seeker replied. He stepped forward, striking at Osmosis viciously with his hoof. The other stallion lifted his cybernetic leg, blocking the strike with a grin. He pushed back with a telekinetic wave, forcing Truth Seeker back. The crimson stallion's horn lit with that unnatural black light, firing his magic cancellation spell. Osmosis' telekinesis crumbled beneath the void magic.

“Still fighting dirty, eh Truth Seeker?” Osmosis said, narrowing his gaze.

“Fighting dirty? No... I'm playing for keeps, my friend,” Truth Seeker replied, flaring his horn again. It glowed black once more, a blast of dark energy whistling through the throne room. Osmosis dove to the side, countering with his own blast and striking Truth Seeker in the side. The dark stallion cringed as the energy hit. Osmosis stood, a smile on his face.

“Give up, old friend. You know as well as I do that I could research better than you,” he said.

“You're going to pay for that, Osmosis,” Truth Seeker snarled. “What could you possibly know more than I? The great Inquisitor!”

“I know that the void magic in this place is slowly rejecting you. You're not the only one who can harness its power,” Osmosis replied wryly. His horn ignited, glowing a deep navy color. He unleashed his magic, knocking the crimson stallion to the ground. I pulled my attention away from the fight to look over the magical cage holding Finishing Touch. The cage was simple in its construction, made of the same onyx crystal that had littered this entire fucking city. I groaned, reaching out with my magic to blast the lock open. The feedback from the crystals was immediate. I nearly dropped out of the sky from the pain. Grunting, I threw my willpower against the pain and started fighting back.

“Come on... open up!” I shouted angrily, blasting at the cage again. The crystals resisted even more. I glared at Touch. “Can't you just slip out of there?”

“I tried already. Something in the cage won't let me out,” Touch said. “Sorry...”

“Listen, I know this is a bad time and all,” I said, flaring my horn again. “But I really appreciate what you did earlier. It took a lot of guts not to just give in.” The purple being smiled.

“I only wanted to protect you and Featherjoy,” he said. “That's all I ever wanted...”

“I knew you had it in you,” I said, smiling widely. “Now... let's get you out of there.” I ignited my horn, beating as hard as I could against the void magic inhabiting the black crystals. This time, I focused on simply freeing my friend, instead of trying to crack the magic shell. I thought about how much I wanted to be in his company, about how he made me feel. He was a friend, and I wasn't about to let that friend down. I had to free him. The onyx cage began to crack and shudder under my assault, and my eyes widened. The key to beating the void magic wasn't brute force. It wasn't overpowering it with your magic.

It was friendship. Pure and unadulterated friendship. It was a magic that worked wonders. I grinned, sending an image of Touch and Featherjoy, happy and laughing at some joke of Steeljack's. The cage sprung into slivers, shattering completely and freeing my purple gelatinous friend. Touch leaped from the broken cage, landing on the balcony with a splash next to the rest of our friends. Featherjoy jumped off of Violet's back, rushing forward to tackle Touch in a fierce hug. I smiled. A flash of light drew my attention to the fight below us. Truth Seeker snarled, hurling another bolt of dark energy towards the good Professor. Osmosis smiled and simply stepped to the side, letting the bolt pass by.

“Why... won't... you... just... DIE!!!” Truth Seeker roared, igniting the darkness of his horn once more. Another magic cancellation wave appeared from its tip, this one much larger than his previous blasts. The magic poured forth, moving to capture Osmosis in its deadly grip. The blue stallion stood tall with nowhere to go, holding his head high against his enemy's assault.

“Osmosis, no!” I shouted. The blue unicorn smiled softly as the magic wave struck him.

Nothing happened. Osmosis stood there, his horn glowing a brilliant blue. The dark magic surrounded him on all sides, floating in the air as he directed it back towards Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion fell backwards, hitting the ground with a ***crash*** as the magic wave slammed right into his side. The

void in the air fell away around Osmosis, who stood over his rival triumphantly. He moved next to Truth Seeker, who appeared to be unconscious and still breathing. I flapped my wings, landing next to the blue unicorn. He glanced over at me briefly and then back down to Truth Seeker.

"I'm sorry, brother," he said. "But you never did understand the nature of friendship. That's the secret to beating the void magic, after all." My eyes went wide.

"Brother?!" I said. Osmosis nodded.

"Yes. Truth Seeker wasn't always so bad," he replied. "He was too impulsive however. Never one for staying in one place and researching. In my time searching this place, I found out quite a bit about the magic here. The void crystals... they are rough on everypony. But with good friends and a goal in mind, one can survive their effects."

"P-P-P-Professor?" A voice said from behind us. The blue unicorn turned, seeing Finishing Touch standing there. The stallion smiled.

"Finishing Touch," he said. "It's so good to see you again, my friend." Before Touch could respond, several unicorns that belonged to the Magisterium charged into the room. I snarled, lifting Stargazer. Osmosis lifted a hoof, stopping me. "No. They will threaten you no longer. They are now remembering who they once were."

"Osmosis?" One of the unicorns asked from the balcony. "What is the meaning of this? What's going on?" The blue stallion glanced up.

"My dear friends, you have been under control of one who was thought to be trusted," he said, addressing the group of unicorns. He motioned to Truth Seeker. "Truth Seeker controlled your minds. He made you do things to steal the secrets of the Wasteland for himself and himself alone. He is to blame."

"Then we should kill him!" The unicorn shouted back angrily. "Dispose of that traitor, now!" Osmosis shook his head in negation. The stallion continued, a thread of compassion softening his voice. "Look, I know he's your brother, Osmosis... but even you can't ignore this."

"No. Truth Seeker deserves punishment, but he also deserves our kindness. He should be taken back to Canterbridge, where we can help him. This place, this magic, it has poisoned him," Osmosis said. "I beseech you to see reason, and do the right thing." The assembled unicorns mulled over the Professor's words for several moments. They fell silent as a group before another unicorn spoke.

"How do you know we aren't going to just get mind controlled again?" The unicorn said. Osmosis smiled, lifting an item out of his saddlebag. It was a horn ring, made of metal. "An inhibitor ring? Are you sure it will work?"

"It will if we all work together to keep him under wraps. Now, will you help me?" The blue unicorn said.

"Fine, fine," the other unicorn replied. "We'll do as you say, honored Professor. Or should we call you Inquisitor now?" Osmosis chuckled.

"No no. The Magisterium is no more. The honor of the Magisterium is tainted, perhaps ruined. We were just simple ponies once, my friends. It is time that we return to our simple roots, and use our knowledge to help others," he said. The other unicorns nodded, stepping forward. They collected the ring from Osmosis and fit it to the unconscious form of Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion was lifted into the air and placed in a set of manacles.

"We shall prepare the caravan for travel, then," the lead unicorn said as the throng of former Magisterium ponies filed out of the palace doors. I cocked an eyebrow at the blue unicorn.

"I'm not sure exactly where you're heading, but there's a town north of here called Arlington. They've fallen on some rough times, dealing with Steel Rangers and all. They could use a little help," I said. Osmosis nodded in response.

"I believe we can make a stop there and lend some assistance," he said. "Provided that I have my two favorite helpers with me." He glanced over at Finishing Touch and Featherjoy and smiled.

"You mean... us?" Featherjoy asked, her voice tiny. She looked up at me as if asking permission. I nodded, and the grifflet charged forward, wrapping her little claws around Osmosis' leg. The blue stallion chuckled.

"Of course, Featherjoy. I always prefer to be in the company of my friends, after all," he said, lowering himself to the young griffon's level. "Featherjoy... I'm so sorry about what you had to go through, about what you had to see. When Truth Seeker's guards came to us at the Museum, I thought maybe that I could get you two away so they couldn't capture you. I was ready to give my life to protect you both."

"About that..." Touch said, interrupting. "How did you get out of there? When we were running away, it nearly looked like your leg was shot clean off." Osmosis grinned, tapping his cybernetic leg with a hoof.

"They hit the wrong leg, of course. I had wanted to tell you about my... affliction, but I never really had a good time to approach the subject. Not many ponies like cybernetics, but if I hadn't been this way, I really would be dead right now," the Professor said. He looked up at me. I grinned sheepishly. "And you must be the Ministry Mare that Touch has told me so much about."

"That would be me," I replied. "And this here is Violet, Patch, Steeljack, Nixis, and Lilith. My friends." The others waved, smiling at the blue stallion. Osmosis smiled in return.

"Professor Osmosis at your service. I do apologize for the actions of my brother. He never used to be so bad," he said. "I suppose now we should get things in order to leave this dreadful place. Touch, Featherjoy, I would like for you two to join us in Canterbridge. There, you can both have a home."

"I... I don't... I don't know, Professor," Touch stammered. "What if I—" Osmosis stepped forward, placing a hoof on the goeey creature's shoulder, stopping him.

"Touch. I've seen you at your best and at your worst. Do not let some predetermined notion of destiny tell you what you should become. You make your *own* fate, my friend. You. Not some goddess up in the sky," he said. "Be who you want to be. Not what you - or others! Think you should be." Touch fell silent, thinking on the Professor's words. He looked over at me, and I nodded softly.

“Yes,” Touch finally said. “I’ll come with you. I want to be good, Professor. I want to spend time with Featherjoy, and I want to work more on my art. I want to be your friend.”

“Excellent. We will leave in the morning, then.”

I trotted along, following behind the others as we migrated out of the palace and back into the plaza. The air was thick still with the void crystal's magic, making the journey rather sluggish. The rest of Osmosis' group was waiting for us to arrive. They had managed to rustle up a few carts, one of them holding Truth Seeker. The crimson unicorn had yet to awaken since his fight with Osmosis. The blue unicorn motioned to a route leading outside of the ancient city that would safely keep us out of ghoulish territory.

Within the hour we had made it out of the city proper and on the road. Just up the road from the massive empire we left behind was an abandoned power station which would serve as a resting place for us. I dragged myself into the office of the station, slumping down in the corner. Despite the fact that I had been able to overcome the cage holding onto Finishing Touch, I was still having problems with the void magic that had been present in the city. I glanced up, seeing the Smooze himself. He sat down next to me, a crude smile formed on his face.

“Hey,” I said, lifting a hoof. Finishing Touch nodded, and plopped next to me.

“We’re leaving at first light,” he said wistfully. “I wanted to get a chance to talk to you before we left.” I glanced over at the creature.

“What about?” I said, cocking an ear in his direction.

“I... I wanted to thank you. For taking care of Featherjoy,” he said. “And for believing in me.”

“Touch... I never stopped believing in you,” I said, facing him. “You are good, and you have a wonderful friend in the young griffon.” Touch smiled.

“I have a wonderful friend in *you*, Radiant Star. You of all ponies kept reminding me of how good I can be,” he said. “I wish we could stay around and help you.”

“You don’t want to go where we are headed, Touch,” I said. “The road ahead... it’s going to be long and hard. But it’s a road I must travel if I am to stop Spark. Besides... you’re getting a home! Life will only be looking up for you and Featherjoy.”

“I am happy for that,” Touch replied. “But I cannot help but worry that the others will regard me as Truth Seeker did, as a tool to be used...”

“They won’t,” I argued. “You’ll show them. You just have to trust yourself. Yourself and your friends, Touch. Trust the Professor and Featherjoy. They’ll be right there with you.” The Smooze nodded.

“I know, I guess I’m just overthinking things,” he said, chuckling. The purple creature stood, a sigh rumbling from his wobbly body. “I think that I am going to turn in for the night. I will see you in the

morning, Star.”

“Sleep well, my friend,” I said. Touch slid away as Violet trotted up. My little mare laid down next to me, nuzzling my neck.

“I’m glad that everything turned out okay,” she said quietly, pulling away and rubbing the base of her forehead. I kissed her softly on the cheek.

“Feeling alright?” I asked. Violet nodded.

“Yeah, just a little sore still. My horn is still a little raw from that void magic,” she replied. “I’ve never felt anything quite like that before.”

“Me neither. It was kind of crazy,” I said, extending my wing over my love’s back. “Don’t worry, the feeling will go away after a while. I’m already starting to feel way better.”

“You’re an alicorn, silly,” Violet said, rolling her eyes. “I’d be kind of scared if you weren’t healed up by now.” I chuckled, resting my head next to hers.

“Well,” I said, yawning. “I think I’m gonna try and get some sleep. Goodnight, sweetheart.”

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I looked up, groaning loudly. The door to the library lay open as always, a soft light beckoning for me to enter. I stood, stretching my legs out. I trotted into the treehouse, wondering what Twilight wanted next for me. I found the purple mare sitting at her desk, her back turned to me. I coughed softly to get her attention. Twilight’s head cocked back slightly, regarding my presence. Her eyes were a bit red and puffy, as if she had been crying.

“Twilight?” I said. “What’s... what’s wrong?” The other alicorn sighed heavily.

“I... I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “About your last visit... I wanted to apologize for how I acted.” I smiled softly, settling onto my haunches in front of the mare.

“Aww, Twilight,” I said. “It’s alright. If our positions were reversed I probably would have done the same.”

“Still... I owe you a lot. Seeing what you did for your friends... you reminded me of a long time ago,” Twilight said.

“Speaking of that... I want to ask you something,” I said, narrowing my gaze at her. “I want to know about the intervention. When the Elements tried to kill Spark.” Twilight’s eyes widened, and she glanced away.

“My friends... they were so worried about me that they thought they needed to confront me over my brother’s death. They didn’t quite understand how bad things had really gotten,” she said. “The war was stressing all of the Ministry’s resources, and the I.M.P. Project was in full swing.”

“And Spark’s plans?” I asked. “How did she figure into that?”

“Spark... I didn't know at the time what she really wanted. I didn't find that out until... well, until I cast the spell,” Twilight said. “At the intervention, I was in the middle of discussing with my friends how I was just fine when Spark overloaded my mind. I felt a pain like no other. I only knew that I had to escape.”

“What did Spark tell you?” I said.

“She... she said that the Elements tried to kill her. That they tried to sever the connection between us,” Twilight replied. “I was frightened. I was worried that it would happen again. From that point forward; I focused on - no, I hid my projects at the Ministry.” I nodded, pondering the mare's words.

“I... I see,” I said softly.

“My friends tried to do what they could, but the war was taxing them as well. The harder we all worked towards a brighter future... the worse our friendship had become,” Twilight said. “Then the end of the world happened... and I found myself inside the Goddess.”

“What exactly happened to Spark after that?” I asked. “I never did truly understand that.” Twilight chuckled.

“I don't think I have the answer for you on that one, Star. I only know what's happened since the connection between us was established,” she replied. “Trixie never really let me out that often. I suspect that she was jealous of the attention I had received... before. I mean, I was a Princess, and then the Ministry Mare.” I sighed, glancing at my hooves. This mare... she was just like me in a lot of ways. I looked back up at Twilight.

“What was it like?” I said, catching the purple alicorn off guard.

“What do you mean?” Twilight said.

“Being a Princess. Being the Ministry Mare. Being you...” I said. Twilight nodded.

“It... It was something that I'd rather not talk about right now,” she said. “Life in Equestria... in old Equestria... it's something I miss dearly.” I narrowed my eyes at Twilight.

“Fair enough,” I said. “What now?”

“Now? Well, now we get on our way to finding Spark. You mentioned before that we were going to Manehattan?” Twilight said.

“There's a group of ponies there I believe can help us,” I said. “They're called the Twilight Society.” Twilight nodded.

“Good. The sooner we find Spark, the sooner we can end this,” she said.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke to the soft light of the power station office, sighing. Violet lay next to me still, murmuring in

her sleep. I chanced a tiny smile, the scene was simply too cute. I laid there for several moments, listening to her breathing. When I tried to concentrate on the peaceful joy of the moment, my thoughts turned to Twilight. I wasn't quite sure what to make of the purple mare. She seemed like she was trying to help me, but at the same time I wondered just how bad things had gotten for her. Violet shifted next to me, yawning as she awoke. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled as she looked up at me.

"Morning, sweetheart," she said. A smile crept along my face.

"You're cute when you talk in your sleep you know that?" I said. Violet's face flushed red.

"I-I-I am not!" She stammered. I grinned.

"What were you dreaming about, eh?" I said, dropping my head closer to her. "Some hot sexy flank? Or just me?" Violet's eyes popped open wide, and her blush ran deeper. I chuckled, nuzzling her close. "I'm just messing with you, Violet. You can turn down the blush. Glad to see you're feeling better."

"I... I umm... Yeah. I'm feeling much better," she said. "The headache is gone, at least." I nodded, lifting my wing off of my lovely mare. I stood, stretching my legs out. I looked across the room, noticing that Steeljack and Patch were sleeping on opposite sides of the area. In fact, it seemed as if Patch was sleeping apart from even Lilith and Nixis, who were situated in the same side of the room as Steeljack was. I narrowed my eyes at this. At some point, I was going to need to talk to Patch about what was going on. But right now, I needed to speak to Osmosis and the others.

I trotted out of the substation into the brisk morning Wasteland air. The former Magisterium ponies were packing up their supplies already. The rest of my friends appeared from the depths of the power station as I trotted up to Osmosis and Touch. I smiled widely.

"Radiant Star," Osmosis said. "I wish that we could stay longer, but unfortunately... we've been gone from our home for far too long."

"You deserve it, after going through so much," I said. "Hopefully one of these days we'll meet again."

"One can only hope," Osmosis replied.

"What about Truth Seeker?" I asked.

"My brother is currently under heavy sedation. I plan to keep him there for the duration of the trip. Despite my feelings towards him as family, I cannot afford to be careless in his imprisonment," Osmosis said. "It is going to take some time to treat him. The void magic of that place made significant alterations to him."

"Is there any hope for him?" Violet said. Osmosis smiled.

"There's always hope. It will take all the effort of the Seekers of Truth to find a cure for him, but we will find it. I will see to it personally," he said.

"Seekers of Truth?" I asked, cocking my head.

“Yes... it is time for us to go back to the ways of the past, and help others because they need help. The Magisterium was a grab for titles and structures of the past. Now, we must adapt if we are to meet the needs of the Wasteland,” Osmosis said. “Besides, the Magisterium and the High Inquisitor was Truth's deal. It leaves quite a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Understandable. It is a good change. So you'll be going back to where you're from, then?” I said.

Osmosis nodded. “If you ever find yourself in the area of Canterbridge, please feel free to stop in. You will be more than welcome. Now then, I have business to attend to, so I will leave you to say your goodbyes.” The blue unicorn turned and trotted away to talk to the other unicorns. Touch and Featherjoy stood to the side, bright smiles plastered all over their faces.

“I want to tell you all about how thankful I am for what you all have done,” Finishing Touch said. “You helped us when we needed it the most, and you helped me most of all.”

“You're a friend,” Violet said. “We couldn't turn you down.”

“Exactly,” Patch said. “You helped us get out of that Museum, after all. We owed you a solid.” Touch chuckled at this. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Featherjoy inching closer to me. I grinned, reaching out with my magic and lifting the grifflet into the air. Featherjoy laughed loudly as I set her down onto my back. I trotted away from the group while they were saying their farewells.

“I'm going to miss you, little one,” I said quietly. “You have such a long journey ahead of you, I hope that your travels with Touch go well.”

“Thanks, Missus Star,” Featherjoy replied. “I'm gonna miss you too. Are you... are you gonna be okay?” I nodded.

“I shall be fine, Featherjoy,” I said. “I have my friends. They will give me the strength I need to move forward. You must promise me something.”

“What's that?” Featherjoy said.

“Do the same. Move forward. Draw strength from your friends. Give strength back to them. It is all we can do in this world, to keep each other safe. Can you do that for me?” I asked softly. Featherjoy's eyes widened and she nodded.

“I... I will... I promise,” she said. “Missus Star?”

“Yes, little one?” I replied.

“Promise me you'll be alright? I don't want anything bad to happen to you,” Featherjoy said. I smiled, looking away from the young griffon and back at the others.

“I... I promise. I'll try to do my best, Featherjoy. Don't worry, little one. You'll hear about me on the radio,” I said. “Just keep your ears dialed to DJ-PON3.”

“I sure will!” Featherjoy said enthusiastically. The young griffon jumped off of my back, running over to meet her friend. I lifted a hoof and waved at the two as Violet stepped up next to me.

“Think they'll be alright?” Violet said. I looked down at her and back at the two friends. Osmosis smiled brightly as they started down the road. They followed behind the caravan, chatting as Featherjoy zipped around them happily.

“I think they'll be just fine,” I said. “Now then... we have a city to get to.” Violet nodded, a smile forming on her face.

“That's right,” she said. “Manehatten it is!”

We started down the road, the morning air keeping us in halfway decent spirits. I noticed that Patch was still keeping to herself, but I was in no position to address that at the moment. Patch deserved her time to come to me on her own. I couldn't force her to tell me what was going on. All I could do is hope she would talk to me. My mind turned to the road ahead. What was Spark up to now? And where did our road end? Could I keep my promise to Featherjoy?

My mind swam with all these thoughts and more as we walked down the road. I nearly missed the blinking marker on my E.F.S. I stopped dead in my tracks. I turned my head to the left of the road, the marker coming into full view. I flipped open my PipBuck's automap function. The blinking arrow was pointed towards a map marker labeled *Ministry of Arcane Science – Branch Hub*.

“Hold on... Violet, did you get a map marker too?” I said. My marefriend cocked her head at me.

“No?” She questioned. “Why?”

“I just had one show up. It's for a M.A.S. Hub,” I said. “It wasn't there before. And it's blinking. I don't like that it's blinking.”

“Weird. I don't know, Star. We're still days away from Manehatten. We should probably stay on task,” Violet said. I nodded.

“You're probably --” I started to say as my horn ignited, blazing a brilliant purple. My hooves started sliding beneath me as I was physically dragged by my horn towards the blinking marker. My eyes widened as I tried to cut off whatever spell I had instinctively cast, but I couldn't get it to drop. I resorted to the only thing I knew how to do. “Violet!! Stop this crazy thing!”

“Star! Try and cut off the spell!” Violet shouted, giving chase after me. I couldn't even shake my head in response.

“Tried that!” I called back, as I bumped into a big rock in my path. The rock dragged and rasped my hide as I was drug over it. “Ouch!! Watch it would ya?!” I heard my friends shouting as they ran after me, and I groaned. *I guess they did always say that unicorn magic works in mysterious ways*, I thought as I floated over the next hill. I couldn't even see where I was going! I tried to turn my head, but it wouldn't turn. I closed my eyes, sighing. My horn stopped as quickly as it had started, depositing me onto the ground with a ***thud***. I sat up, groaning. The building in front of me was huge. It's four spires towered above the Wasteland, standing vigilant against the world. One of them was missing its top, having been destroyed by either the megaspells or by the change of time. The map marker on my E.F.S. was blinking intensely now. I narrowed my gaze at the Ministry hub. Something wanted me to come here. I wasn't quite sure why.

“Star! There you are!” A voice from behind me exclaimed. I turned back to see the others appearing over the ridge. I breathed a sigh of relief as Violet came galloping up to me. I lifted a hoof in greeting.

“Looks like we're here anyways,” I said, glancing back up at the building.

“Yeah,” Violet said. “I have a bad feeling about this, Star.”

“I am in agreement with Violet,” Nixis said. “This place is... ominous.”

“Still... I have to find out why I'm here. There has to be a reason for it,” I said, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. “Besides, maybe we'll find some clue to locating Spark. It's a Ministry of Arcane Science hub after all.” The others nodded, preparing their gear. I grinned. It was nice to know my friends were always behind me. I turned back towards the M.A.S. Hub, trotting up to its entrance. The doors were hanging off the hinges, revealing a large lobby. I stepped inside cautiously. When nothing tried to zap, electrify, blast, shoot, or stab me, I trotted in further.

The lobby was completely ruined. Skeletons littered the floor, and black scorch marks covered every discernible wall. Propaganda posters hung from the ceiling, burnt and charred. The image of Twilight Sparkle looked out from each one, a smile on her face. The smell of death lingered in the air. I stood there, taking it all in. The room was eerily quiet. The soft hoof falls of me and my friends were the only sounds. I moved forward, the blinking arrow on my E.F.S. beckoning me towards the large set of double doors in the back of the lobby. The doors swung open without issue, revealing a long branching hallway. A set of offices lay on the left as we stalked down the hall. The terminals sitting on the desks were lit up still, each of them bearing the sigil of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I narrowed my eyes as I focused on where the arrow was pointing.

“Any idea why we're here yet?” Violet said. I shook my head.

“I'm more concerned as to why there's no security active,” I replied. “Most Ministry hubs we've been to are loaded to the teeth with active Ponitrons.”

“Yeah...” Lilith said. “Usually I'm cracking robot skull by now. Something here doesn't add up.” I nodded. This whole thing was weird, and getting weirder. We had to be here for a reason, so where was it? We continued forward to the end of the hall, where an open door leading to a set of stairs lay. The arrow on my E.F.S. blinked faster and faster. I glanced up the stairs, hoping that nothing was going to come screaming down at us. When nothing happened whatsoever, I stepped inside and started up the stairs. The stairs were in pristine condition, despite how bad the rest of the Ministry hub was. The stairs led past many visibly locked doors, giant padlocks adorning each one of the entrances. The only one that wasn't locked lay at the very top of the stairwell. I pulled open the door, and gasped.

“What the...?” I said, cocking my head. The door had opened up into a large office, one that looked fairly familiar. It bore the same motif as all the other offices that had belonged to Twilight Sparkle that I'd seen. The carpet held the cutie mark of the Ministry Mare herself, and a massive purple crystal sat at the far end of the office. What was worst however, were the signs. Large arrows, blinking bright neon green and purple, were pointed towards the desk in the center of the room. I blinked. This whole thing reeked of a certain god of Chaos.

“Discord...” I said under my breath. “Engineer for the Equestrian Railroad Company.” I drew a deep

breath and shouted. "Show yourself! Are you there?!" There was no answer. I narrowed my gaze and followed where the signs pointed. In the center of the desk, lay a plush pillow. Sitting on it was a memory orb. A sign above it read *Watch me if you dare...* My mind clicked, and I realized that it was him. He was the one leaving the memory orbs. It had to be him. But... why? Why was he doing this?

"What the hell?" Violet said. "Why would he...?"

"I don't know but I know he's here somewhere," I said angrily. "Discord!! Come out here and face me!" I stepped into the center of the room, unlatching Stargazer. "Where are you?!" The answer I got was something that I didn't expect. The crystal at the other end of the room began to crack, steam pouring forth from its seams. My eyes widened as the crystal shattered completely. Whispers emanated from the remnants of the crystal.

"She's here..."

"Yes... she's here..."

"Let us... greet her..."

I suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this. Four ghostly white alicorns appeared from the remnants of the crystal. Their manes were blonde, and their eyes were blood red. They licked their lips in unison as their wings flared out.

"Umm... Star?" Violet said. "I think we should... you know... maybe run now?" The four ghostly mares started forward, grinning evilly.

"She cannot be allowed to leave... she is the Goddess..." The four mares said at once. They opened their mouths at once and began to... sing?

"The Goddess Twilight cometh... behold... behold..."

"A Goddess here before us... behold..."

I shuddered at the sound. Their song was haunting, and that same time the creepiest fucking thing I'd ever heard in my life. I staggered backwards, my eyes widening as the four leaped into the air. They screeched like bloodwings, their mouths opening and revealing rows of razor sharp teeth. *What the fuck are these things?!!* I thought as I frantically dove to the side, just barely dodging the first of the white monsters as it swooped over. I grimaced, lifting Stargazer and firing a blast of fire at the ghostly alicorns. The bullets struck, but appeared to do absolutely nothing. Violet chimed in with a stream of silver fire from Thunder Flash, but even that had no effect.

"Everypony, out!" I shouted. We turned to find that the door had shut closed tight. Steeljack yanked at the door handle. It refused to budge. The monstrous alicorns hung in the air above us, cackling wildly.

"The Goddess Twilight... she is ours..."

"Yes... ours... she will be ours..."

I narrowed my eyes at the four mares.

“Nixis, get the door. I'll see if I can draw their fire and grab that memory orb,” I said. The hellhound nodded and lumbered towards the door. I growled, unleashing a steady stream of bullets at the white creatures. They hissed violently, their attention turned away from the canine tearing the door apart at its seams. My friends quickly exited the office as the white alicorns dove down at me. I jumped back as one of the monsters snapped at me, sinking a bite into my shoulder. I howled in pain, igniting my horn and pushing the ghostly mare back with a blast of telekinesis.

“What the hell are you?!” I yelled as another one of the monstrous things attacked, buffeting me with her wings. I fell back, hitting the ground hard next to the desk. I pushed myself off the floor, glancing over at the memory orb. I quickly scooped it into my hooves, letting the PipBuck inventory spell do its work. I would have to view it later, it seemed. A flash of wing hit me in the face and I growled as I felt one of the ghostly mares lift me into the air. I struggled to escape her embrace. “Let me go!!”

“You are the Goddess Twilight... you are ours...”

“Yes... The Goddess...”

The mare's face was inches from my own now, her blood red eyes flaring. A snake-like tongue lashed out of her mouth, caressing my cheek lovingly. I roared, flaring my horn and casting my gravity spell at the mare. The spell took hold, jerking the alicorn away from me and bouncing it off the ceiling. I spread my wings, dropping to the floor. The white mare struck the ceiling with intense force. The other three mares snarled as they moved to fly after their companion.

“Go find yourself another Goddess,” I said, charging up my horn. “I'm not interested.” I released the magic into a teleportation spell, reappearing on the other side of the door next to my friends. I turned to Violet. “Run!” The flight down the stairs was terrifying as the first of the ghostly beasts appeared at the top. It screeched loudly as it flew down after us. We hit the bottom of the stairwell hard, charging into the main Ministry hub hallway. The sounds of panicked hooves hitting the concrete accompanied the frenzied screams of the three remaining alicorns.

“Come back... Goddess...”

“Come back...”

“You are ours... Goddess...”

I galloped as hard as I could, flaring my horn and breaking through the door to the lobby. I grimaced, reaching out with my magic and picking up a nearby chair. I tossed it at the doors, breaking them apart at their hinges. We landed back in the Wasteland with a ***thud***, groaning loudly. The monsters struck the front wall of the Ministry hub, screeching and howling. I narrowed my eyes as they sat in front of the open door, hissing at us.

“They can't leave,” Violet said breathlessly. “Why can't they...?”

“I don't know, and I don't care,” I said. “Whatever those things are... I don't even want to know.” I stood, grimacing. What in the hell was Discord thinking, sending us in there? My mind drifted back to the signs and the obvious nature of the trap in that office. The God of Chaos had to be behind it. But then... why didn't he show himself? It wasn't in his nature to hide like this. What was his angle? “We

should go. We need to get to Manehattan.”

Violet smiled and I turned away from the Ministry Hub. I glanced at my PipBuck's automap. The blinking icon that had led me here was gone, and Manehattan was still roughly two days away. It was going to be a long trip.

We started the long walk back towards the road, nopony talking much. My mind swam with thoughts of the past several days, of Twilight and Spark, and of the realization that Discord had been leaving the mystery memory orbs. That last part really scared the hell out of me. Several hours into our trudge, I decided it would be a good idea to flick on the radio and see if there was any more news about Spark. The rough and tumble voice of DJ-PON3 came through the PipBuck's speaker loud and clear.

“Helloooo kiddies out there in the Equestrian Wasteland! This is DJ-PON3, your voice in the darkness! I've got some news out there for all you fine Wasteland folk.

We've got some more news about everypony's favorite Ministry Mare, friends. It seems that the Mare herself has been seen up north assisting a group I only know as the Seekers of Truth. Their leader, the friendly and fantastic Professor Osmosis, told us all about how the Ministry Mare saved him and his friends in some dark and scary ruins of an ancient empire. The Professor expresses his gratitude to the Ministry Mare! Good on you, Ministry Mare. Way to fight the good fight.

And now... some more news on that mystery alicorn that was seen attacking some of the outlying settlements in Manehattan. It appears that this mystery-corn has moved on, with no real reason as to why she has disappeared. Thankfully, nopony was hurt in the attacks. Sources say that the mysterious alicorn is out of the city now and moving east towards the Everfree Forest.

And that's it for the news! I'm DJ-PON3, and now it's time for some music! We've got a little Velvet Remedy lined up for you, so sit back, and relax!”

I narrowed my eyes at the radio broadcast. The Everfree Forest? Why would Spark be going there? Regardless, we needed to go to Manehattan in order to speak with Homage and the Twilight Society. They had to know something about Spark. She couldn't just waltz through their city and them not know anything. My thoughts drifted to the memory orb in my bags. I was going to have to view it soon, I knew that. It had to have some information, otherwise why put us through the trouble of getting it?

Further down the road we found ourselves near an abandoned set of office buildings. The sky was beginning to darken, and I motioned for the others to follow. After checking out one of the buildings, we decided to hunker down for the evening and make camp. I ignited my horn, setting fire to the debris we had assembled. Our makeshift campfire illuminated us as we settled into our first break in what seemed to be weeks of running and shooting and hiding. I watched on as Steeljack and Nixis played their unusual game, chatting amongst themselves while Lilith sat nearby. Patch sat off to the side by herself, staring sadly out the window. Violet lay next to me, snoring softly as she slept.

I opened my bags, pulling out the memory orb from the Ministry Hub. I glanced back at the others, and back to it. I reached out with my magic, taking a hold onto the orb, feeling the world fall away into nothingness.

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I knew immediately the body that I was inhabiting. By now, Twilight's body had become second nature, probably because it felt like that body was my own. It was weird... the longer I journeyed to get myself back to being me, the more I felt like... her. Was I losing myself somewhere along the way? I didn't have much time to think more on this as I adjusted to my surroundings. The purple mare was walking along a rope bridge, a massive ruined castle looming in the distance. She stepped onto the stone steps leading up to the gates.

So... this is it, a voice said from behind Twilight's thoughts. My host narrowed her gaze at the doors leading into the ruins.

"All this planning, all this plotting," she said. "It's all led up to this. Are you ready, Spark?"

I was born ready, Twilight, Spark said. ***Let's get this show on the road.*** Twilight nodded, reaching out with her magic and pushing open the gates. The mare stepped through, trotting through the hallway that extended deep into the castle ruins. Thunder sounded from outside the castle, and the soft pitter patter of rain filtered in through the holes in the massive ceiling, causing water to splash up from the cracked stone. Twilight stopped at one of the sets of stairs leading up into one of the spires and started a slow trot up them. My host exited the stairwell into what appeared to be a throne room. Two broken thrones sat at the end of room, emblazoned with the visages of the sun and moon.

"When Sun and Moon meet, Twilight connects them both," my host whispered as she stepped down into the center of the throne room. "It seems like so long ago that we defeated Nightmare Moon here."

Those times are long gone, Spark mused.

"Still, I miss them, Spark. I do wish the days when all I had to worry about was how many tickets my friends would get to the Gala would come back," my host said. Spark tittered in the back of her mind.

After we do this, we will be able to make that happen, she said. My host narrowed her eyes at the ground, nodding.

"Right," my host said. "Time to get ready." Her horn flared a majestic purple, opening what appeared to be some sort of dimensional pocket. An altar fashioned from obsidian appeared from within, floating over to lay in the middle of the room. A black casket followed closely behind, resting comfortably upon the stone slab. Twilight smiled painfully, continuing the spell as she floated out several more objects of note. Four braziers rested in a square around the obsidian slab, while a small table with several items on it sat outside of the ritual area. Twilight closed the portal and trotted over to the table.

"Now, let's see," she said, levitating out a clipboard with a checklist attached. I nearly died of laughter. Even while committing a spell that for all intensive purposes could be considered evil, the Ministry Mare was still ridiculously organized. "Blood of a changeling, mane of a zebra... thank you Zecora, the essence of a rainbow, the scales of a dragon... and finally, the Element of Magic..." Her hoof ran over the familiar gold tiara. She smiled as she levitated the crown to her brow. "I think that's everything."

Yes... everything is in place, Spark said. Twilight looked over at the casket, tears forming in her eyes.

She trotted over and ignited her horn, lifting the top away from the box. Shining Armor's body lay inside of the casket, as clean and pristine as the day he lived.

"It was difficult to get ahold of your body, my brother," she said. "I had to really work to keep it a secret, after all. But no matter. I will do what I must, and bring you back." My host smiled as her horn worked, lifting the various ingredients into the air above the casket. With a flash, the four braziers lit, illuminating the throne room with a soft light. Thunder roared from outside the castle walls, adding to the dark nature of the ritual. A vial of glowing green blood floated in front of Twilight.

"The blood of a changeling, to charge the body with the magic of form..."

The vial tipped over, pouring its contents onto the body below. A small packet of hair came next.

"The mane hairs of a zebra, to charge the soul with the magic of life..."

The mane hairs dropped onto the glowing blood covering the stallion's body. Another vial, filled with what appeared to be a rainbow colored liquid, appeared.

"The essence of the rainbow, to charge the mind with the magic of clarity..."

The rainbow colored liquid splashed onto Shining Armor's form, mixing with the blood. Several purple and green scales levitated into the air.

"The scales of a dragon, to charge the horn with ancient magic..."

The scales dropped onto the body, which had begun to glow a soft blue. Magic filled the air around my host, crackling and snapping like lightning.

"Finally... the Element of Magic, the spark which holds together Harmony itself... to charge the life with the soul of the dead," Twilight said finally. A purple glow emanated from her brow, the gem set into the Element tiara blazing brilliantly. A beam of energy erupted from it, engulfing the stallion in the casket in its wave. Twilight smiled as the energy poured forth into the body.

Yes... you're doing it, Twilight! You're – Spark started to say as the magic in the air suddenly shifted direction. Spark grew deathly quiet, while Twilight's grin widened.

"Yes... you can feel it, can't you, Spark?" My host said. "You can feel the magic. You know what this is."

No... you... you can't! Spark shouted. Twilight shook her head.

"I can, and I am going to. I told you before that I was going to stop you," she said. "And I was right. It took so much time to set all of this into motion, and now... now there's only one more piece and it will be complete." Her eyes drifted back down to the wings at her sides.

Don't you dare, don't you even think about it, Twilight. Don't --

****RIIIIIIP****

The shock of pain blurred my host's vision as her magic took a hold of the two feathered appendages on each side of her body. Twilight grunted and pulled hard, separating bone from body. Blood poured from each wing and purple flesh hit the ground with a sickening ***splat***. My host glanced down at the shredded wings. They were broken and bloody. Twilight swayed, trying to keep her balance. Her front legs spread out, steadying herself. She grinned as her vision got hazy.

"I win, Spark," she said shakily. "I win, and you lose. You're not getting your body. Time to end this."

No!!!! Spark roared in her mind. Twilight ignited her horn, lifting the broken appendages into the air.

"The wings of an alicorn, given freely to purge evil from the world," my host said. "Blood and bone and flesh and feather, give root to my magic... free me of this accursed spirit!" A howl of pain erupted into the darkness, as a roar of thunder sounded overhead. A purple glow emitted from Twilight's brow, forming into the rough shape of a pony across the throne room. Spark screamed as she came into being, the familiar purple alicorn with a black mane. Her eyes flared red and she stomped an ethereal hoof.

"No, Twilight. You cannot beat me," she growled. "I am an Element of Harmony! I am the Spark that gives power to the others! I have lived for centuries, and I shall not be denied my destiny!!"

"You sound just like her," Twilight said, grinning wryly. "So melodramatic."

"I am **NOTHING LIKE HER!!!**" Spark shouted.

"And yet here you are, spouting off the Royal Canterlot Voice," Twilight countered. "You're misguided Spark. She led you to this, led you to do all these horrible things... you killed my brother, you... you bitch!!!" My host stomped forward, blood trailing from her sides as her horn blazed. "And I'm going to end it."

"You can try," Spark said, clearly amused at the mare's insolence. Twilight snorted, pawing at the floor. Spark chuckled. "You're kidding. You're kidding, right?"

"She said that too," Twilight said, surging forward. A blast of purple energy spat from her horn, striking the black-maned alicorn in the chest. Spark fell backwards, hitting the ground with a thunderous ***crash***. The Element stood, her expression fearsome. She retaliated with her own blast of telekinesis, missing Twilight as the purple mare dodged to the side. Twilight stomped her hoof and glared, standing her ground.

"I will get my body, Twilight. You will not stop me!" Spark yelled.

"No, Spark. You lose," Twilight replied. "You lost from the moment I finished the spell. You see, the spell was never intended to bring Shining Armor to life. I figured that out right after you gave it to me. I saw what it would do. You wanted me to give you life from the get go. But by adding my wings to the formula, the spell has the opposite effect." Spark narrowed her eyes at the other mare. Twilight grinned wryly. "In short, the spell will trap you back into the Element you so hate. You will remain there, forever."

"No... that can't be..." Spark said as she looked down at her hooves. They were beginning to disappear. She howled with rage. "No!! You didn't... **NO!!!!**" A flash of light erupted from where the alicorn

stood, engulfing her in its brilliance. Within moments, the mare had disappeared. A purple jewel fell to the ground in her place. Twilight sighed and slumped to the ground. She glanced over at the casket in the center of the ritual area. With a blink of her horn, the casket and the slab vanished from sight too. My host smiled softly.

“We sure fooled her,” she said. “I’m sorry Shining. I had to do it. Thankfully, I didn’t need to use your real body. This war provided me with plenty of unicorns I could dress up to look like you.” She groaned, looking down at her wings. “I’m... I’m sorry...” Her vision went dark and she fell over. The memory faded to black.

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I groaned, my eyes fluttering open. It was dark, as always. I sat there for several moments, trying to process what I had just seen. Twilight’s betrayal of Spark, the sealing of her inside her own Element... what had Twilight done to her? Spark’s plan was evil, but Twilight’s methods almost seemed... too extreme. As I pondered the memory, I realized that I now knew where Spark was headed. The Everfree. Spark had challenged me to find her where it all began. I had been considering the locations in my mind for some time now, even thinking that maybe Maripony was one of those places. After all, I had only been thinking of where it all began for me, and that was obviously with the Goddess.

I hadn’t fully figured it out, but some part of me instinctively knew that the Everfree was where Spark’s story had begun. It started with the defeat of Nightmare Moon, and the binding of the Elements to Twilight and her friends. Spark’s corruption had taken root there. Only one thing kept coming up that I was missing. Nightmare Moon. What had really happened to the spirit of hatred she once was? Was Luna secretly her all along, despite having been purged by the Elements? Or was she something else entirely, playing her pawns and making her moves carefully? The piece that I had defeated in Chicacolt was but one small piece of the overall being... what had happened to the rest of her? Twilight had spoken in the memory as if Nightmare was already gone by the time she cast the resurrection spell. What did she know that I didn’t? I considered asking Twilight about it the next time I spoke with her, but I wasn’t sure how to approach it. Perhaps the Twilight Society would have some information on that. Despite how much I wanted to run to the Everfree right then and there, I knew that I couldn’t do that without knowing what I was getting myself into first.

The soft and gentle patter of rain began stirred me from my thoughts, and a second series of noises drew me from my bedroll. I swore that amidst the raindrops I could hear... crying? I scanned the room, not seeing a particular green mare. I stood carefully and tip-hoofed through the room, gently flapping my wings so as to not wake the others. I cocked my head to one side, listening as best as I could for the source of the sound. It started again, and I glanced upwards. It was coming from above, from the roof. I made my way into the stairwell quietly and started up the ruined stairs. They led to an entrance to what was now the roof of the building, which was in reality just the next floor. The actual roof lay in the ruins nearby, having been sheared off at some point.

The crying continued, piquing my curiosity as I stepped forward. A few drops of water matted my coat as I walked into the light storm. In the center, sitting in the middle of the rain, was Patch. More crying came from the mare as I walked. I hesitated, but finally gave in and spoke.

“Patch...?” Patch stopped immediately, her good eye turning slightly to regard me. It was puffy and red, like she’d been crying for hours.

"Go away, Star," she said softly. I shook my head.

"No. There's something wrong. Please let me help you," I pleaded.

"I'm fine, now please leave me alone," Patch said. "It doesn't... it doesn't concern you."

"I don't care," I huffed. "You need somepony to talk to. And it doesn't seem like you want to talk to Steeljack at all, or anypony else for that matter."

"It doesn't concern them either," Patch replied, her voice hoarse and raspy. "Now please, just... just go." I narrowed my eyes at the green mare.

"Fine," I said. "But remember what I said, Patch. I'm here for you... you know that. I just... I just want to know that you're alright." I turned away, seething with anger. Why couldn't she just accept that I wanted to help?! I could have screamed right then and there, but I didn't. Patch's voice cut me off as I started to walk back, stopping me cold in my tracks.

"Wait. I... Okay."

I turned back, seeing Patch looking right at me. Now that I could fully see her in the light of the evening, she looked like hell. Her mane was ragged and her eye was swollen red. Tear streaks matted the fur on her cheeks. She was also shivering slightly. *How long has she been up here?* I thought as I came to her side. I slumped to my haunches next to her.

"I... I'm sorry, Patch," I said. "I shouldn't have been so forceful. I'm just... I'm worried for you."

"I... I'm sorry, too," Patch replied. "I just... I don't know what to do, Star!"

"I'm here now," I said. "What is it?" Patch sighed, looking down at her forehooves for several long, awkward moments.

"I... I'm pregnant," she finally said. My eyes widened at her confession. I looked over at her, noticing that tears were forming once more upon her face.

"You mean...?" I said softly. Patch nodded. "How... how long?"

"I... I'm not exactly sure... since Theater, maybe?" She said.

"Does... does Steeljack know?" I said. Patch nodded again silently. "Patch... I didn't... but this is good, right? You're going to be a mother. A foal..." Patch finally relented, her crying beginning again in earnest. *What did I say?!* I thought frantically. Patch choked on her tears, forcing them back.

"But... I'm not. There's something wrong, Star," she said. "I thought it was nothing, but I can't... I can't..." She broke down again into tears, sobbing hard against the rain pattering upon us. I scooted closer to the mare, extending a wing over her for warmth.

"Take your time," I said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I CAN'T FEEL THE FOAL!!" Patch erupted, breaking into another round of sobs. "I can't feel it

there, Star... it's like... it's like it's just... gone!"

"But... what happened?" I started to ask, but then I realized I already knew the answer to the question. The temple had happened. My eyes widened. "Oh... Oh, Patch... I... I'm so sorry. The radiation..."

"I thought at first..." Patch choked out. "I thought at first that it was just me being silly. I should have let Steeljack take care of me. He tried so hard to help, but I was too stubborn. I... I wish... I wish that I'd... I wish that I just died down there!!" Patch turned to me, burying her face into my shoulder as she began to cry again. Tears had begun forming in my own eyes and I lifted a hoof to pull the mare closer into a firm embrace.

"Patch... you don't mean that... please..." I said soothingly. Patch cried harder, pulling her head away to look up at me.

"You... you're right... I just... I wish I knew what happened," she said. "I was... I was looking forward to it, you know. When I first found out, I only told Steeljack. He was so excited, Star. I'd never seen him that happy."

"Have you told him about, you know... this?" I ventured to ask. Patch only shook her head once. I sighed. "I think that you should. He deserves to know, Patch."

"But what if... what if he hates me for it, Star? What if he resents the fact that I was too stubborn and that I killed our baby?!" Patch blubbered. I placed a hoof on her shoulder, patting it softly.

"I know Steeljack well enough to know that he would never do that to you, Patch. He loves you, very much I might add," I said. "We all do."

"But..." Patch started to say. I lifted a hoof, stopping her.

"Patch, I know that this is hard, but I have to ask... you said that you can't feel the foal. Are you sure that it means what you think it means?" I asked. Patch was deathly quiet for several moments.

"What do you...?" She said. "Do you think that you could... you know... look inside and tell me? You can do that right?" I sighed again. While there were many magical talents that I seemed to be privy to, viewing the inside of a mare's womb was not one of them.

"I wish that I could, Patch. But unfortunately, I don't have that ability," I said softly. "But the unicorns at Tenpony might. Life Bloom might know how to do it. When we get there, we'll go see them, and have you looked at."

"And if I'm right?" Patch said hesitantly. "What if... what if the foal is lost?" I stopped for a moment. I didn't have any true experience with any of this, personally. I'd never been pregnant, thanks to the fact that my entire race was still currently all female. I choked back my own tears for a moment, and looked down at the green mare.

"I don't know, honestly," I said. "But whatever happens, Patch. We'll be there for you." I pulled the mare close again as she began to cry more. A crushing despair weighed heavy on my heart. If not for me, we wouldn't have even been in that Celestia-forsaken temple. I couldn't quite escape the nagging war in my mind that she knew what she was doing being there opposed to the feeling that I was

ultimately responsible. I looked up at the sky. Clouds obscured the moon, the precipitation falling a little harder now. I opened my mouth, feeling the rain hit my coat. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so instead, I thought of Patch and reminded myself of a Sweetie Belle song that I had once heard on the radio. I'm not sure why I did it, but I began to sing it softly to the crying mare.

“Into each life... some rain must fall...

But too much is falling in mine...

Into each heart, some tears must fall...

But someday, the sun will shine...

Some folks will lose the blues in their heart...

But when I think of you... another shower starts...

Into each life some rain must fall...

But too much is falling in mine...”

My voice trailed off and I felt Patch cling closer to me. Her crying had subsided, for now.

“Star?” I heard her say. “Will you... will you stay here with me? I don't want to be alone tonight. I really need a friend.”

“Of course I will,” I said. “Of course I will.”

“Thanks,” Patch said. “You have a lovely singing voice, you know that?” I chuckled.

“Thank you, Patch. Now, lay your head down and rest, and I'll sing the rest of it, okay?” I replied. Patch nodded, moving her body so that she was lying next to me. I flared my wings out, wrapping them around the earth pony. I looked to the sky once more, tears starting to drizzle down my own cheeks. I wasn't sure what would happen next, but I knew in my heart that I would never leave a friend hurting like this ever again.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Quest Perk: Mare of the Void: Your journey through the ancient empire has bolstered your defenses against magic draining attacks. You have an inherent +20% resistance to these kinds of attacks and spells.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 26: Revelations and Rewards

Just because I have this crown and these wings, it doesn't mean I'll be a good leader!

Despair. It is an emotion that has pervaded the very essence of the Equestrian Wasteland. Despair destroys, it takes and feeds and leaves nothing behind in its wake. Every living thing feels despair at one point or another in their lives. It is that single moment when you feel as though nothing else can ever be right with the world.

That night, sitting there alone with Patch, I felt despair. I was flattened by the realization at how much my journey was affecting my friends, and how destructive the whole thing had been.

I wonder if Twilight ever felt this way. Did she ever feel like the entire world was against her, and that life itself was simply not worth living? Based on what I had seen, I'd like to think so. The great Ministry Mare who was once a Princess had seen much in her time, from the rise of war and the death of her own brother, to the end of the world and evil through the eyes of the Goddess. It seemed that despair had ruled her life, all the way to the bitter end.

But, her time did not end there. What was she? Was it really Twilight that I was speaking to every time I visited that infernal library? Or is it something else, nagging and pulling on my mind to control whatever 'Mysterious Power' I've been saddled with?

Sometimes, I wish I knew all the answers to these questions, but I don't. All I know is what lies ahead. All I have to do is have the strength to step out of despair to get there.

My eyes fluttered open to the gleam of sunshine, and I heard a soft snore coming from next to me. I glanced over, seeing Patch curled up in a ball underneath my outstretched wing. She was sleeping soundly. I smiled sadly, remembering the events of the night before. The revelation of her pregnancy, and the consequences of the radiation weighed heavily in the back of my mind. It took all of my effort for it to not bring me to tears. I knew that there was nothing I could do now to change the past, but I would do everything I could to make the future better.

I owed it to her foal. I owed it to everypony who had been there for me, who had helped me along the way. But most of all, I owed it to her.

I stretched out, yawning lightly as I removed my wing from the sleeping mare, taking care to not brush her with it as it lifted away. Patch rolled over in her sleep and went back to snoring. I sat there for several long moments, just taking in the morning air. The soft clop of hooves from the stairs told me my silence was to be soon interrupted. I stood, turning back towards the entrance as Violet appeared. I lifted a hoof, indicating to be silent as I pointed down at Patch. I silently made my way to the stairs next to my green marefriend.

"Everything alright?" Violet whispered. I hesitated. It wasn't my place to tell her at all about Patch's pregnancy, and I wasn't going to break her trust.

"I... Yeah, everything's fine," I said quietly. "Patch just needed somepony to talk to about some things, and we just kind of ended up falling asleep." Violet narrowed her gaze at me.

"Are you sure?" She said. I grimaced under her cold gaze.

"It's... it's not my place to say, Violet," I said. "Please, trust me. Patch will talk to us when she's ready to. But I can't betray her trust. Please tell me you understand." Violet's eyes softened up.

"Oh, sweetie, no... I do, I understand," she said. "I'm just... I'm worried about her, and you. When I woke up and you weren't there, I almost thought for a moment..." My eyes widened as I realized what she meant.

"Oh. *Oh*. Umm, Violet, you know that I love you, right?" I said quickly. "It totally wasn't like that. Patch just... she needed some help." Violet nodded.

"I know," she replied. "And I love you too. I don't know why I thought it, I should know better by now." I smiled, nuzzling her cheek and giving it a little peck.

"It's quite alright," I said. "Let's give Patch some time to sleep in. She's had a bit of a rough night, and I – Hey why are you blushing?!" My marefriend's face had erupted in a shade of deep red. She burst into laughter as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Sorry, sorry! You said rough night, and I couldn't help but laugh," she said in between gasps. I rolled my eyes.

"Foalish," I said, sticking my tongue out at her. Violet grinned.

"Tease," she replied. I grinned widely.

"You know it," I said, pushing open the door. The others were up and about, getting their things together. Steeljack looked up as I entered the room. His eyes were pleading. I trotted over to him and rested a hoof on his shoulder. "She's still upstairs sleeping."

"Is she... she alright?" He said softly. I nodded.

"As okay as she can be, at the moment," I said. "But please... be patient with her. She needs a friend right now, not a protector." Steeljack pondered this for a few moments and then nodded solemnly. The pushing open of a door sounded from behind us, and I glanced back to see Patch stumble in. She yawned widely as she took note of everypony (and hellhound) watching her.

"Good morning," she said quietly. "I... I have something I need to tell all of you. I wasn't going to, but I think I should, because I love all of you dearly and you're all my best friends." Steeljack stepped forward to stand next to her. The green mare caught his eyes and sighed. "Especially you, Steeljack. You most of all deserve to hear this."

"Whatever it is," Steeljack said. "No matter what, you know I'm here for you." Patch smiled softly.

"I know," she said. "I know I've been a bit anti-social lately, and I wanted to apologize. None of you deserved how I treated you. I wish I could take it back. I'm... I'm pregnant." There was a soft gasp

from Lilith and Violet. Nixis merely nodded. Steeljack fell to his haunches with a thump. "But... there's something wrong." She turned to Steeljack. "I can't feel it, Steeljack. I can't feel our foal. I don't know what's wrong, but ever since the temple, I don't know if it's there or if it's gone... Please... Please don't hate me..." The silence was deafening. Steeljack sat there for several moments, staring at the mare he loved. Finally, a soft smile came over his face.

"Patch..." Steeljack said. "I could never hate you. I love you, so very very much. No matter what. I'm... I'm not sure what to really say. Are you... are you alright?" Patch smiled and nodded.

"I'm... better. Star and I talked about some things last night, and when we get to Tenpony, we're going to see if the doctors there can tell me what's wrong," she said. "I can't feel it, but I had a weird dream last night. It's like I know it's still there, but something isn't right with it."

"Then we'll find out, together. And even if things turn out for the worst, I'll still be right there by your side," Steeljack said. "I'm not leaving your side, ever. Nothing in this world could take me from you." Patch lunged forward, wrapping her forelegs around Steeljack's neck. The grey stallion smiled deeply as he returned the mare's embrace. The two separated, and Patch started crying again a little as Lilith stepped forward. She placed a hoof onto her shoulder and hugged her close. No words were needed to express the feelings between the two. I smiled as I reflected on the fact that the two were once bitter enemies, but now... now they were close friends. Perhaps... perhaps the magic of friendship really did have some power here, after all. I moved to the three, and turned to Patch.

"I am proud of you, my friend," I said. "It takes a brave mare to admit to the horrible things in life and that you need help getting through them. I will stand by you as well, as long as you see fit to call me friend. And if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, I am here for you."

"Me too," Violet said. "We're like a family, after all. And family sticks together, no matter what." Nixis lumbered behind my marefriend, a somber look on his face.

"Despite having not known you as long, I too shall endeavor to do my best to be your friend, Patch," he said. "Loyalty is a virtue that is respected among my kind, canine in nature as we are." Patch had pretty much completely broken down now, but her tears weren't those of sadness. They were tears of joy. Tears that represented the sheer happiness that could only come by the presence of friendship.

"Thank you... Thank you all," she choked out. "I don't... I don't know what I would do without you all."

"Do not worry, my friend," Lilith said finally. "We will help you with this. I will not rest until we can find out what is wrong with your foal. I promise you this."

"And the first step to that, is getting to Manehatten," I said simply. "I am certain that the day ahead will be long and difficult, but if we press on, we should be able to arrive at the city by nightfall." The others nodded, going about the morning tasks to clean up our things. I latched Stargazer onto its harness and stepped out into the morning, ready to face the day. My friends came up beside me, and we set off. As we walked, I felt a new strength come from within. A strength I had desperately needed to carry on. It came from those who walked with me.

Inevitably, my mind turned to Twilight, and of her past. Once upon a time she felt this same strength, the strength of friendship. The war had taken all of that. It had put those six mares through hell and

back again. But looking at my own friends, I started to think Twilight was wrong in her last letter to Celestia. Friendship was still very much alive in Equestria.

The morning bled into noon with a swiftness none of us expected. The dullness of the Equestrian Wasteland lay before us in all directions, and it was only thanks to our PipBuck automaps that we even knew where we were going. We had planned to head through Glyphmark and down to Manehattan. I paused to look behind us, sighing. I knew I couldn't see the city any longer, but my heart still ached for the ponies of Chicacolt. I found myself wondering if Danish was okay, and how the rest of the MMMM were holding up.

Despite the breakthrough this morning, everyone was still relatively quiet. Patch clung close to Steeljack and Lilith while Violet and Nixis walked beside me in comfortable silence. I decided that maybe a little news would be in order, hoping that there would be some more information on Spark. I flicked on my PipBuck radio, and the smooth tones of Sweetie Belle came running through. *Must be a slow news day*, I thought to myself. Sweetie Belle gave way to Sapphire Shores, who gave way to Velvet Remedy. The music was a nice distraction at least. Everyone bopped their heads at the Sapphire Shores song, even Steeljack could be seen slightly moving his head. It was kind of hard to tell in his power armor. As the last of Velvet's song faded, the liquid tones of DJ-PON3 filled our ears. Stallions weren't my thing, but I could listen to that voice all day long.

"And that kiddies, is our old friend Velvet Remedy. Isn't she just fantastic? I agree, one hundred percent."

"I'm your host, DJ-PON3, coming to you from the lovely Manehattan Ruins, and it's time for some news."

Settlements on the outlying portion of Manehattan are finally rebuilding after the mystery attacks of last week. Central Station has reported extensive damage to its Metro station, however. Looks like those tunnels are out of commission for the time being, kiddies.

Regardless, if you know anything about what went down out there, please let old DJ-PON3 know. Also, tensions are high in the city as the NCR (that's New Canterlot Republic for those of you who have been living under a rock for the last two years) have set up shop in a camp outside the city. The NCR has said they are looking to provide assistance to the settlements in need, including food and water. The aforementioned tensions come from the hoity toity in Tenpony Tower, who feel they don't need the NCR's charity and that they can get by without their help. The NCR has responded, stating that 'We're in the city now, and we're not leaving until we've done what we can to help.' Residents of Tenpony Tower say that's a big old load of brahmin shit, and that the NCR only cares about forcing their laws and rules on the ponies of the city.

Come on, kiddies. We're all the same, no matter what flag we fly. Can't we all just... you know what I'm talking about! If we work together, we stick together, and we all win. That my friends, is called fighting the good fight.

And with that, I'm out for a while. I got myself a hot date, kiddies! You know, the nut kind. Just kidding!"

I blinked. The NCR moving into Manehattan? That seemed sort of strange. I glanced over at Patch.

“What do you think about that NCR stuff?” I asked. The mare shrugged.

“Doesn't totally surprise me. When I was down in Fillydelphia, Lieutenant Kirby went on more than once about how the NCR wished they could establish a foothold in Manehattan,” she said. “Sounds like they finally did it.”

“But aren't the NCR supposed to help everypony?” Violet said. “I mean, that's a good thing, right?”

“Not necessarily. The NCR is pretty strict. They want everypony to follow their laws, and their rules. And they're not exactly too forgiving in their interpretation of those rules,” Patch replied. “I mean, look at what happened with me. I was discharged for having one less eye.”

“Still, wouldn't some rules be better than nothing, especially since they'd be provided with food shelter?” I said. Patch sighed.

“What DJ-PON3 failed to mention is that you have to become an NCR Citizen to receive handouts like that. They don't just give food out to anypony. And once you're a Citizen, you don't get to just stop when you've got the food,” she said. “Basically, in order to provide assistance they're annexing pieces of Manehattan.”

“And Tenpony doesn't want that,” I said, realizing what the mare was saying. “You think it has something to do with the Twilight Society?”

“I'd say it has more to do with Celestia One,” Violet interjected. “Think about it. The Twilight Society controls that thing with an iron hoof. What group wouldn't want access to a megaspell like that?” I nodded. It certainly seemed reasonable. But what would the NCR do with such power? Why did they want it in the first place? I shook the thoughts away as we passed close enough to Glyphmark to get a good look at the town. They weren't important right now. Finding Spark was. At the very least, everything seemed to be at ease in the zebra filled town. No pony was running up to us asking for help, and nothing was on fire.

It felt like a breath of fresh air. Not that I minded helping my friends, but it was a nice change to be able to move forward without another obstacle letting Spark get further away from us. Glyphmark disappeared behind us, and we continued down the old concrete road, following our automap and the signs towards Manehattan.

Nightfall met us on the final ridge, overlooking the valley the city slumped in. Manehattan looked just like it always had. Dark, dreary, and ominous. We decided to stop at an old abandoned office building for the night, planning on heading into the city and going to Tenpony Tower in the morning. I stood upon the roof alone while the others made camp, scanning the city for any signs of life. Nothing stirred in the last fading twilight. I glanced up at the black structure that was Tenpony Tower. *Tomorrow, I thought. Tomorrow, I will find out what you were doing here, Spark. And then I will find you.*

A flash of light startled me and I fell back to my haunches. In the distance, I could see the light circling the city. It coalesced into a grinning face consisting of two mismatched yellow eyes and a crooked smile. The ethereal face opened its mouth into a cruel laughter, echoing across the entire city. I snarled under my breath.

“Discord.”

“Discord? I still don't understand what his deal is,” Violet said, taking a sip of water from her canteen. The fire we had managed to cobble together was in its final stages of dying. “I mean, what is he gaining from following us like this?”

“I don't know, but I don't like it,” I said. “I've got a bad feeling about him. He is the God of Chaos after all. Too unpredictable.”

“Still, if he is here in the city, why hasn't he shown himself yet? It seems... so unlike him,” Steeljack commented. Patch lay sleeping next to him, while Lilith and Nixis were curled up together in the corner. I paused to blink at that, before moving on. After my sighting of Discord, I wasn't sure that I could get to sleep at all. I sighed.

“I'm not sure about that, but I am sure that he's the one who keeps leaving the memory orbs,” I said. “He has to be. I just don't get why. What is he trying to show me? It's just more of Twilight's memories, more of Spark.”

“Maybe he's trying to send you a message,” Violet said, yawning. “I don't know. I'm just too tired to even think about it right now, Star. I'm going to bed.” Violet stood and trotted over to our bedroll, where she plopped down as unladylike as possible. Within mere seconds, soft snores could be heard from the mare. I glanced back over at Steeljack. We stood, walking out of earshot of the rest of the camp. The night sky was brilliant tonight.

“Enough about me, how are you holding up?” I asked quietly. The stallion looked back down at his mare, grimacing.

“I... I just lost my kid, Star. How do you think I feel?” He said.

“Steeljack...” I said softly. The stallion shook his head. He frowned.

“I wish I could say I wasn't hurt. But I can't, Star,” Steeljack said. “I want to scream... I was to cry. I want to lash out and get angry. I don't know what's up or down anymore.”

“Steeljack,” I said, placing a hoof on his shoulder. “Patch needs you. She needs you to be strong, for her. I understand how you feel. You have every right to be upset, but we need you.”

“What do I do then, Star? Just laugh and go on like it never happened?” Steeljack said, his eyes wide.

“You do exactly what you're doing right now,” I said. “You open up, you talk to us. Talk to Patch. She will understand your feelings better than most. Pain is normal, it's okay to hurt. But getting angry won't solve the problem.” Steeljack glared at me and then looked away. He paused for a moment, sighing.

“I... You're right, Star,” he said. “I'm sorry. You're right. I'm just glad to have friends like you. Even when I don't know how to deal, you help.”

“You're going to be fine, Steeljack,” I said, pulling the stallion into an embrace. I held him there for

several minutes. It was the only thing I could think of to do. "We don't know if the foal is lost, after all."

"I guess so..." he said, releasing himself from the hug. "Do you really think the doctors at Tenpony will be able to help her?"

"It's our best shot at getting some idea as to what's actually going on," I said, hanging my head. "That much radiation, it wasn't good for any of you, let alone the foal. Had I known, I would have told Patch to stay put."

"You couldn't have known about the radiation, Star," Steeljack pointed out. I sighed, nodding.

"When you're right, you're right," I said. "Still... I wish I could do something else for her."

"You've already done far more than you think you know," Steeljack said softly. "You got her to open up about it. That's more than I've been able to do."

"I think that's because she was worried that you would hate her," I said. "She really loves you, you know that right?"

"I... I do," Steeljack replied.

"You know that you don't have to do any of this," I said. "When we get to Tenpony, you could always... you know, stay there together." Steeljack narrowed his gaze at me.

"I think we both know the answer to that question, Star," he said. "I wouldn't, and neither would Patch. No matter what happens, we're in this til the end."

"I know, I know," I said. "But... just think about it, okay?" Steeljack scoffed.

"That we've actually talked about, Star. The decision was easy, and Patch feels the same way," he said, grinning. I rolled my eyes. "It's not that simple, Star. We're in the middle of chasing down a spirit that wants to destroy the world. Do you even realize how ludicrous that sounds?"

"When you put it like that, it kind of does, yeah," I said, chuckling.

"And you and I both know, that if Spark wins, it's over for all of us. So, do you really expect either of us to just sit on our rumps and let it happen?" Steeljack said fiercely.

"Steeljack, I --" I started to say as the stallion lifted a hoof, silencing me.

"No, listen to me. We're in this for the long haul, no matter what it takes. If Spark wins, and I've given up the fight, I die anyways. If I'm going to die, it's going to be for a cause, Star," Steeljack said. "I owe it to Crystal, and I owe it to Patch."

"Crystal?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow. Steeljack nodded.

"It's been a long time since I've said her name," he said, his blue eyes shimmering with determination. My eyes widened as I realized who he was talking about. His wife. The mercenary who'd been killed

by Red Eye's slavers. "And while I miss her, she died for a cause. She saved so many, and I know now what that means. I have a cause now. Because come hell or high water, if my foal is still alive in that mare, I'm fighting to save it. To give her... or him... the future they so rightly deserve." I slumped to my haunches in front of the stallion.

"I... I never thought of it like that," I said. "Thank... thank you. For staying. It really means a lot to me."

"Anytime," Steeljack replied. I yawned, my mind finally catching up with how tired my body was.

"I think then, I am going to sleep," I said, turning around and starting back to the camp. I stopped for a moment. "For what it's worth, Steeljack... I think you're going to make an excellent father." The stallion nodded as we silently walked back to our respective loves. Sleep overtook me as easily as I had hoped it would, providing at least a little escape from the world around me.

Morning came all too quickly, as it often did. I laid there for several minutes, feeling the warmth of Violet next to me as she wriggled in all of her cuteness. I glanced across the clearing, seeing Steeljack and Patch curled up next to each other. My mind turned to the conversation from the night before, pondering Steeljack's words. Still, I had to wonder where this journey was going to end. Would we all see it through to the end? Or would some of us fall along the way? I sent up a silent prayer to Luna, hoping for the former, but secretly knowing that it was likely to be the latter. Spark wasn't going to make things easy for us, I knew this for certain. Just what was she looking for anyways? Was she looking for the jewel that she had become in the memory? Was that why Discord wanted me to see it? So I could recognize what Spark escaped from?

We awoke as normal, getting ready silently for our journey into the city. Manehattan loomed ahead of us as we left our shelter. We stepped onto the main road, ready for whatever was coming next.

"Well, let's go," I said. We started forward purposefully and quickly. The streets were filled with debris and devoid of life. A large office building that was overturned in the middle of the street blocked our direct path to the monorail line. We turned down to the left, taking an alley back onto the main drag. Within several hours we arrived at the monorail station. We took our first steps up onto the Luna line, trotting down the ancient rail line. I looked up at the end of the line, at Tenpony Tower. I sighed. It was so near, yet so far away.

We saw our first signs of life halfway down the rail. Two guard ponies stood vigilant at a substation off the rail line. They flagged us down, motioning for us to halt. They both wore gas masks and combat armor, making it difficult to identify what they were.

"State your business," one of them said.

"We're here to see the Twilight Society," I said. "My name is Radiant Star."

"Access is permitted, but you'll need to check your weapons at the door," the other guard said. I nodded.

"What's going on around here?" Violet asked. "Why all the extra security?"

“Things are pretty tense with the NCR at the moment. We're taking all the extra precautions that we can,” the first guard said. “Now, get going, we'll radio ahead that you're expected.”

“Thank you,” I said. We passed through the guard checkpoint with little issue, although the two ponies did seem to glare at Nixis. I knew that hellhounds weren't exactly common around here, but I hoped they'd be at least accepted. I pushed the thought out of my head as we walked. It took approximately a half hour to reach the front gates of Tenpony Tower. The guards waved us to enter the station. I unclashed Stargazer from its harness and handed it over to them. We were ushered into the tower proper, and I smiled as a familiar blue unicorn stood waiting for us in the center of the common market.

“Well met, Ministry Mare,” Dusk Blue said. The unicorn wore a simple black cloak with a silver clasp.

“Dusk Blue,” I said. “I am surprised to see you here. I almost expected Life Bloom again, with some ominous news about the Twilight Society.” Dusk Blue chuckled.

“Well, that would be a little too cliché, Radiant Star,” he said. “But as you well know, things around here are a little crazy lately. To be truthful, I would have been surprised to see you here if I hadn't been listening to the radio broadcasts. You've been busy, Star.”

“Yes, well... about that. We have some business to discuss,” I said. “In private.” Dusk nodded.

“Of course, of course,” he said. “Follow me, if you will.” We followed the unicorn over to the elevators where we filed into two separate cars. The elevators stopped on a floor containing a long hallway with several suites. Dusk Blue led us to one of the suites. He sat down on a cushion in the main room of the suite.

“Now, then. What do you wish to discuss?” Dusk Blue said as we sat down. Nixis and Lilith remained standing in the back of the room. I narrowed my gaze at the unicorn.

“The attacks on the settlements,” I said. “You were there, Dusk. You know about Spark. It was her, Dusk. I know it was.”

“I had assumed that you would ask about that,” Dusk said. “Truth be told, Star, we don't know all that much about the attacks yet. You say it was Spark? You mean the mare that you once told me was in your head?”

“Correct,” I said. “Except... she's no longer there.”

“What do you mean?” Dusk said.

“I mean that Spark has a body now. A body shared between her and a friend of mine...” I said. “She's on her way to the Everfree Forest, but I'm not sure why she attacked these towns first.”

“Well... I think the prudent thing to do might be to go visit one of these towns and speak to their villagers,” Dusk replied. “In fact, if you head to Central Station, another of your friends is there investigating this as well.”

“Friend?” I inquired, cocking an eyebrow. Dusk smiled.

“Sunshine Sky is in the field, lending what assistance she can to the ponies in the settlements,” he said.

“The pink mare?” I said. Dusk nodded. “I see.”

“Star, you have to understand... right now things are quite tense with the NCR,” the blue unicorn said. “You see, they've requested access to Celestia One.” Patch snorted.

“Figures,” she said. “Typical of them, really.”

“Yes, well... the problem is that the NCR doesn't want to study the megaspell chamber, to learn. They'll want to use it, judiciously and severely,” Dusk said. “The Twilight Society wants to prevent that. We want to protect ponies, yes... but not by using a megaspell that can wipe out millions of lives.”

“Is there anything that we could do to help?” I asked. Dusk narrowed his gaze at me and grinned.

“There might,” he said. “The NCR have set up shop just outside of the city at a location they're calling Camp Hope.” My PipBuck beeped as it picked up the map marker. “The Twilight Society is willing to negotiate a compromise with the NCR, but unfortunately the NCR doesn't want to meet with us directly. They're very... ultimatum that way. Perhaps... you could meet with them?”

“On one condition,” I said immediately. I motioned to Patch. “I know that Tenpony Tower has extremely good doctors. My friend here... she needs some assistance and requires the services of a doctor that might know something about... pregnancy.” Dusk Blue nodded.

“I think that we can agree to that,” he said. “In fact, if you will meet with the NCR and negotiate a treaty, I will speak with Life Bloom to have him look at your friend.” I looked over at Patch. She smiled brightly.

“We'll go then,” I said, returning my gaze to Dusk Blue.

“Excellent,” the unicorn replied. “I will give you some time to collect yourselves, then. You may use this suite for your needs. Your gear will be brought up to you. I will send an acolyte to bring your friend to the doctors in the morning.” The unicorn stood, bowing low. “It is a pleasure to see you once more, Radiant Star.”

“Likewise,” I said. Dusk Blue closed the door and I sighed. Patch laid a hoof on my shoulder, a huge smile on her face.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“Patch,” I said. “I meant what I said before. We will do everything we can to help you.” Lilith stepped forward.

“I am going to stay here with Patch,” she proclaimed. “The rest of you should go visit the NCR.”

“Are you sure?” Patch said, looking up at the black mare. Lilith smiled.

“We are friends. And I would be remiss if I wasn't there with you when we found out what is wrong,”

she said. Steeljack coughed.

“Shouldn't I you know... stay behind too?” The stallion said.

“Girl stuff, Steeljack,” Lilith said, jokingly. “But seriously... you should go with Star. She might need your help. Trust me, I'll take care of your marefriend.” Steeljack sighed, nodding.

“It's decided then,” I said. “Lilith will stay behind with Patch, and we will visit this Camp Hope. I would also like to visit Central Station. We need to keep our eyes on why Spark was here, what she was looking for, and why she left.”

“Agreed,” Violet said. “So when are we leaving?”

“In the morning,” I said. “We will leave in the morning. Based on my automap, it should only take about two hours to get to Camp Hope, and from there an hour over to Central Station.” The others nodded and I stood to take stock of the suite that Dusk Blue had left us in. It was nice. Much nicer than what we had been accustomed to lately. There were even several real beds! I slumped down into one, sighing as I laid my head back on the pillow. Violet joined me shortly after and I sighed.

“Are we doing the right thing?” I said softly, turning to face my love. “Mediating a truce between the Twilight Society and the NCR? I almost feel like it's just another thing pushing me away from Spark.”

“That might be, but you and I both know that if it wasn't Dusk Blue who had asked, you wouldn't have accepted,” Violet said.

“I guess you have a point there,” I said, yawning. “I'm going to sleep. Goodnight, my love.” Violet reached in, giving me a kiss on the cheek.

“Love you, sweetie. Sleep tight,” she said. I smiled and turned over, closing my eyes and letting sleep take me.

A knock at the door forced my eyes open. I nearly thought it was a dream, waking up in such nice conditions. The bed was nice and soft, and I smiled softly at the warmth of Violet next to me. Another knock came at the door. I groaned, sliding out of the bed. None of the others were up yet. I trudged towards the door, pulling it open. On the other side of the door was a mismatched beast, his evil yellow eyes piercing through my soul. My eyes widened.

“Discord!” I shouted. The beast sneered, pulling its lip back and showing teeth. Still, he said nothing. He did nothing but stare at me. “What do you want? Why are you here?” The beast lifted a claw, pointing a finger at me. The sneer turned into a cruel grin. Why wasn't he attacking me? What in the world was going on? Discord's mouth opened and he began to laugh. In fact, he cackled madly. The laughter carried through the air around me, surrounding me in its insanity. I closed my eyes, trying to shut it out of my mind.

I opened my eyes and groaned. Violet laid on the bed next to me. I blinked. *A dream?* I thought to myself as I shoved myself off the nice and clean bed, taking care to not wake Violet. I shuffled into the main living area, glancing at the door. It was still closed, and there was no one knocking at it. It must

have been a dream, I had decided. Either that or it was a warning. What was going on here? What was Discord's angle in all of this? Was he trying to drive me insane?

“Star,” a voice said softly. I looked over, seeing Nixis sitting in the corner.

“Nixis,” I said. “You're awake. I figured everyone else was asleep still.” Nixis chuckled.

“I sleep fairly light,” he said. “Are you alright?”

“Had a bit of... a bad dream, I guess you'd call it,” I said. “Ever since we came close to the city, I've been having this nagging feeling that something is wrong. Like something's coming, and I can't quite put my hoof on what it is.”

“Dreams are sometimes gateways to messages that our minds are trying to tell us,” Nixis replied. “They hold many meanings, sometimes subtle and sometimes more overt. All it takes is for one to listen closely.”

“And if your dreams involve a mad deity of Chaos?” I asked quietly. Nixis grinned toothily at me.

“Well, then one might say you're fairly screwed,” he said. I blinked. Did he really just...? Nixis chuckled. “I'm kidding, Star. Too much time spent with Lilith, I suppose.”

“Do you miss it?” I said softly.

“Miss what?” The hellhound lumbered.

“Your home. You know, Ponyville,” I said, locking eyes with the canine. He rubbed the back of his head and smiled.

“I do... but I have not been back there for quite some time. I doubt that I am remembered. Hellhounds aren't exactly known for their intelligence, after all,” he said.

“But you're smart,” I said. Nixis chuckled again.

“I am educated, if that's what you mean. I don't know why, but I always liked to spend time in Ponyville's old Town Hall when we first arrived there. The others wanted little to do with the place, and there was never anything there important enough for the raiders who had desecrated the town prior to our occupation,” he explained. “I found so many books. It wasn't until a passing caravan was actually willing to trade with us that I started to really learn Equuish. It was fascinating. There was so much knowledge locked away. Things we can really use to make this world a better place.”

“And Ponyville? How did you end up becoming the Mayor there?” I asked as I sat down next to him.

“I was the only one willing to go out and talk to the caravans, so I just kind of... fell into it. The others respected me for my ability to think and plan,” Nixis replied. “I suppose I do miss it, after all. Simpler days.” I nodded, staying silent. I was reminded of the first days after Violet and I came to Fort Knowledge. Life was much simpler back then. We were going to help ponies who needed it, care for others. And then... Twilight happened. Spark happened. Life had spiraled out of control much quicker than I could have ever imagined.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. I stood warily, the events of the dream still fresh in the forefront of my mind. I trotted over to the door and pulled it open. A white unicorn in a black cloak was standing on the other side. He smiled briefly as our eyes met.

“Good morning,” he said. “My name is Winter. I was asked by Dusk Blue to come here, concerning a mare named Patch.” I breathed a sigh of relief, much to his surprise.

“Let me get her up,” I said. “Another one of our friends is staying behind with her. I trust that won't be an issue?”

“Not at all,” Winter said. “She can accompany us to see the doctors.” I nodded, closing the door and walking back into the bedroom area of the suite. Patch was up, looking a little groggy and out of sorts.

“Patch,” I said. “Someone is here to take you to the doctor. Are you ready?” The mare nodded as she walked over and prodded Lilith awake. I glanced at the foot of our bed, noticing that our weapons and bags had been delivered. Patch and Lilith trotted out into the living room, followed by the others. The green mare hugged Steeljack and whispered quietly to him before heading for the door. Winter stood just beyond, a soft smile on his face.

“I'll... I'll see you guys later,” Patch said.

“Don't worry, Patch,” Violet said. “Everything's going to be fine. You can do this.”

“Thank you, thank you all,” the other mare replied. Lilith smiled as she followed Patch into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

“Alright,” I said. “Let's get ready and get going here. The faster we get done at Camp Hope, the faster we can get down to the business of finding out more about Spark.” The others nodded their assent, beginning the routine of gearing up for the trip. We made our way out of the suite and down to main hall, where Dusk Blue waited patiently for us. He smiled brightly as we came up to him.

“Well, you're off then?” He said.

“Yes. We will go to this Camp Hope and speak with the NCR. I am sure that we will be able to work something out,” I said.

“I certainly hope so. Then we can get all this extra security out of the way, and be done with this craziness. You have no idea how hard it has been lately,” Dusk replied.

“I can imagine,” I said.

“Give my regards to Sunshine if you see her,” the unicorn said, winking. My eyes narrowed. “Oh, I'm well aware that you plan to visit Central Station while you are out, and that is fine. I would not expect you to put your own plans on hold after all, Star. Be careful out there.”

“Thanks,” I uttered. Did the Twilight Society know everything we did? Were they spying on us? I tried to shrug off the feeling of being watched and moved past Dusk Blue, saying nothing else. We stepped out of Tenpony Tower and back onto the monorail line. I glanced at my PipBuck. Camp Hope

was on the eastern edge of the city, not terribly far from here. As we walked, I noticed more signs of life around the city. An office building with a pony or two scavenging here, a trading caravan there. Granted, they all gave us a bit of a wide berth as we passed. An alicorn, hellhound, unicorn, and earth pony. I guessed that we looked pretty imposing to them.

Within the hour we were at the edge of the city. I grimaced when I saw the tents. Lined up in several rows, surrounded by makeshift chicken wire fences, was Camp Hope. I could see ponies milling about inside the wire. Some standing guard, some training. There were even some doing morning runs around the camp. This screamed of war to me, for some reason. I couldn't shake that feeling as we made our way closer. Outside of the camp was a large tent that stood on its own. In front of it was a line of ponies, waiting to receive food and water. Many of them were hurt or malnourished, looking like they were at the end of their rope.

A guard stopped us at the main gate. One of them, an earth pony mare motioned at us. A combat shotgun hang loosely off her battle saddle.

"Halt. State your business here," she said.

"My name is Radiant Star," I said. "We seek an audience with your commanding officer."

"For what purpose?" The mare asked.

"We've been sent to negotiate on behalf of the Twilight Society," I said. The mare scoffed.

"Fuck off, we don't need none of the Twilight Society here," she said. I grimaced.

"We're not with the Society," I said. "I don't know if you listen to the radio, but I'm the Ministry Mare. All I care about is making sure that everyone works together."

"Oh really? You're the one on the radio? Huh," the mare said. Another guard came up and tapped her on the shoulder. He whispered in her ear, glaring at me while he did. The mare's eyes widened and she looked up. "Seriously? Fuck..." She glanced back at us. "Alright, look... you can go in. Captain is expecting you in his tent. Don't cause any trouble, or else."

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "Where may we find this officer?"

The mare pointed at the rear of the enclosure, indicating the superior officer's tent. She looked pretty pissed off that she had to let us in. The officer's tent was the largest one there, besides the operations tent that we passed on the way there. The ponies working there looked up from their terminals, staring at us intensely. It felt... unnerving. I stepped into the officer's tent after a thorough pat-down from the guards as the others hung around outside.

The tent was spacious, but there wasn't much to it. It was lightly furnished, with a plain wooden desk in the middle of the space. A chair was turned away from it, where a pony sat.

"Umm... hello?" I said. "My name is --"

"Radiant Star," the voice from behind the chair said. My eyes widened. I knew that voice. The chair spun around, revealing a familiar unicorn stallion. He wore a smug grin on his face. "I was wondering

when they would send you.”

“L-L-Lieutenant Kirby?” I said. Kirby grinned widely, tapping the beret on his head with a forehoof.

“That's Captain Kirby now,” he said. “It's been quite a while since we last saw each other, Ministry Mare.”

“Indeed,” I said. “I guess you know why I'm here then.”

“You want to discuss negotiations between the NCR and the Twilight Society,” Kirby said flatly. He stood, turning away from me. “Tell me, Radiant Star. How is my former security officer?” I blinked. Oh, right... Patch. I hesitated for a moment. Kirby sighed.

“She's... she's fine,” I said finally. My voice was shaky. Kirby nodded.

“I can hear the fear in your voice, you know. I expected as much. I do miss her, quite a lot actually,” Kirby said. “I suspect that's why you're here now. The Twilight Society offers quite a bit, don't they?”

“You would be right,” I said. “About Patch, that is. “She's back at Tenpony Tower now, being seen by their best doctors. It was our exchange for me being here.”

“What is wrong with her?” Kirby asked. My eyes shifted back and forth, seeking an answer.

“Mare problems.” Kirby glanced at me, a perplexed expression on his face. He nodded, hanging his head.

“Well, let us hope it is worth it,” Kirby replied uncertainly. “I will tell you the same thing that I told those insufferable Twilight Society ambassadors. We do not want to use their damn weapon. We want to study it, and help keep it secure. It would be very bad for all of us if it were to be used by the wrong hooves.”

“They didn't believe you, I take it,” I said, sitting back onto my haunches in front of the desk. Kirby turned around, mildly surprised at my reaction.

“No, they didn't. They think we want to use it. If that were my goal, I'd have stormed Tenpony long ago,” the unicorn said. “It isn't like we don't have the numbers to do so. And while it would certainly be bloody, we'd come out victorious. We always do. But that doesn't help the Wasteland.” He sat back down at his desk, smiling.

“Violence does not help anypony,” I said. “All it does is beget more violence.” Kirby chuckled.

“You know, you're different now. Wiser, I think. It really has been a long time,” he said. I turned my head away at the compliment. I certainly didn't feel wiser.

“So what now?” I asked.

“Well, now, we have to convince the Twilight Society to agree to allow us access to Celestia One for the purposes of studying the chambers,” Kirby said.

“And what will you do with that information?” I said. Kirby chuckled.

“I knew you'd ask that,” he said, trailing off. I scowled.

“You're not going to tell me, are you?” I asked, flatly.

“Sorry. Classified. I'm not allowed to release any information to anypony, Star. My ass would be in a sling over something like that,” Kirby said. “You understand.”

“No, I really don't, but whatever. Look, I'd be willing to talk to Dusk Blue about all of this, but I need some information too,” I said, my voice getting edgier.

“Down to business, I see,” Kirby said. “Alright. Honestly, all I'm looking for is one visit. A few hours time with the chamber and some assistance from the Society in understanding how it works. In return, we'll provide security and also continue to assist the refugees out here. No citizenship required.”

“That's... actually rather generous,” I said, surprised. “I will talk to Dusk Blue and offer your terms. Now... as for what I need. The ponies you're helping out here, their villages were attacked recently by an alicorn.”

“Yes... very mysterious that is,” Kirby said. “The very same alicorn passed over Camp Hope as well. We weren't quite sure what was going on until we saw her attacking the settlements. We tried to do what we could to help those in need.”

“Do you know anything about the alicorn that caused the attacks?” I asked. Kirby raised an eyebrow.

“No? I truly don't. I wish I could help you, Star, but unfortunately I don't know much about it other than that it put a lot of ponies without homes,” he said. The stallion stood, motioning to the tent entrance. “Now, if you'll excuse me. I have some meetings to attend to.”

“Of course,” I said, standing. Kirby smiled.

“It... it was good to see you,” he said. “Give my regards to Patch, please.”

“I will, and thank you,” I said. Kirby moved to leave, stopping next to me. He glanced up at me and whispered under his breath.

“Just watch yourself around the Twilight Society, Star. Sometimes the best intentions lead to the worst actions. They may know more than you think about this mystery alicorn of yours,” he said. I nodded mutely as the unicorn left the tent, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Did the Twilight Society really know more about Spark then they were letting on? If so, why would Dusk Blue lie to me? Or did he not know either because he wasn't told?

A cough drew me out of my thoughts. I looked up to see Violet standing in the entrance of the tent waiting for me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I replied.

“Was that Kirby I saw?” My love said. I nodded.

“Yeah. He's apparently in charge of the operation here,” I said.

“And what did he say?” Violet asked as we made our way out to where Steeljack and Nixis waited. As we walked, I explained about the NCR's proposition and what they wanted with Celestia One. I wasn't quite sure what to do with the information. Kirby's warning about the Twilight Society worried me. What weren't they telling me that I needed to know? Was I wrong to trust them?

Or was there something else going that I was just another pawn of?

We made our way back into the city towards the map marker that belonged to Central Station. The town was settled around one of the old subway stations, according to what information we could glean from the NCR camp. The town itself was relatively simple, with a wall built from old subway cars. Many of the town's 'buildings' were made of panels of steel with metal roofs. The entrance to the station loomed nearby. As we approached the town two ponies came out to greet us.

“Hold up there,” one of them, an earth pony mare with a purple coat and black mane, said. “State your business here, alicorn.” I sighed. I should have figured that the town residents would be averse to having one of my kind around after what happened. I lifted a hoof in greeting.

“Please, we mean you no harm,” I said. “My name is Radiant Star, and this is Violet Iris, Steeljack, and Nixis. We are here seeking information about the creature that attacked you.”

“Yeah, I bet you are. Probably scouting out the place to attack us again,” the other guard, an earth pony stallion, replied. I narrowed my gaze at him. Violet chuckled lightly at my side. Nixis and Steeljack hung next to us, grinning as well.

“I give my word as the Ministry Mare,” I said. “No harm shall come to thee while I am among you.”

“Pfft... the Ministry Mare? You expect us to believe that?” The stallion said, chuckling. The mare elbowed him in the chest, stopping him cold. Her eyes were wide.

“Tuck, I think it is her,” she said. “Just like on the radio.” The stallion glared at the mare, and then squinted at me. His eyes widened as well and he grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry, umm... miss Ministry Mare,” he said, motioning for us to approach the town gate. We stepped forward and I smiled.

“No problem,” I said. “I can understand that tensions are high at the moment, with what you've gone through recently.” The two guards chuckled hesitantly.

“Yeah... well, you can go on in. Just be careful, alright. Ponies are real hesitant of your kind, for obvious reasons,” the mare said. “Just head straight back towards the station. You can see the mayor of the town there.” I nodded and we stepped into the small town. The main part of the village was in pretty bad shape. Ponies were milling about, dragging debris away from destroyed homes. A few of

them looked up, taking notice of us. They glared daggers at us as we made our way towards the back of the town. A large subway car sat next to where the entrance to the station was. Curiously, the stairs leading down into the station were blocked off. I stopped near them, glancing down into the darkness.

“Hello there!” A voice said, pulling my attention away from the stairs. A white earth pony stallion had stepped out of the subway car. He wore a simple suit that accentuated his purple mane. “Can I help you four?”

“Umm... well... my name is Radiant Star, and I have a few questions about the attack on your village,” I said. The stallion nodded, still smiling.

“You're not NCR, are ya?” He said quickly. I shook my head. “Good, good. I'm the mayor around here. You can call me Dashing Do.”

“Dashing Do?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow. The stallion laughed.

“Don't ask. Parents. You know how it is,” he said, motioning for us to follow. We made our way over to the old subway car. I looked over at the others.

“Steeljack, Nixis, hang out here. His office is kinda small,” I said. Steeljack nodded silently. The hellhound hunkered down wordlessly. They sat down in front of the car, keeping an eye on the ponies who were rebuilding the town. Many of them were still glaring our way. Dashing opened the door to the car.

“Don't mind them,” he said. “They're just a little on edge. What with the attack and all.”

“That's... actually why I'm here. I was hoping that you would have some more information on the attack,” I said.

“Well, all I know is that we were minding our own business when this crazy lookin' alicorn just appeared out of nowhere, and started slingin' spells at our houses,” Dashing said.

“What did she look like?” Violet asked.

“About her height,” the stallion said, motioning to me. “Green coat, black mane. Real crazy look in her eyes. Seemed to be talking to herself even. What was weird about the whole thing is that she didn't really ever attack anypony directly or intentionally. It was like she was looking for somethin', you know?” I glanced over at Violet, grimacing.

“So what happened after that?” I asked.

“Well, you gotta understand something. We can take care of our own, but we're no Steel Rangers out here. We hid, of course,” Dashing said. “After about an hour, though... she just stopped. Hovered there for a while, and then flew off somewhere else. We heard on the radio after that about how she had attacked a few other settlements too.” The stallion paused for a moment. “Why are you so interested in this?”

“We're sort of tracking her,” I said. I turned to Violet, ignoring the white stallion for a moment, whispering. “It certainly sounds like it was Spark. But what was she looking for?”

"I don't know... you told me that the memory orb with her had her being trapped into a jewel. Maybe that's what she's looking for?" Violet offered quietly.

"Maybe... but why would it be here?" I said. "Twilight wouldn't have left something that important in Manehattan. It would have been with her at all times. Which would mean... Maripony."

"Yeah..." Violet said, returning her attention to Dashing. "Look, thank you for seeing us. I think that's what we needed to know. We'll get out of your hair now."

"Thank ya kindly, darlings," the stallion said. "It was my pleasure, as long as you're not NCR, I'm always happy to see peaceful new faces around town."

"What do you have against the NCR?" I asked curiously. My assignment to broker some form of treaty between the NCR and the Twilight Society still sat in the back of my mind. The stallion chuckled.

"Let's just say I don't much care for anypony coming in and telling me how to run my town," he said. "The NCR say they care, but they really don't. They just want to impose their own rule. I don't want that. I just want to live, eat, and love." I nodded, standing.

"Well, thank you again for your time," I said, pushing open the door and exiting the subway car. My thoughts were even more confused concerning the NCR. I couldn't decide whether Kirby had lied to me about helping the refugees or not. I had certainly seen refugees outside of Camp Hope, but there wasn't any NCR presence here that I could see. I glanced around the town. Many of the ponies were still watching us out of the corner of their eyes as they went about their business. Steeljack and Nixis stood off to the side of the mayor's car, waiting for us.

"Everything alright?" Steeljack said.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here, and get back to Tenpony," I said. "Spark isn't here. We should focus on finding her now." The earth pony nodded. We started to walk back towards the town gate, when a soft pink earth pony mare came running up to us.

"I thought... I thought I was wrong, but it really is you isn't it?" She said, huffing. "You're the Ministry Mare, aren't you?"

"I... I am," I said. The mare latched onto me with her forelegs. *Hey! Personal Space!* I thought. The mare looked up at me, tears in her eyes.

"Please... I need your help. It's my daughter. She's trapped down in the tunnels of the subway station. No pony can free her..." she said, blubbing.

"Hold up, calm down," I said softly. "Start from the beginning."

"My... my name is Fizzy Crunch," the mare said. "When that thing attacked us, a bunch of us went down into the tunnels to hide. My daughter and I got separated in the chaos. Then these things... these weird looking things appeared. We ran, and then the tunnels collapsed from the chaos above. My daughter was stuck in one of them. I'm not... I'm not even sure if she's still alive... but if there's a chance... I have to know..."

“Is that why the station is cordoned off?” I said. The mare nodded. “Why hasn't anypony tried to rescue her?”

“A group went back down in after the attacks ended, but whatever those things down there were... they didn't return,” Fizzy said. “After that, no pony else wanted to go in there. Please... you're the only pony I can think of who could help me.” I narrowed my gaze at the mare.

“Alright,” I said. “We'll do it.” I glanced over at Violet. “Violet. You and Steeljack will take point up here. See what you two can do for the townsfolk. Nixis and I will go down and see if we can find this filly. Nixis' digging will help us get around down there if there is any debris.”

“Are you sure, Star?” Violet said. I nodded, looking over at Fizzy Crunch.

“I can't in my right mind let a mother go without knowing what happened to her filly,” I said. “Besides... if no pony else is going to help this town, we will.” Violet grinned. “Fizzy, show us to the station entrance.” The mare nodded, motioning to us to follow her. I looked over at Nixis. The hellhound smiled toothily.

“Let's go plumb the depths of the ancient subway station, then,” I said, a matching grin appearing on my face. Spark was one thing, but a nice clean rescue was just what the doctor ordered.

I stepped down into the darkness, pushing open the metal gate leading down into the subway station. Nixis lumbered beside me, cautiously glancing from side to side. The gate creaked open, and I half expected there to be something waiting for me right around the first corner. I was quite frankly, disappointed when there wasn't. The subway station was dark, the only light coming from a few flaming trash cans situated around the platform. Four tunnels spread out in each direction from the central platform. I grimaced. Fizzy's story hadn't really given us a whole lot of information on where her daughter had been seen last.

“Well, I guess we'd better start with one of these tunnels,” I said. Nixis nodded in agreement. We made our way towards the far tunnel. The stench of death surrounded us. It seemed the inhabitants of the town above hadn't really done a whole lot to clean up around the station. Charred skeletons of long dead ponies littered the area, remnants of the balefire explosion that had destroyed Manehattan.

We stepped into the dark tunnel, grimacing at the debris littering the tracks. An overturned car sat in the middle of the tunnel. We edged around it carefully, keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Nothing. I glanced at my E.F.S., checking for hostile targets. Nothing. *Hmm*, I thought. *If there's anything down here... where are they? If it were ghouls, they'd have heard us by now.* I unlatched Stargazer from its harness, floating it into the air beside me. I lit my horn, sending up a spark. The soft purple light illuminated the tunnel in front of us. The track dipped into a steady slope, descending down into the murky depths. A second tunnel jutted off from the side of the main tunnel. It appeared to be some sort of maintenance access. Further down the tunnel, pieces of the ceiling had collapsed inward, creating a bridge to the other side of the debris.

“I'm not picking up anything on my E.F.S.,” I said quietly. “Can you smell anything?”

“Just... rot,” Nixis replied. “I don't see anything either. Do you think whatever was down here just... left? Like Spark did?”

“I don't know, but I'm not willing to lower my guard to find out,” I said. “Keep sharp. Let's head over into the other side of this tunnel. Maybe it will lead us to the filly.” Nixis nodded, lumbering behind me as we made our way through the mess of rubble and down onto the sloping track. A blinking map marker came up on my E.F.S. I checked the automap, a marker stating 'Subway Station Maintenance Office'. It was located in a side tunnel just up the tunnel. I sighed. *Might as well check it out*, I thought. I motioned at Nixis to follow me.

The maintenance door was locked. I snarled under my breath, reaching out with my magic and ripping the door from its hinges. A set of stairs leading up into the offices lay just beyond it. I trotted up them. *Well, if the door was locked... there's probably nopony here*, I thought. *Why was there a map marker then?* I pushed open the door to the maintenance office, grimacing at the smell inside. A few radroaches skittered about the room. They screeched as they saw us, running to hide in the corner. A terminal sat on the far side of the room on a desk. It was still glowing. There were no other doors that I could see.

“Well, this is a dead end,” I said flatly. “Great. Let's try one of the other tunnels.” I started to turn around when I heard something laughing. It was coming from inside the room. The terminal screen lit up, a pair of mismatched yellow eyes appearing on the display. The keyboard turned into a crude smile, the keys forming a sinister fang.

“Discord?” I said, my eyes widening. The terminal suddenly sprouted a pair of tiny wings, lifting into the air. It flapped around the room, the keyboard hanging off of it by its cable. The keys were still arranged in that silly smile. Cackling erupted from the... thing. “What the...?”

“Star?” A voice said from beside me. A paw placed itself on my shoulder, shaking me. I turned, seeing Nixis standing there. “Star, are you alright?” I looked back at where the terminal was. It was back in its normal place, devoid of any wings, eyes, or smile. I blinked. *What the fuck was that?* I thought. “Star?”

“Sorry. Thought I saw something,” I said. “Let's go down to the other tunnel.” The hellhound nodded and I followed him out of the room. My mind couldn't get itself off what I had just seen. What was going on? Was Discord simply fucking with me? I'd seen several visions so far of the deity, and each one was extremely disturbing. I didn't know what to do.

We made our way back up the tunnel, pushing aside debris and rubble as we approached the station platform. There was still nothing on my E.F.S., and we hadn't heard hide nor hair of any filly. I was getting worried that the filly was no longer alive. I pointed towards another tunnel and we began to trudge down it. The track in this section of the subway had been torn all to hell. Several large holes littered the ground. We stepped lightly past them. At the far end of the tunnel most of it had collapsed in, blocking passage. I grimaced, until I noticed a blip come up onto my E.F.S. It was dead ahead. I trotted forward, inspecting the debris.

“Hello?” I called out. A whimpering noise could be heard just beyond the collapsed portion of the tunnel. “Is anypony there?”

“H-H-Hello?” A tiny voice called out in the darkness. My heart soared at the prospect that the filly was

alive.

“Are you hurt?” I asked loudly.

“I’m... I’m trapped back here,” the voice responded. “Who are you?”

“We’re here to get you out of here, sweetie. You stay right there, we’ll find a way around to get to you.” I turned back to Nixis, who was peering down the tunnel intently. I started to say something, but he raised a claw to silence me.

“Something’s wrong. We’re being followed,” he said quietly. I narrowed my gaze down the tunnel, following where the hellhound was looking. Nothing.

“Are you sure?” I said. The hellhound nodded, his lips curling into a snarl. One of the holes nearby began to shudder, and something... strange crawled out of it. A soft glow came off of the creature’s scaly skin as it levered itself to its feet. Its eyes were an unholy green, and a snake-like tongue rolled out of its mouth, which was lined with sharp, pointy teeth. Its claws were massive, and barbed at the tips. It glared at us, opening its maw and growling loudly. My eyes widened. “What the fuck?”

The monster pulled itself out of its hole and started lumbering towards us. Nixis leaped forward, slicing into the creature with his vicious claws. Blood sprayed from its shoulders, but that didn’t stop the beast from grabbing onto Nixis and attempting to snap and bite with its jaws. The hellhound struggled with the creature, tumbling over and rolling into a ball of fury and claws. A hissing noise from behind me told me all I needed to know about these beasts, there was more than one of them. I jumped to the side, unlatching Stargazer from its harness as another of the creatures slashed down where I had been. It snarled loudly at me.

“Eat this,” I said, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up several shots at the creature and let the spell drop. Time sped back into motion as Stargazer took aim and unleashed its payload, slamming into the monstrosity’s chest. Green blood exploded from where the bullets hit. That didn’t slow down the creature, unfortunately. It charged, roaring as its claws found purchase on my shoulder. I howled in pain, lifting Stargazer and using it as a battering ram right into the thing’s face. It fell backward, its face caved in from my strike. It gurgled for a few moments and then stopped moving. “Nixis! Are you alright?!” I shouted to the darkness. The hellhound roared in response.

“I’m fine!” He called, grunting as he lifted himself off the ground. The monster that he had been fighting lay on the ground below him, ripped to shreds. He was huffing loudly, clearly out of breath.

“What the hell were those things?” I said, breathing just as hard. I glanced down at my shoulder. It was red with my own blood. “They came out of the ground...”

“I have never seen such creatures, personally,” Nixis said. “Maybe these are the things that the mare was warning us about.” The hellhound noticed my injury. “Are you okay? Your shoulder...”

“I’ll be okay,” I said, floating out a healing potion and downing it. Within moments the wounds on my shoulder began to stitch back up, and I let out a sigh. “We should keep moving. If those things can tunnel their way through the ground, they can get to that filly. And that’s something I’m not about to let happen.” Nixis nodded.

"I can hear the child still through the rock. She is scared, but alive," he said. He put a paw up to the tunnel wall. "Unfortunately... I don't think I can dig through the rubble to get to her. Doing so could damage the structural integrity of the tunnel, and that could bring down everything, including the town above."

"Let's... try to avoid that if all possible, please?" I said, motioning down one of the side tunnels. "Well, let's see if we can find a way around to the other side. There's gotta be another tunnel that can take us over there." I stopped for a moment and called out again to the filly. "Stay there, and stay hidden in case those things come around, sweetie. We're going to try and find a way around to you!"

"O-O-Okay," the tiny voice came from beyond the rubble. I set a map marker on my PipBuck of where we were and nodded, turning away and following after Nixis. As we made our way down into the next tunnel, I felt that we were being watched. A gurgling noise confirmed my suspicions as another one of the creepy glowing creatures erupted out of the ground in front of us. It pulled itself out of its hole, roaring as it slashed out with its claws. Nixis met it head on, blocking its strike with his own razor sharp appendages. The hellhound struck back, knocking the abomination to the ground. Its brains spilled out of its head, glowing bright green as they stained the tunnel floor. Several more hissing and gurgling noises came from behind us. I glanced back, seeing four of the strange monstrosities.

"Nixis... I think we better run," I said. The hellhound snarled under his breath, but nodded all the same. I turned on the spot and began to canter forward. Nixis followed behind as we tried to not trip over the debris littering the tunnel. The hissing from behind us got louder as more of the monsters popped up from holes that we passed. I urged my legs forward, moving into a swift gallop. Nixis had moved beside me, pushing himself just as hard as I was. A soft light from ahead indicated that the tunnel opened up into a larger area.

We burst out of the tunnel opening, coming into what appeared to be another subway station. My eyes widened as I stopped dead in my tracks. The station was abandoned and decrepit, but not without life. Hundreds of the tunnel monsters littered the old station. They were everywhere... climbing along the walls and crawling across the platform. In the distance, the stairs leading up to the outside world were completely collapsed, preventing any escape. I grimaced as Nixis came up beside me.

"Oh," he said quietly. "Not good." The hissing noises from behind us stopped abruptly as the entire station looked right at us. Every creature regarded us with an intense curiosity, their tongues slithering in and out of their toothy maws. I blinked, my eyes widening.

"Not good," I said, my heart pounding in my chest. "Not good not good not good!!!" I turned around. The group that had been following us was blocking the entrance back to the other tunnel.

"Umm... Star? What now?" Nixis said hesitantly. I narrowed my eyes at the creatures. Many of the ones on the station platform had started approaching us. I looked to my right. On the other side of the platform was another tunnel. There weren't any creatures near it at all, which was strange.

"Close your eyes and get ready to run to that tunnel on the right," I said, igniting my horn. I reached deep inside, searching for some sort of offensive spell that could help us. With a grin, I released my magic, creating a flash of light so bright that everything in the vicinity had to look away. "Run, now!!!" I shouted as I veered to the right, averting my eyes from the blast. My hooves pounded onto the concrete over the platform and down into the tunnel. My heart raced and I could hear it pumping loudly as adrenaline fueled every step. After several moments I could only hear the sound of my own

hooves and Nixis' paws. I slowed down, stopping and looking back down the tunnel. It was empty. There weren't even any holes in this tunnel.

"They're not following us," Nixis said. "That doesn't make any sense. Why aren't they following us?"

"I don't know," I said breathlessly. "But I'm not about to hope for the worst. I just hope we haven't gone too off course." Nixis put his claw to the ground, grimacing.

"I can't hear anything in the vicinity through the rock," he said. "Not even those creatures. It's weird, it's like they're... attuned to it or something."

"I bet Spark's attack dislodged something in one of the tunnels," I said. "Probably freed those things from wherever they came from." I glanced back down the tunnel we came from and shuddered. I hoped this way had a way out. I had no desire to go back through those monsters again. I pointed in the other direction. "Let's go. Hopefully we can find the filly and get the hell out of here." Nixis nodded, falling into a calm lope beside me. We walked along for several feet before the hellhound broke the silence.

"A thought occurred to me, Star... I've told you much about myself, but I don't really know all that much about you other than what I've witnessed and heard on the radio," he said quietly. I chuckled softly.

"Not much to tell really," I said. "You know as well as I do what happened at Maripony. I was there, after all."

"Yes... I was part of the hellhounds that migrated from Old Olneigh to Ponyville," the hellhound mused. "But what about before? Don't you remember anything from before?" I shook my head.

"Nope... not really. It's all a bit of a blur. Nothing really comes into focus whenever I try to think about it," I said. "It wasn't until after Unity that I remember anything. I didn't even have a cutie mark after Unity." I sighed, remembering the cutie mark that I had lost to the Twilight transformation. How long had it been since I had seen it?

"Really? I was under the impression your kind didn't have cutie marks," Nixis said. I shrugged.

"I guess when we returned to our own minds... we pretty much became grown up blank flanks," I said. "I found that I had a real talent for stargazing of all things. It's what I got as my cutie mark. I felt... proud of it."

"Stargazing?" Nixis replied, curling his lips into a grin. "You?"

"Shut up," I said playfully. "Just because I'm not that bright doesn't mean I don't enjoy something simple. I kind of miss it, to be honest. I haven't done it seriously since all this crazy shit started. The transformation spell... took my cutie mark and mixed my memories with Twilight." The tunnel we were in seemed to go on forever. I swore that it would never end. A thought came to my mind suddenly. "Nixis? I just... had an epiphany I think."

"And what, pray tell is that?" Nixis asked.

"If those things didn't want to come down this tunnel... then what's down this tunnel?" I said quietly. Nixis grimaced. The answer to my question came all too soon. A roar sounded from down the tunnel followed by the sound of something striking stone. It sounded completely inequine. *Shit... out of the frying pan and into the fire*, I thought. A side tunnel jutted out from the main tunnel in an intersection ahead of us. I motioned to Nixis as we ducked down it to the left. We sat there for several moments, pressing ourselves against the wall.

Then I saw it. A hulking mass of fur and muscle strode by in the darkness. Its eyes gleamed a dead sliver in the gloom. Each footfall it took made a thunderous sound. It stopped at the intersection and began to sniff the air around it. I cringed, pressing myself back as hard as I could, hoping and praying to Luna that the thing wouldn't see us. It sat there for several long minutes, sniffing and growling. Finally, it turned down the intersection and started into the other tunnel. Within several more moments, it had disappeared. Only the telltale sounds of its massive paws were left behind. I breathed a sigh of relief as I dropped to my haunches.

"What... was... that?" I said, shaking. "This place is crazy. I'm never coming down into a subway ever again."

"It looked like a Yao Guai," Nixis said quietly. "But down in the subway, and that big? Unheard of."

"Yao Guai?" I asked. Nixis nodded.

"Mutated black bears," he said. "Very vicious. I'm surprised that he didn't see us. They're very well known for their sense of smell and sight in the dark."

"Don't look a gift pony in the mouth, Nixis," I said. "Let's get moving. I do not want to be around for that thing to decide it wants to come back." The hellhound nodded quietly in response and we made our way back into the main tunnel. The blinking map marker I had set was thankfully pointed in the direction we were walking. We moved as quickly as we could, dodging the rubble and debris scattered along the track. Eventually the tunnel opened up into a substation that looked like it had been used for repairs. It was lit by several half-working emergency lights, providing a soft ambiance to the station. The tunnels on the opposite side from us ran directly into a collapsed section. My heart soared however, when I saw a small cream-colored filly sitting next to the rubble. She looked up, her eyes lighting up with joy. She stood, trotting over to us.

"Are you alright, little one?" I asked. The filly nodded.

"Yeah... I'm fine," she said confidently. I smiled. For such a small filly, she was showing remarkable bravery.

"We had feared the worst. Your mother is very worried," I said. "What is your name, little one?"

"Fizzy Pop," the filly said. "What's yours?"

"I am Radiant Star, and this is my friend Nixis. He's going to help us dig our way out of here," I said, motioning to the hellhound. Nixis smiled, curling back as many teeth as he could. The filly didn't even bat an eye. *Tough kid*, I thought. "Now then, are you ready to get out of here?"

"Sure, I just need to say bye to Harry," the filly said. I stared at her blankly.

“Umm... who's Harry?” I asked. The filly chuckled, pointing a hoof past us. I glanced behind me and nearly jumped out of my skin. Standing on the substation platform was the Yao Guai from earlier. Now that I could see the thing in better light, I was far more frightened. The monster easily stood taller than me even on four legs. I also noticed that it hadn't moved yet. It was just standing there. “Sweetie, stay back behind us. When I tell you to run, you ---”

The filly didn't listen, pushing past me and running towards the giant bear. I called out, but it was too late. The Yao Guai sniffed the air and made a low rumbling noise as the filly got closer. Fizzy Pop wrapped her forelegs around the great beast's neck, giggling. The bear did nothing, absolutely nothing whatsoever, at least to the filly. He sniffed the air again, growling in our direction.

“Oh, you silly billy, they're here to get me home to my momma!” Fizzy Pop said. “They're okay.” The bear grumbled, seeming to look down at the filly. It nodded once in response. I blinked.

“What,” I said flatly. Now I had seen it all. If tunneling monstrosities hadn't done it, a filly snuggling a giant mutated son of a motherfucking bear almost certainly took the cake. I nearly fainted right then and there. I stopped for a moment, studying the beast.

“Star... do you see?” Nixis said, pointing. I followed his gaze to the beast's eyes. It was no wonder I had seen them gleaming earlier. The beast was *blind*. I blinked.

“Harry doesn't see too well, but he knows you're there,” Fizzy said. “When I got trapped down here, he saved from those freaky looking monsters. He's been keeping me safe. This place is his house!” I chanced a step forward. A low growl elicited from the bear.

“Calm down,” I said softly. “We're... we're not here to hurt you or the filly. We just want to take her home. Get her away from the monsters. Can you understand me?” The bear growled in response, but nodded. “Good. Do you maybe know a safe way out of here? Or at the very least, a route that takes us to another station we can dig ourselves out of?” The bear shook its head. *Darn, one could hope*, I thought, grimacing.

“Star. The other tunnel here isn't nearly as bad,” Nixis said, inspecting the collapsed section of tunnel. “I don't know where it leads, but I should be able to dig here if I'm careful.” I nodded.

“Start digging then,” I said. “I will watch and keep an eye out for any problems.” The hellhound turned towards the rubble and began to slice through it like it was butter. He grunted, picking up stone after stone and tossing it to the side as he worked. I kept a wary eye on both the bear and the tunnel. The bear was nuzzling the filly as she laughed and giggled with him. The tunnel was empty. A little too empty, and a little too quiet. I stepped down onto the track, listening intently.

“What's wrong?” Fizzy Pop said, noticing that I had stopped. Harry too, was watching the tunnel. I grimaced.

“You can feel it too, can't you?” I said to the bear. It nodded. “Those monsters. They're coming. All of them. Nixis... how much longer?”

“I'm working as hard as I can,” Nixis replied. “If I go any faster I could bring down this part of the structure.” I blinked. *That's it*, I said. I looked over the filly.

“Fizzy, get onto Harry's back. We're gonna have to make a break for it as soon as Nixis can punch through to the other side,” I said. The filly nodded and lifted herself onto the bear's massive neck. Harry growled in agreement. “Nixis, do what you have to do but make a big enough opening that we can collapse it once we get onto the other side. We cannot leave that open.” The hellhound saluted and returned to his work with an intense fervor, ripping into rock and stone and rebar. The tunnel sat quiet.

I cocked my ear, hearing the sound first. Hundreds of hissing, gurgling monstrosities were coming up the tunnel. I grimaced, taking aim with Stargazer and letting loose a torrent of fire down the dark tunnel. I heard yelps of pain and snarling from the ones that I must have hit. The substation shuddered suddenly.

“Let's go!” Nixis shouted. “Get onto the other side! This thing is going to come down any minute!!” I nodded, turning on the spot and running towards the hellhound's makeshift tunnel. Harry bounded in front of me, squeezing in just behind the canine. The tunnel lurched, and some debris began to fall. Hissing and snarling and snapping sounded from behind me. I didn't even turn to see what I knew already to be there. The tunnel began to start collapsing just as I reached it. I howled, firing up my horn and unleashing my magic into a teleportation spell, appearing right in my line of sight in front of Nixis. As I did, the tunnel collapsed completely, the roar of falling debris filling my ears. I coughed at the dust that kicked up from the rubble.

“Miss Star! Are you okay?” The filly shouted, bounding down from the giant bear's neck. I smiled. She was safe.

“Yeah, I'm alright. We're all alright. Let's get you out of here, sweetie,” I said.

I groaned, shoving another piece of rubble out of my way off the ruined stairs. Nixis worked beside me, tossing rocks and stone to the side as we finally broke through to the metal gate leading back into the Wasteland. I pushed it open with my magic, sighing as I felt the sun on me. I took a deep breath and looked behind me. The Yao Guai and Fizzy Pop were walking up the cleared stairs, the filly blinking as she looked at us.

“Alright, everyone,” I said. “Let's figure out where we are.” I turned on my automap and checked the map marker for Central Station. Thankfully we were only about an hour away to the west. I sighed. “Looks like we've got a bit of a walk, but we're safe for the moment.”

“I'm gonna get to see momma!” The filly shouted happily. Her expression turned to a sour one. “But where... where's Harry gonna go?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Harry should be fine,” I said. “He's a mighty scary Yao Guai. I doubt anyone would want to mess with him.” I glanced over at the bear. He was sniffing the air. He bayed into the wind happily.

“It looks like he has found something worth pursuing,” Nixis said. The filly nodded sadly, running up to where the bear was standing.

“I love you, Harry! Thank you for saving me, be good now!” She said, planting a kiss on the Yao Guai's cheek. Harry grunted and took off, disappearing into the ruins of the city. I smiled.

"I think you made yourself a lifelong friend, little one," I said. "Now, come. You can ride on my back until we get back home." We started along the path, keeping an eye out for anything dangerous. Thankfully our journey was short-lived and we found ourselves trotting into Central Station. The townspeople looked up, seeing the filly. A cry of joy erupted from the crowd as Violet, Steeljack, and Fizzy Crunch came storming towards us. The mother picked up her filly and cried as she hugged her close. She looked up at me, tears spilling out of her eyes.

"Thank you thank you thank you!" She said. "I thought I'd never see her again!"

"Momma! I missed you!" Fizzy Pop said.

"Oh, I missed you too, darling," the elder mare said, pulling her filly close. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"No, Momma, I had help. Miss Star and Nixis and Harry saved me!" She said. Violet looked up at me, blinking.

"Who's Harry?" She said. I glanced over at Nixis.

"Don't ask," I said, chuckling. "Come on. Let's get back to Tenpony. I need a long shower and we need to check on Patch." Violet grinned, nodding.

"Alright. Why don't we ask 'Harry' to come along too?" She said teasingly. I blinked. She was making fun of me!

"I'll have you know, Harry was a very nice bear," I said, turning to make my way out of the town. Violet giggled.

"Sure he was," she said. We started walking but stopped when a voice called out behind us.

"Miss Star! Miss Star!" Fizzy Pop yelled. I stopped and craned my neck back.

"Yes, little one? What is it?" I asked. Fizzy Pop reached into her bag and produced a spherical object. She held it into the air.

"The mismatched one told me to give you this," she said. I blinked. It was a memory orb.

"The mismatched one?" I said. "What do you mean?" The filly shrugged.

"He just said you'd know what it meant," she said. She went bounding off as I collected the memory orb, placing it into my saddlebags. I narrowed my gaze after the filly. *Discord*, I thought. *What is your game, already? First I'm seeing fucked up visions of you, now you're leaving me more memory orbs! Did you plan for that filly to be stuck down in those tunnels? Or did it just suit you because you knew I couldn't resist helping?*

"Star?" Violet asked. "Everything alright?"

"I don't know, Violet," I said softly. "I'm not sure what's going on right now, but I aim to get to the

bottom of it. Discord wants me for something. And I want to know what.” I started walking as the others followed. I was going to get to the bottom of things.

Within several hours we made it back to Tenpony Tower. Night was starting to fall, and the guards were waving the last of the travelers entering the tower in for the night. I decided that Dusk Blue could wait, and instead wanted to know what was going on with Patch. We took the elevator and headed up to our suite. I pushed open the door, seeing the green mare herself, along with Lilith. They were sitting on the old couch in the middle of the room, listening to the radio. They both looked up as we entered.

“You’re back,” Lilith said. I nodded silently. Patch looked... well, for the most part she looked like hell. I guessed that she’d been crying. I was not happy at that prospect. Did that mean the foal was gone? I didn’t want to say anything first, preferring to let her tell us at her pace. Lilith smiled softly, placing a hoof on her friend’s shoulder. Patch forced a smile.

“Hi,” she said. “Sorry, I’m just really tired. Long day, and all.”

“Agreed,” I said, chuckling softly. Patch smiled again.

“I saw the doctors,” she said.

“And...?” I ventured to ask, preparing myself to engulf the young mare in the most spine crushing hug ever based on her answer.

“Well... they don’t know what’s going on, actually,” she said, sighing. I blinked. *WHAT?!* I thought angrily. *WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY DON’T KNOW?!* Patch must have seen the vein in my forehead, because she waved a hoof to calm me down. “Sorry, that was a little dramatic, I guess. Basically, the results were inconclusive. They do know the foal is not gone, but they don’t know anything about what is there, either.”

“So what did they say?” Violet said, sitting down across from the mare as Steeljack rested his other hoof on his love’s other shoulder. Nixis carefully placed himself against the wall as he watched.

“There’s... there’s a doctor in the city. He’s supposed to know everything there is to know about this kind of thing. His name’s Dry Rot, well... that’s what it is now. He’s a ghoul,” Patch said. “The doctor I saw said that he’s helped them out numerous times with unusual pregnancies.”

“Where is this Dry Rot?” I asked. Lilith smiled brightly at this. She lifted a crudely drawn map of the city, showing an X.

“He lives in a settlement called Duskhoof,” she said. “It’s below ground under the old Ministry of Peace hub. Would make sense, since he’s a doctor and all.”

“Sounds like a ghoul town,” Steeljack said, glancing over at me. “Whatcha thinkin’? Go and visit him?” I nodded.

“Tomorrow,” I said. “We’re at a dead end here with Spark. If this doctor can help us with Patch, then I want her to see him.” Patch shuddered a bit.

“Hopefully he’s not like... a gross ghoul,” she said. I chuckled.

“What about Spark?” Lilith said. “Did you find anything out?” I shook my head.

“All we know is that she was looking for something. I assume that since she didn't find it is why she has moved on towards Everfree,” I said. “After we leave Manehattan, that will be our next destination. Hopefully we can catch her before she does whatever it is she's planning to do.”

“And the NCR?” Violet said. “What are we going to do about them?” I grimaced.

“The NCR and the Twilight Society are going to need to work out a compromise. I figure if I can get Dusk Blue and Kirby in the same room talking, then there won't be any need for us to hang around,” I said. Patch's eye lit up at the mention of the name.

“Did you say Kirby?” She said. I smiled.

“Sure did,” I said. “But he's a Captain now. He wanted me to tell you hi for him. Said he misses you.”

“Captain? Wow... I knew Kirby was good, but Captain is pretty impressive,” the green mare replied. “If he's at the helm of this, I'm sure you can get him to cooperate. Maybe I can put a good word in, or something.” I chuckled.

“Let's just focus on one thing at a time,” I said. “I'm going to speak with Dusk Blue in the morning about all of this, and tell him our intentions. You know... we also didn't even see Sunshine Sky. I wonder if she came back to the Tower.” I shrugged. “Now... if you'll excuse me, I'm rather tired and in need of some sleep.”

“Pssh, you just want to go look at that memory orb that the filly gave to you,” Violet said, grinning.

“Filly? Memory orb?” Lilith said. “What kind of trouble did you get yourself into this time?”

“The kind of trouble where we never speak of it again,” I said. Violet laughed.

“Oh come on, tell them about Harry,” she said. I glared at the mare with death in my eyes.

“Who's Harry?” Patch said. I groaned.

“Harry's a bear,” I replied. “Just a bear.”

“An *imaginary* bear,” Violet sing-songed.

“He was quite real,” Nixis interjected. Violet snickered, turning into full-fledged laughter.

“Oh that's... that's... hilarious!” She chortled in between breaths. Nixis grimaced. He did not look amused by this. Violet rolled her eyes. “Sorry, okay... you win. Harry was a bear who was real, there you two happy now?”

“Quite,” I said, standing and grinning widely. I grabbed my bags and trotted to where our bed was. Violet rolled her eyes once more and bid her good nights to the others. Steeljack wrapped his forelegs around Patch on the couch, staying there with her as Lilith made her way to her own bed. I smiled

softly at the two earth ponies, remembering what Steeljack had told me before about his promise. I had no doubt in my mind that he wasn't going to keep it.

Violet slumped next to me, cozing up close as I removed the memory orb from my bag. I spun it around on my hooves, sighing.

“So, what do you think it is this time? Ooh, maybe you'll get lucky and it'll be Twilight having sex,” Violet joked.

“Not exactly the image I was going for there, Violet,” I said, grinning. “Granted, that'd be a fair shade better than what they have been. I still don't get it though. Why? Why is he leaving me these orbs? What does he want me to see?”

“I can't answer that one, Star,” Violet said quietly. “We'd have to go to the source for that, and unfortunately he seems to be missing in action.” I nodded.

“Well, only one way to find out what the hell is going on in this thing,” I said, lighting my horn. I grabbed onto the orb and dove in, feeling the world slide away in a flash of white.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

My host groaned, a chill breeze blowing across her coat. Her eyes were closed, but I knew exactly who I was. Twilight was second, third, and fourth nature by now. The mare stirred, coming out of her sleep and opening her eyes. My host's vision came into focus, and I heard beeping from beside her head. The soft white walls of a hospital room appeared. My host looked up towards the window. Outside, the spires of Canterlot rose. It was then that I realized that my host also wasn't alone. Five mares sat on a bench along the wall. They were resting peacefully. My host smiled softly as she sat up, ruffling her sheets. Rainbow Dash was awake immediately, the chromatic mare at my host's side in a flash.

“Twilight?” She said. I could tell by her face that she'd been crying. “Are you... are you okay?” My host coughed.

“Water,” Twilight croaked. Rainbow Dash nodded intensely, zipping across the hospital room to the sink. She pulled out a cup and filled it, returning it to the bed-ridden mare. My host took the cup with her hooves and began to drink slowly. She set the cup down and looked down at her sides. Her sides were bandaged heavily, red stains bleeding through from below. Twilight sighed and looked up at Rainbow Dash. “How long was I out?”

“Several days,” Dash replied. “I... *We* were worried sick about you.”

“I seem to recall that a little differently the last time we spoke,” my host snorted. Dash turned away.

“Twi, come on, don't be like that. We love you, and we always will. You know that. You scared us, you know,” Rainbow said shakily. She was barely holding on. “I mean, we thought you tried to kill yourself, you know that?” Twilight reached out with a hoof, setting it on Rainbow's shoulder.

“I'm sorry... I didn't know,” she said. “Dash... I don't know what to say...”

“Just promise you won't ever do anything like that ever again,” Dash said solemnly. “Promise me.”

"I... I promise," Twilight said. Dash sighed.

"I believe you, Twi," the chromatic mare said. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, I think I'll be alright," My host replied. "I just need to get some rest, I think. The others, they're still asleep?" Dash nodded.

"Do you want to talk to them at all?" Rainbow said. My host looked over at the others, still slumbering on the bench.

"No... there will be time enough for that later," she said. "Right now I just want to rest." Dash nodded as my host rested her head back onto the pillow. She closed her eyes. I almost expected the memory to end, but it didn't. Instead the scene shifted. Twilight was still in the hospital room, but now she was alone. Twilight grunted as she pushed herself into a sitting position. A knock at the door gave her pause.

"Twilight?" A soft voice called from the other side. "May I come in?"

"Umm... yes, it's fine," Twilight called back. The door opened, revealing a regal white alicorn. Princess Celestia stood tall as she entered the room, but even I could tell she was just masking her emotions. Celestia sat down next to the bed and looked Twilight directly in the eye.

"And how are you feeling today, my faithful student?" She asked. Twilight chuckled softly.

"Please, you know I haven't been that for a long time," she said.

"You'll always be my faithful student, Twilight. You know that," Celestia chided gently.

"Busy," Twilight said. "Very busy. My absence is causing the Ministry to go insane. It's like they can't do anything without me. And to boot I've got a meeting with Trixie at the end of the week."

"I believe I asked about you, Twilight. Not your Ministry," Celestia said. Twilight averted her gaze from her one-time mentor.

"Sorry, Princess," my host said.

"You can call me Celestia, you know. Just because you're a Ministry Mare doesn't cheapen the bond we share as friends," the alicorn said. Twilight sighed.

"Sorry, *Celestia*," she said, chuckling. "I'm feeling alright. Pain's gone down a lot since I woke up. I had a visit from your sister earlier today."

"Yes... I'm afraid we aren't on speaking terms at the moment," Celestia said. "You know how I feel about the war, and all. I am pleased to see that you are well, however. I don't know..."

"It's okay, Celestia," Twilight said, interrupting her. "I know."

"Were you... successful in your task?" Celestia said, her expression turning deathly serious. My host

simply nodded. "And the item we discussed... it's been buried in the old castle ruins. It will stay there for eternity."

"Good," my host said. "Celestia... what do we do now?"

"Now? Now, we live, my faithful student. We do our best and we share the magic of friendship with each other," the regal alicorn said.

"But Spark..." Twilight started to say. Celestia lifted a hoof.

"Spark is where she needs to be. Her place is with the Elements," she said. Twilight sighed, but nodded.

"You're right," she replied. Celestia smiled and stood.

"I am afraid I must now take my leave of you, my faithful student. I wish you well in a speedy recovery," she said. Twilight smiled, bowing her head.

"Thank you," she said as Celestia left the room. Twilight let out a sigh and laid her head back onto her pillow.

"Oh... what a touching scene," a deep voice said from within the room. "Student and Princess reunited in the bonds of friendship. Gag me with a stick." Twilight sat up, seeing two yellow mismatched eyes appear in midair. The eyeballs appeared to be the bodies of giant bees. They buzzed around the room, landing on two flowers that had mysteriously grown on the hospital room floor. The ground turned to dirt and a mismatched aberration of animal parts climbed out. The bees that were its eyes zipped around the room and landed back in his head. Discord grinned a cruel grin, his eyes gleaming.

"Discord," Twilight said. "What do you want?"

"What do I want? You're asking me, the god of Chaos, what I want?" Discord said. He grinned, snapping his fingers. A throne of snakes appeared next to him, writhing and slithering about. Discord reclined back in the makeshift throne. "You know... I really don't know. That's the beauty of it isn't it? Me, the god of Chaos, knowing what I want? That's almost as funny as Loony Luna with glasses." Twilight groaned.

"I've got to get some rest, Discord. Why don't you go see Pinkie Pie or something," she said. Discord shrugged.

"The Element of Laughter isn't quite as much fun anymore, you and I both know that. Not since she started doing those nasty little mints she loves so much," the deity said. "No... I want something more important from you, Twilight Sparkle." His voice turned venomous. "I know what you did.... last summer."

"What?" Twilight said, cocking her head in confusion. Discord cackled wildly.

"Sorry, I meant to say the other night. I have no idea where the other thing came from? Maybe I saw it in a movie?" He said. "Don't you love it when your mouth just runs away with you?" As if on cue, the mouth on his face popped off and grew legs, running around the hospital room. Discord's eyes

widened as he flew after it, grabbing onto the runaway mouth. He popped it back onto his face. "I didn't mean literally. Sheesh."

"What do you know?" Twilight said angrily. I could tell she was getting upset.

"I know what you did to the Elements, Twilight. Even one such as I could never do something so... so cruel," Discord sneered. "You and your little friend Spark, you piqued my interest."

"So? What are you going to do about it?" Twilight snarled. "Tell everypony? Try it, and I'll make sure that you're sealed back up in stone for it."

"Threats, Twilight Sparkle? My, my... this war really has gotten to you hasn't it?" Discord said, chuckling. "Do not assume to presume my intentions, Sparkle. I am a god after all, beyond the scope of your mortal understanding."

"Spit it out already, Discord. What is it that you want?" Twilight said. She was on edge now. Discord merely laughed in response.

"What I always want, my dear. A good show. That and I want your power, of course. The power you so carelessly threw away to seal old Sparky," he said. "With power like yours, I wouldn't have to pretend that I'm reformed, after all. I'd be invincible." He waved his hand and snapped his fingers. The throne of snakes disappeared in a flash. "All you have to do is be willing to give it to me."

"You... you monster," my host said. "I would never..."

"Never what? Be careful before you finish that thought, Twilight Sparkle. You no longer have the Element of Magic connected to you. So I would watch what you say to me," Discord said, grinning widely. "You see, being the god of Chaos and all, I know something that you don't. This little war of yours, it's coming to an end. But it won't be the end that you're expecting."

"What do you mean?" Twilight said. "Once I get I.M.P. up and running, we'll be well on our way to winning the war." Discord snorted.

"Yes... well... what I'm talking about is a slightly different end of course. Spoilers, my dear Twilight Sparkle. But since I'm the god of Chaos, I can bend those rules slightly and tell you one little eensy weensy tiny secret," he said, coming in close to the purple mare. She stayed silent, glaring at him. Discord's eyes blazed with joy. "What's the matter, Sparkle? Cat got your tongue?" He stuck his tongue out at Twilight, a grey stripey kitten clinging to the end of it. The kitten flapped as Discord blew a raspberry at Twilight. The Mare of the Ministry of Magic frowned.

"Tell me," Twilight said angrily. Discord came closer until he was whispering in my host's ear.

"You... you are going to die alone, Twilight Sparkle," he said. "Sad, but true. But that's not all... no... tell her what she's won, Johnny!" The draconeus motioned over to the wall where another Discord appeared. He was wearing a flashy suit with a slicked back black toupee. A microphone was held in his claws.

"Well, Discord. Our plucky young survivor here has won an all expenses paid trip to the afterlife! Yes, that's right, the afterlife! She'll enjoy beautiful spas and unending hellish torment for the rest of her

pitiful existence!” The second Discord said. The first Discord cackled wildly.

“Thanks, Johnny. You can go now,” he said, pulling on a cord out of the ceiling. The second Discord fell through a trap door, screaming. “You see, Twilight Sparkle. I know how this is all going to end. And I need... a little insurance. I need you. The power you sealed away with the Element of Magic. All you need to do is tell me where it is.”

“If you're so great and powerful, then why don't you find it yourself?” Twilight spat. “Forget it. I'm not helping you.” Discord glared at her and sighed.

“Fine. It was worth the shot. I suppose that we'll be seeing each other again, Princess Twilight,” he said. “I daresay that I am looking forward to it.” The draconequus snapped his fingers and disappeared in a flash of bright light. I blinked. I half expected the memory to end after this, but it didn't. Instead it seemed to turn gray and grainy. I was jerked out of Twilight's mind and into darkness. The scene before me had turned into a film reel displayed on an invisible surface.

“Who's there?” I called out. A cackling erupted in the void around me. I narrowed my gaze as the film playing in front of me burst into flames, disappearing with a crackle and a pop.

“Hello again, Radiant Star...” a voice said from the darkness. I growled.

“Discord,” I said. Two blazing brilliant orbs appeared in the void. They expanded until they were as large as bowling balls. The massive head of the draconequus shimmered into existence behind them. A cruel grin was brought forth from the deity of Chaos as he regarded me.

“Yes... did you enjoy my little messages? I know I did,” he said, his snake-like tongue slithering out of his mouth.

“What do you want? How are you even doing this?” I asked. The spirit cackled madly.

“I'm the spirit of Chaos and Disharmony, I can do whatever I so desire... within limits of course. Even Chaos has a little Order. It's more unpredictable that way,” Discord countered. I grimaced. “I've missed you, little Star. Have you missed me?”

“Why are you following me, Discord? Why leave the memory orbs?” I said.

“Because I wanted you to see,” the spirit spoke honestly. “I wanted you to see the lengths that Twilight went to. What she did to the Elements. Why. Who. What. When. Where. How. You know, that old song and dance.”

“All I saw was you threatening to take her power away,” I said angrily. Discord laughed heartily, shaking as he doubled over. He floated back into the air and grinned evilly.

“And yet my little Star... she threatened me back. Does that tell you something? It certainly told me all I needed to know at the time,” he said. “I told you before that I play the long game. And now, I'm making my move.” A massive chess board suddenly appeared between us. The pieces on my side were me, my friends. The other side consisted solely of tiny Discords. His pieces were animated, howling and laughing and jumping about. “There's a storm coming, Radiant Star. A great big storm of chaos, and there's nothing you can do about it.”

“Try it, Discord. I'll make you eat your words,” I said. Discord put a paw to his chin for moment.

“Eat my words, dear me really?” He said. In the air beside him appeared the words 'Eat my words'. Discord plunged a fork out of nowhere into them, devouring them. “Hmm... tastes... sort of like chicken.”

“By the Goddess, can't you ever be serious about anything?!” I shouted angrily. “I have no time to deal with you, Discord. Spark is out there, and I have to stop her.”

“Spark is the least of your concerns, Radiant Star,” Discord said, turning deathly serious in his expression. “You see, you and I are going to play a little game of chess. My way. I've made my first move. Now it's your turn. I'm in the city somewhere. It's your job to find me. Do so, and the next stage of the game begins. But I warn you, Radiant Star. Run... Run, and I will hunt you down... and then... well I will not be so forgiving.” The spirit of Chaos floated into the air before me, growing to magnanimous proportions. “Now, I leave you with a little parting gift. Ciao, Radiant Star!”

A window appeared, looking into a cell. Sitting inside was a pink unicorn, chained to the floor. She struggled, crying out for help. *Sunshine Sky?* I thought frantically. The window disappeared, poofing into nothingness.

“Discord!!!” I roared as the entire world faded into white, plunging me back into the world of the living.

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Maximum Level!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 27: The Oncoming Storm

Too bad, you're Rainbow Dash. Now let's go defeat Discord so we don't ever have to speak to each other ever again!

Malice. Hatred beyond measure. These are the life and limb of the Equestrian Wasteland. It's all so clear to me now. Ponies aren't interested in helping each other. They're interested only in their own survival. After all I've done, and all I've seen, however... I still cling to the hope that one day we will all live again in harmony.

Harmony. A force that was supposedly so powerful that it drew ponies together. What happened that corrupted harmony so? The war, of course. The long and bloody conflict not only resulted in the near extinction of our species, but also meant the death of our greatest treasure – harmony.

Time stands against me now. Tensions rise and the pawns are in place, waiting on the storm to come.

Well, I won't let it. I'll fight the storm, no matter the cost. Because that is what is right. What is just. What is honorable. A wise white stallion taught me that once.

I will fight, or I will die. What remains to be seen is which one the ultimate outcome will be.

I came to in the middle of the inky depths of darkness. An icy chill seized me as I realized that I was alone. *Where am I?* I thought. I tried to move. I couldn't. I was stuck. Something was holding me down. What was even stranger, was that I couldn't feel my wings. I glanced over, trying to see the appendages. They weren't there! *Where the hell are my wings?!* I thought frantically. I looked down at my hooves, suddenly realizing they were the wrong color. I was pink. I was also smaller.

I began to hyperventilate as I tried to push on whatever was holding me down. I reached out for my magic, but felt nothing. I grimaced. There had to be some explanation for all of this! What happened to me?!

“Oh... tsk, tsk. Now don't do that, dearie. You'll only make it worse,” an aged, quavering voice said. My eyes shot up, seeing a ghostly apparition of an draconequus wearing a gray wig and a shawl. A cane had popped into existence next to him.

“Discord,” I said, my eyes widening as I shut my mouth. My voice was different too! I sounded all high and squeaky! Discord's eyes widened as he burst into laughter. He rolled about in midair, cackling wildly.

“You... you... you should see the look on your face,” he said. “Priceless!”

“What's going on? Where am I?” I said, ignoring the fact for the moment that my voice was not my own. Discord stopped rolling around and snapped his claws. He disappeared, reappearing in a white lab coat with glasses on his face. He took out a stand and pulled on a string, rolling down an entire chalkboard out of nowhere. A piece of chalk floated into his open paws. He started drawing intensely

on it, equations and numbers and letters.

“Well, you 'zee,” the spirit of Chaos said, his voice now slightly higher pitched and very haughty sounding. “It is 'ze existential crisis 'zat every pony must face in 'zere lifetimes. Who are 've? ‘Why are ve here? ‘Vhen is lunch? ‘Zis is the 'ze questions you have, ja?”

“Discord!” I squeaked angrily. “Tell me what I want to know before I come up there and rip you limb from limb!” Discord grinned widely, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

“Oh, but that would ruin my fun,” he whispered in my ear. I turned my head slightly. The mismatched spirit's face was no longer there. I growled.

“What did you do to me?” I said. “Tell me!”

“My dear, dear Radiant Star... I decided that I simply couldn't wait for you to find me. So, I gave you a little gift. A way for us to meet, face to face without that annoying little gun of yours,” the spirit's voice echoed all around me. I couldn't see him. Frankly I couldn't see anything. “Or do you not remember your little friend?” My eyes widened. The memory orb, Discord's appearance. The scene he played out before me.

I was in Sunshine Sky's body. There was no other explanation. A flash of light later and Discord reappeared, grinning toothily at my expense.

“You didn't,” I snarled and roared. “You put me in Sunshine Sky's body. Why? What happened to her? What happened to my body?!” Discord's expression looked painful as he pulled out two industrial size ear plugs and shoved them into his goat-like ears.

“Indoor voice, my dear,” he said. “Your questions will all be made clear in due time. And to answer you: Yes, Because, She's fine, You're fine. Does that help at all?”

“Not really,” I snorted. “Why did you put me in her body?”

“To speak to you,” Discord said. “But now I can see that you're being all boring and interrogational. Perhaps you need some friends to play with. That might help you see things my way.” Discord snapped his claws again, and I heard growling from all around me. “Careful now... you don't want to get too friendly.” Yellow eyes pierced the darkness, staring intently at me. I was surrounded by them. Manticores. I grimaced. A fuzzy feeling came over me as I felt magic flowing through my horn. *Figures*, I thought. *Discord doesn't like it if isn't a little sporting.* The manticores roared, one of the sets of yellow eyes starting forward. Discord grinned widely as he snapped his claws, disappearing in a flash of bright light. I had to do something, and fast, otherwise I'd be manticores meat.

“Here goes nothing,” I said, flaring my horn. I wasn't used to this whole 'no wings, short body' deal. I wasn't even sure what magic Sunshine even had access to. I decided that good old fashioned telekinesis would be the safest bet. I directed my magic towards the closest manticores, which I could see more clearly now that my eyes were finally adjusting to the darkness. The blast was weak, but the pressure against his eyes and snout was enough to confuse the beast. I glanced at the restraints holding me down. Reaching back into my own mind, I searched for something to try and sever them. I released the magic. What was supposed to be the metal links dissolving in a flash of heat was a slow melting, and I strained to pull the softened manacles apart. They finally fell to the ground with a sizzle,

and in the light given off by the molten steel I could see the manticores circling. There were three of them.

I shrugged off the rest of the metal chains, finally able to move. The first mantichore decided that was the right time to attack. The monstrosity dove forward, roaring and howling as its stinger hit the ground next to where I had been. I dove to the side, rolling over and flaring my horn again. I thought of what I had seen of the pink unicorn, and decided to go for broke, using one of her ideas for a spell. The ground shook beneath the monster, green thick vines sprouting out of the concrete and taking hold of the beast's wings. The mantichore roared, struggling against the vines.

“Hah!” I crowed in my squeaky squeaky voice. I still couldn't get used to it. “Take that, you ruffian!” The mantichore snarled in response. Wings beat against air, indicating that another of the pack was incoming. I glanced about, noticing that one of the three had disappeared. A roar from above me told me all I needed to know. I moved forward clumsily, still trying to get accustomed to the smaller form. A mantichore crashed into the ground behind me as I started running. There had to be an exit here somewhere!

A door appeared out of nowhere, standing alone in the center of the room. I snarled loudly as another mantichore jumped out in front of me. It reared up, readying its scorpion-like tail for a strike. My horn flared, emitting a shower of sparks, the bright light causing the beast to squawk and cover its eyes. I rushed past it and stopped in front of the door. I didn't have a chance to really study the structure. It was a door, and even though I knew that Discord was behind it, I could hope that it lead somewhere safer than this. I threw it open with a blast of magic, and leaped through.

I landed on a rough patch of dead grass. Behind me, the door snapped shut and disappeared in a flash of white light. I groaned loudly, standing shakily. Thunder erupted in the sky above me as I took in my surroundings. The land was dead for miles and miles. *Where am I?* I thought. *Am I even in Manehattan anymore?* I spun about, looking for any sign of anything that I might recognize. Nothing but inhospitable wasteland. I stopped, sitting back onto my haunches, trying to figure out what in the hell was going on.

“Alright,” I said aloud. “So I'm trapped in a unicorn's body, in the middle of nowhere. I was almost killed by manticores, but escaped through a door that led me here. And to top it all off, the spirit of Chaos and Disharmony wants to fuck with me. This is has got to be my best day ever.”

Almost as if on cue, my day got worse. Skittering noises came from the hill behind me. A ridiculously large white radscorpion appeared over its crest, chattering loudly. I stood, instinctively thinking to reach for Stargazer, when I remembered where I was and that I didn't have my gun. I was going to have to make Discord pay for that part later on. The radscorpion charged, scurrying down the hill with the intent of making me dinner. Without any way of fighting it off except for magic (and even then I wasn't sure how long I'd last against something of this size), I turned tail and started to run.

The sandy and partially grassed terrain below my feet quickly turned to cement. I was now on a road, an old highway from the looks of it. A glance behind me revealed that the radscorpion was still chasing after me. I lurched into a short-legged gallop, noticing a fallen street sign laying along the highway.

Exit 42 – Discord Avenue 6 miles

I blinked. This had to be some kind of joke or something. Discord was just messing with me. But_

why? Why was he doing this? I kept trying to apply some logic to the situation, but applying logic to a being comprised of complete and utter chaos was about as difficult as giving a cat a bath. It just didn't happen. Either way, I surmised that this Discord Avenue was where I needed to go. The radscorpion screeched loudly behind me. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake it. I ran hard, panting as Sunshine Sky's body tried its best to keep up with my mind, which was running a mile a minute. Why did Discord want to talk to me? What was this long game that he kept referring to? Why show me all of those memory orbs if all he wanted to do was kill me? Why was I monologuing so much?!

I passed a second sign, this one upright. It had a single arrow on, somehow pointing in all directions, and said **3 miles** on it. I couldn't even tell if I was close or not. I heard a roar behind me and I turned. An even larger Yao Guai had appeared in front of the radscorpion. The two gigantic beasts, titan-like in their nature, started battling. The radscorpion swung its vicious tail, intending to split the large bear in two with its barbed stinger. The Yao Guai batted away the tail with a casual flick of its massive paw and drew in a large breath. With a single exhale the massive black bear emitted a stream of fire that singed the giant scorpion's legs. I blinked. I was sure that real Yao Guai couldn't breath fire. Very sure. Oh what the hell, I didn't know anything anymore at that point. I didn't stop to think about it as I whirled and resumed galloping forward. Better to leave the two giant beasts behind fighting each other than chasing after me.

The rocky highway sloped downwards, curving gently through a green lush valley that spread out for miles. Another road sign, pointing either forward or straight up indicated that **Discord Avenue** was only one more mile to go. The valley was filled with buildings, the ruins of an ancient town. The only things off about the entire place was that the majority of the buildings were upside down, floating in the air, or scampering about on tiny hooves. A large mansion stopped in front of a small bodega, and opened its doors up, devouring the smaller building whole. It burped loudly and continued around the valley, completely ignoring me. A group of very large horned creatures wearing what appeared to be pink frilly outfits came dancing by, standing on the very tips of their hooves. I blinked. Just where in the hell was I?

I decided to press forward, the center of this town being the obvious exit out of this strange place. As I made my way into the town, I noticed the ponies. They were gray toned, and completely oblivious to everything around them. One of them was watering a garden that was growing off of the side of a building, while another one was ice skating on a lake of soap that had formed in the middle of the street. As I walked, I grew increasingly nervous. More than often, I caught a few of the gray ponies watching me, their eyes dull and lifeless.

I made it to the center of town with little issue. There, where there might have been a fountain or a statue, was another large door. Surrounding it were several large neon arrow signs, all pointing directly at it. Another sign, written in script sat above the door. I paused for a second to read it aloud.

“To the pony who has made it to this door, the road ahead is very bleak.

The answers to your questions may not be what you seek.

Stray from the path and you will end up like them.

Discorded and lost to the chaos within.

For few ponies have made it to my gates.

So come to me now, and meet your fate."

I grimaced. Another riddle? Straying from the path? That was easy. The path lay straight ahead to the door. I took one step and realized my mistake. The moment my hoof touched the ground, all of the gray ponies in the vicinity immediately looked up. One of them called out, an unholy shriek of terror that chilled me to the very bone. *Shit!* I thought as the group of discorded ponies moved forward. With a preternatural swiftness they moved, one of them in front of me almost as soon as I lifted my leg to step back. It howled and snorted, its eyes turning a dull red as it changed form. It became a monstrous bipedal creature with claws and horns. It sliced through the air, forcing me to jump back. I glanced around. Many of the other ponies in the crowd were doing the same thing.

"Stray from the path..." I said aloud. "What the hell does that mean?" I sidestepped, accessing my magic and attempting to hit the thing with a weak blast of Sunshine's telekinesis. It merely dazed the creature for a few seconds before it started forward again. It was a few seconds I intended to capitalize on. Ducking underneath the creature I ran for the door. It was the only solution to this game. I had to get there by any means possible.

Of course there had to be a catch. As I neared the door, the ground beneath me cracked wide open, creating a moat of molten magma between me and the door. I grimaced as I watched the magma pop up all around it, turning it into an island amidst boiling lava. I nearly tumbled in, but thankfully was able to turn at the last minute. A shriek from behind me indicated that one of the creatures was on my tail. I growled loudly, ducking to the side as it soared past me and into the lava. The beast howled and roared in pain, sinking below the surface. I cursed under my breath. If I'd had wings, I could have just flown over, and I doubted that Sunshine's borrowed magic was capable of teleportation. It wasn't a typical skill every unicorn had access to, after all.

I had to get across the lava pit and into that doorway. There had to be some way to get across! I scanned the plaza for something, anything that I could use. *There!* I thought. There was a large wooden pole across the other side of the plaza. It was snapped off, just the perfect length for a bridge. It was a little thin, but I could make it work. I just had to get there. One of the discorded, as I'd come to call the beasts, charged right at me. I couldn't take on all of these things. I had to be quick. I jumped to my left and moved as the thing barreled right into another one that had been behind me. With Sunshine's body, I was smaller and I could move faster than I normally could. I hoped that would be an advantage against these things.

I ducked and dodged, in what felt almost like slow motion. Each time I made it past one of the discorded I felt like my whole life had nearly passed before my eyes, and yet I managed to not get struck. It was like a cheat, like the discorded were trying to scare me without actually hurting me. Was this just part of Discord's game, too? Was I being tested somehow?

A discorded appeared in front of me, howling and slobbering. I flared my horn, pushing weakly with a blast of telekinesis at him. The blast only fazed the beast, disorienting it for a brief moment. I followed up with trying to activate Sunshine's vine spell, but it didn't seem to work here. Was the only magic I had access to basic abilities? Using the opportunity presented, I ducked between the creature's legs and kept charging forward. I arrived at the wooden pole and hopped onto it. I took a few shaky steps, trying to get the rhythm of my own trot together before progressing out any further.

The discorded roared and growled at me as I made my way across the makeshift bridge. I was doing it!

I was going to get across! I was halfway across when I felt the pole beneath me shudder and shake. I glanced back, seeing several of the discorded crawling up onto it. *Shit shit shit!* I thought. With all the extra weight on it, the pole wouldn't hold. It would fall into the magma below. I started moving a little faster, thankful that the pole was dry and not slippery. A loud ***crack*** erupted from behind me and the pole started to fall away below my hooves. I cursed loudly, my trot turning into a downward slide. I was only going to have one chance to get across the rest of the way. I flared my horn, and pushed off of the pole with my back hooves as hard as I could.

I was in the air above the lava, my front legs stretched out as far as they could go. I released the spell I'd been storing up, trying to push my back hooves with telekinesis. I missed. As the howls and screams of the lava-bound discorded ripped through the air, a surprisingly powerful shove pinned my tail to my haunches and slammed me into the concrete island. I rolled and tumbled, hitting the archway with a tremendous ***thud***.

"Ow," I said aloud as I tried to push myself up. "Anypony get the number of that skywagon?" I glanced around, remembering where I was and that I was alone. "Oh, right." I took a look over at the door. It was cracked slightly open. I glanced across the sea of lava. The edges of the other side were filled to the brim with discorded. They roared and snapped and howled as I pushed the door open the rest of the way. A soft light came over me as I stepped through, and the world disappeared.

I blinked. It was dark out again, and I stood on a hill overlooking a massive harbor. Centuries of old fishing and naval boats lay in pieces amidst the old docks. A large pre-war military base could be seen sitting just off of the harbor. I turned my head back, seeing Tenpony Tower in the distance. *I'm back in Manehattan?* I thought. *What in the hell was all that then?*

"Oh... you've made it this far, how splendid!" A voice from above me said. My eyes shot up, seeing a toothy grin and two yellow mismatched eyes.

"Discord!" I shouted. "What is going on here?!"

"Step inside, little 'Sunshine Star'..." Discord replied, a spectral claw appearing out of nowhere and pointing down at the base next to the harbor. "We need to have a chat, you and I. And I would prefer that we aren't disturbed." The face dissipated into nothingness and I scowled. Why did Discord want me to come here? What was his game? Was my body okay? What about Sunshine's spirit? Too many questions circled around in my mind.

With nothing more to do than ponder the answers to them all, I decided that the best course of action was forward. I took one step, that turned into two, that turned into many more as I headed towards the military base at the end of the harbor. As I walked silently, I couldn't help but wonder...

What's next?

The entrance to the military base loomed over my head. It was dark. The walk through the harbor had been... boring to say the least. After what I had gone through to get here, I had been expecting more from Discord. I trotted into the dark courtyard leading into the confines of the base, glancing about here and there for any sign of danger. Several times I had to pause and rest. This body wasn't used to the active lifestyle I usually lived. I was pushing it, but I had to find Discord so I could get put back

into my body.

The military base itself appeared to be old Equestrian in design, prior to Luna's reign. The golden arches leading into the courtyard were tarnished and falling apart. The building itself was a utilitarian gray in color, accented by rusted gold markings. A large steel door sat at the end of the courtyard, leading into the base.

The door was locked. Of course. I grimaced. Without a PipBuck I wasn't going to be hacking into it anytime soon, and Sunshine Sky's magic was nowhere near strong enough to 'pick' the lock my normal way. I was going to have to find a different way in. I glanced around, looking for something that I could use to gain entrance. An open air duct sat hanging off of the side of the building, several feet above me. I looked back at my sides. No wings still. The one time I really could have used them and I didn't have them!

I decided a different approach was needed. I flared my horn, casting Sunshine's vine spell. The green plants erupted from the ground, wrapping around and creating a round platform. I stepped onto it, letting it lift me up to the duct. I banged on the cover for a few minutes with my hoof, finally breaking through. I tossed the cover aside and crawled inside. I took a deep breath and started forward. The duct was cramped, dark, and hot. I began to sweat profusely by the time I reached the first fork in the ductwork. I glanced down the right fork, not believing my eyes. A translucent arrow of green and gold appeared inside, pointing further down the air ducts. It disappeared a moment later. I grimaced and started down the right fork.

The duct ended abruptly above a grated panel. A soft light emanated from below. I knocked the grate away, letting it fall free to the flooring below with a clatter. I grunted as I shoved myself through the hole. If I'd have been at least a little taller or wider, I might not have fit. I found myself wondering if Discord planned this all along. Had he anticipated that I might not be able to reach him in my normal body? Had he been playing me all this time and I hadn't realized it?

I flailed my way to the floor, landing with a ***thud***. Groaning, I picked myself up, a headache forming as I tried to figure out where in the hell I was. It appeared to be some sort of infirmary. Rows of metal beds lined the walls while several tables lay in the center of the room. I stalked forward, looking for the exit. A tinny chime caught my attention. I looked over, noticing a robot in the corner. It was one of those old Doctor Orderly robots that was used for medical procedures pre-war. It was humming along to itself, its buzzsaws whirring softly. It was a wonder I hadn't heard it before. I grimaced. A robot like this one was likely on omega threat level protocol, meaning it was going to attack if it saw me.

I shuffled underneath the nearest table as quietly as I could. The whirring of the buzzsaw cut out and the robot moved through the infirmary. It stopped near the table I was hiding under. Had it seen me? I wasn't even close to being able to take on one of these things. Come to think of it... why was I so weak? I had seen Sunshine Sky fight before and she had been able to hold her own. Had Discord done something to her? In fact, the only spells I'd been able to use were the vine spell and telekinesis, and that I was attributing to the fact that I had actually seen those spells performed by the mare. I wondered if maybe that was the case. I was only going based on what I had seen the mare do, and trying to do it my way. Regardless, I was stuck in this room if I couldn't get out and away from this robot.

The robot hung around the table for a few agonizing minutes before it moved on further down into the

room. I stepped out quietly, heading for the door. It slid open with a screech. I flattened my ears as I leaped out into the hallway. The door slid closed just as the robot appeared in its frame.

“Halt, intruder!” It shouted, emitting a gout of fire from its side. The door closed all the way, cutting off the stream of heat. The door stayed closed. I blinked. Could the robots not trigger them to open? I wasn't going to stick around to find out. Pulling myself to my hooves I began to make my way down the hall. It was a maintenance corridor, lined with pipes. Overturned boxes lay along the path. I walked quietly, hoping and praying there weren't anymore robots.

How wrong I was. After several minutes I found myself at a fork in the passage. On the right, a Ponitron security robot was rolling up and down the long stretch of hallway. It stopped just before the fork, turning around and heading the other way. I frowned as another arrow of gold and green appeared in the air pointing down the same hallway. *Of course*, I thought. *Discord couldn't possibly make it easy on me*. I sighed. There was no way I was going to get down the hall without alerting the robot to my presence. *Well, shit*, I thought. The robot clicked and whirred as it reached the other end, turning around. I sat silently and waited for it to traverse the long hall once more, falling into line behind it as softly as I could. The robot seemed to be set on its course until it stopped in the center of the hall. I glanced over, jumping into an open door. It was an office filled with terminals and scrap metal.

One of the terminals was still active, blinking a soft green at the far end of the office. I crept along underneath the window looking into the small room as the red glow of the Ponitron's sensor swept back and forth. After a few long antagonizing moments it continued forward. I breathed a sigh of relief and made my way over to the terminal, tapping on its keyboard. I shook my head, trying to remember how to do this. I'd always just had Violet do these sorts of things, or I'd toss them around the room with magic. Something told me that wasn't going to work this time. I was not a thinky pony by any means, and being forced to do so didn't really help.

The terminal came up with a list of words that could have been the password. I tapped the side of my head, trying to decide on what to choose. I groaned. I was not good at this! Taking a chance, I tapped the first word I saw that looked good. Turns out the password was *chaos*. I blinked as the menu came up. One of the options was **Disable 1st Floor Security Drones**. Thank Luna! I hit the menu option, receiving a success message in response. The robot in the hall went dark. I cheered and ran out into the hallway past the disabled robot. I stuck my tongue out at it and continued down to the end. A door sat at the end. It slid open as I trotted up to it. On the other side was a massive hangar. Ponitrons whirred back and forth on the catwalks that hung over the floor below.

I stepped inside quietly as I could, glancing down from the catwalk to the ground floor. A large metal crate sat in the center of the hangar. Several larger Ponitrons zipped around it. Two large arrows appeared in the air, this time a bright red in color. They pointed at the crate, blinking. I cleared my eyes, and the arrows disappeared. I had to go down there?! I groaned as I made my way down a set of metal stairs. I was really not enjoying this. I knew that there would be no shutting down these robots. Discord wouldn't make it that easy. I decided that the best thing to do was to test just how badly the chaos deity wanted to speak to me.

The metal stairs led all the way down to the ground floor. Thankfully none of the Ponitrons had noticed me yet. I intended to change that. I strode out of the darkness, walking straight towards the metal crate in the center. The nearest Ponitron stopped cold in its tracks, focusing its sensors and its laser rifle on me.

"Halt, intruder," it said in a monotone voice. I put a hoof up.

"Can it, tinhead," I challenged. "I'm here to talk to Discord." The Ponitron stayed silent for several long moments. I cringed, worrying if maybe I had made a mistake. Finally the robot lowered its weapon.

"Access Granted, opening cube," it said. A loud hissing noise erupted from the metal crate as the rest of the Ponitrons turned and began to roll into their alcoves at the far end of the room. The metal crate continued to hiss as pieces of it began to fall away. My eyes widened when the object in the center of it was revealed.

It was a statue. A statue... of Discord.

"Well, we finally meet face to face, Radiant Star..." The deity of chaos whispered into my ear. His voice came from all around me. I narrowed my eyes.

"Discord? Where are you? Show yourself!" I shouted. Discord's laughter erupted madly from the void.

"You're staring right at me, little Star," he replied. "That's me right there, in the stone statue." I blinked. *What?* I thought. *He's in the statue?*

"You're lying," I said. "I've seen you." Discord cackled again. A shimmer appeared in front of the statue before me, forming into the shape of the draconequus.

"You've seen this, and you've seen that, but you have yet to see the real me," he said as his form became solid looking. He was wearing a top hat and a monocle, reclining against a chair. He waved his hand, causing another chair to appear across from him. A table popped up out of nowhere, two cups of tea steaming on top of it. "Do have a seat, my dear. This story is going to take a long time to tell." I grimaced, trotting over to the chair and plopping onto it.

"Talk," I said. "And when this is all over, I want back into my own body. And Sunshine Sky needs to be freed." Discord grinned toothily.

"Of course," he said. "Now... I'm sure you're wondering about that incredibly handsome fellow behind me. I was not lying when I said that it is me. The real me."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I saw you... in the memory orb. You were there."

"Yes... I remember that day quite clearly. It was why I chose to show it to you," Discord replied calmly. He lifted one of the tea cups and began to drink the ceramic cup itself. The liquid shape of the tea appeared underneath it, dropping to the ground with a splash. Discord grimaced. "Oh look, my tea's ran away." The blob of tea sprang to life, growing a pair of legs and arms. It screeched and ran off.

"Enough, Discord," I said, snarling under my breath. "What happened to you?"

"It's quite simple, little Star. I was encased in a stone prison. Despite the fact that I was 'reformed', loopy Luna never seemed to trust me. And you obviously saw how much Twilight liked me," Discord

said. "One of the final acts that Luna took against me was to turn me back to stone. I'm still not sure how she did it, quite honestly. Never got the time to ask her. She stuffed me away here to keep an eye on me."

"You mean... you're stuck in that thing? Then... then how are you here?" I said. Discord chuckled.

"Patience, little Star," he said. "The war happened. Well... the end of the war, that is. The megaspells dropped, and everypony died. Well... sort of. I was left here... left to the sands of time. But Luna's spell must have had some flaw in it. Something tied to her life force. When she died, the spell began to wane."

"Statue still looks pretty intact to me," I snorted.

"Indeed," Discord said, his tongue slithering in out of his mouth. "The stone itself is secure, but there are cracks in the spell. It has allowed slivers of my existence to slip out. You've even met one or two of them. Fillydelphia, Chicacolt, Manehattan. All me, but not me at the same time." Discord snapped a claw, separating into four separate Discords, each with their own brightly colored top hat and monocle combination. They all spoke as one. "To be honest, Radiant Star. I am quite tired of such a fragmented existence."

"They were all you?" I said. "But not you...?" I tried to process the concept in my mind. The Discords all grinned toothily.

"Indeed," they said. "We are the aspects of the god of chaos. From Mirth to Malevolence, we represented Discord's various parts of his personality. But no longer. We want more."

"So what do you want?" I said, narrowing my gaze at the four mismatched beasts. The Discords snapped their claws, reforming back into a single Discord. His top hat now comprised of all the colors of the others.

"I admit, Radiant Star... that I am fearful of dying here. I want to be free," he said. "I want to taste Equestrian soil once more. I've heard its gotten much better since its irradiated." I made a gagging noise. "The spell is failing. When it does... it will seal me inside forever. And I will die. Dying is boring. It's so much more fun living."

"And what... you want me to free you?" I said. Discord's eyes narrowed at me.

"The thought had crossed my mind," he said.

"Why do you even think that I would want to do that?" I asked.

"Because I have answers," the god of chaos said, lifting a paw up and admiring his claws. "Answers I know you want, and I know you need."

"About what?" I said. Discord chuckled to himself.

"Oh... you can't trick me that easily, little Star. But I will give you a little tidbit of information that I believe you shall find very interesting," the spirit said. "I've waited here, long enough, but unable to touch you."

"You sure as hell tried hard in Fillydelphia," I snorted. Discord cackled, waving his hand to make another cup of tea appear on the table. It set itself on fire and then went out immediately, steaming.

"Malevolence. An aspect of me. But despite his... enthusiasm for the job, he could not touch you. Not with the Element of Magic inside of you," Discord said. "No... I had to come up with a way to separate you from the one you know as Spark." My eyes widened at this. Discord's grin became wider. "Yes... you see it now, don't you, little Star. I couldn't touch you when you passed through Manehattan, because of Spark as well."

"Why did Stargazer hurt you?" I asked, not even thinking. Discord's eyes went dark with malice.

"That infernal contraption. I daresay Luna did a very good job, designing a weapon of such power. She was involved in its construction from the get go," he said.

"You knew about it?" I said.

"Indeed. There wasn't much that Luna could keep from me. When you're the intangible embodiment of chaos, you tend to go wherever and whenever you please," Discord said. "Perhaps that was why Luna had me put back into a stony prison. I simply knew *too* much. Suffice to say, the gun was her way of ensuring that anypony who came after her couldn't. It's a shame she never got to use it."

"What was so special about it?" I continued. I couldn't stop asking questions. Finally, there was somepony (somedraconequus?) who knew what the heck was going on! My mind was completely abuzz with questions.

"Starmetal, of course. The zebras said it was an evil material, born of the stars above. Personally, between you and me... they were all a little too crazy in the head," Discord said. "But starmetal itself... well, you know how it is." I nodded, glancing away for a second. I sighed, returning my attention to the deity.

"What about in Chicacolt?" I found myself asking on autopilot. "Why didn't the spirit there attack me?"

"That was Mirth. He's not the type to attack anypony, really," Discord said. "In fact, I don't much like that aspect of my personality..." He snapped a finger and a second Discord ripped itself from his body. A joyous grin was on his face. The first Discord grimaced angrily, lifting a hand held laser weapon. "Arrividerci!!" The laser weapon erupted, blasting the second Discord with a searing red beam. The copy shrieked and howled, turning into a pile of ash. Discord blew on the laser weapon, sheathing it afterwards. "There. That's taken care of."

"What... what did you just do?" I asked hesitantly. Discord glanced over at me, his grin returning.

"I killed him, of course. No need for that part of my personality when I'm free, after all," he said. "Now then... where were we? Oh, yes, that's right. I believe that my inability to touch you had something to do with Spark and her connection to Nightmare Woona. Some residual effect of the spell, I assume."

"I... I see," I said.

"No... you don't see, little Star," Discord mused. "In order to get you here, I had to do something that I abhor. I had to wait. And I *hate* waiting, Radiant Star. But in the end, it was all worth it. I dropped a line in a certain alicorn's mind about you, and with little prodding, you came to Chicacolt."

"What?" I asked, finally making the connections. Discord had been in the scenes behind us, watching and waiting. The whole fucking time! "You... you're responsible for telling Pride about us."

"Finally catching on are we now?" The spirit replied. "Yes... that was my doing."

"But... but how did you know that Spark and I would separate there?" I said. Discord laughed madly.

"I didn't!" He snorted. "I took a gamble. I knew that eventually Spark would want control. She's never played well with others after all. It felt so good, putting all the chips on the table and making that roll, Radiant Star. And look how well it played out! You're here, and I can finally be rid of this... ugh... statue." My mind exploded with thoughts. Everything up until now had been one cosmic fucking game to this monster. Everything. Violet's injury, Spark. Lucky. Lilith. Everything was poked and prodded forward by this fucking thing. To say I was angry was an understatement.

I was rage incarnate.

"No," I said after several moments.

"No? No, what?" Discord replied. I glared at the spirit of chaos.

"NO!!" I shouted. "I will not set you free! You... you're responsible for all of this! You're responsible for Violet nearly losing her life to Spark! For Lucky dying! For Lilith! You did it all!!" Discord chuckled.

"I hate to tell you this, little Star..." he said, whispering in my ear. "But those things would have happened without my prodding. I merely... gave Pride the inkling. She would have heard of you eventually after you killed her would be lover." I growled loudly, standing from the chair.

"I don't care, you... you monster! I am not going to free you! Now put me back in my body!" I roared. Discord floated around, waving a claw.

"I think perhaps you oughta... cool off," he said, snapping a claw. A large snowball appeared above my head, splattering me with icy cold. I shivered, shaking off the snow as my teeth chattered.

"N-N-N-Not fair," I said angrily, stuttering around the cold.

"I can make more," Discord replied. "Now... are you going to listen to me?" I glared at the spirit of chaos for several long moments, and finally nodded. Discord grinned and snapped his claw, removing the snow from me. "Good. Now then... I brought you here for a very specific reason, moreso than just to free me. I want to show you things. Things you will need to know for the trials ahead. In fact, I think perhaps it might help if I gave you a little incentive." He snapped his other claw, an orb appearing in the paw with a flash of light.

"A memory orb?" I questioned. "And how do I know that it won't just release you and trap me inside?"

“Come now, little Star... don't you trust me?” The spirit said.

“Not particularly, no,” I snarled. Discord chuckled.

“I figured you might say as much,” he said. “But this is something you absolutely need to see. And after you're done viewing it, we will discuss my freedom. Besides... it's not like you have a choice...” The spirit snapped a claw and the arms from the chair began to elongate and circle around me. I yelped loudly as they stretched and closed in, sealing me in place. Discord's form slithered sinuously around me, lifting the memory orb and lowering it onto my horn. It sparked to life, dropping the world out from underneath me.

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I couldn't see up or down from my host's body. It was unique, and terrifying. The whole world in front of me was painted in bright colors on one half, and the other half with muted half tones. Also... I was standing upside down from a ceiling. Is this what Discord felt like all the time? I couldn't even begin to understand the outlook the spirit of Disharmony had. Where was I even? Everything around me was in flux.

Careful now, little Star. Don't want to step too close to the chaos... A voice in my mind said.

I thought this was a memory orb, I said angrily. A cold chuckle emanated from the back of my mind.

It is... but really, did you not expect me to tag along? What fun is that? Discord replied. *Just watch...*

My host's eyes lifted up as the door to his strange abode opened. Things settled into focus as I realized that the draconequus was lounging comfortably against a couch on the ceiling. His eyes narrowed as a dark alicorn entered the room.

“Discord,” Princess Luna said. “We wish to speak with thee.”

“Oh look who it is, pretty Princess Woon,” Discord responded, the malice in his voice clearly evident.

“Discord,” the Princess of the Night said flatly. Discord rolled his eyes, literally. The two orbs popped out of their sockets, falling through the air to land on the floor below, which had now turned into strawberry pudding. It was a very jarring feeling to suddenly be immersed in such a sticky sweet substance. Discord's head popped back up out of the pudding, his eyes back in their original places. He now sported a beard made completely out of the pinkish stuff.

“And what, pray tell, can I do for you today, my dear Princess? Come to gloat about your petty little war?” He said.

“You know why we are here,” Luna replied. “You came to visit Twilight. Why? What interest do you have in the Ministry of Arcane Science?”

“No interest at all, I'm afraid. I've got too many other Ministries to keep track of,” Discord said, pointing out each one on his claw, which grew extra digits for each new one he came up with. “You've got the Ministry of Silly Trots, the Ministry of Badger Badger Mushroom Mushroom, the Ministry of

Excellent Chaos, the Ministry of Awesome Chaos, and finally the Ministry of Radical Chaos.” His claws returned to normal and he shook them out, grinning. Luna rolled her eyes.

“Those last three are the same thing,” she said.

“Are they really? Dear me, I shall have to fix that at once,” he said, snapping a claw and appearing to wear a carpenter's hat. He held a hammer in the other paw. The strawberry beard remained. “If you'll excuse me I'll just --” Luna lifted a hoof, slamming it into the spirit's chest, stopping him cold.

“**No**,” she said, her eyes flaring angrily. “You will answer our questions, Discord. No more games. You know too much about Equestria's inner workings already. Why are you interested in Twilight?” Discord's eyes widened.

“And I thought we had an understanding, Woonaa. In all these years we've known each other, you've not once lifted a hoof against me,” the chaos deity said. He waved a paw, disappearing into thin air and reappearing behind Luna. “I would tread lightly if I were you. You would do well to remember that you don't have the Elements of Harmony anymore to face me with.” Luna snarled, spinning about and trying to strike at the spirit. Discord disappeared once more, a sigh escaping his mouth as it fluttered up to the ceiling on its own.

“Discord! Get back down here!” Luna roared. “We will kill you for threatening us!”

“Ohh, Woonaa. So angry. So hateful. Can't we all just get along?” Discord's disembodied voice said. “You want to know why I went to visit Twilight? Fine. I went because I know what she did out there in the middle of nowhere. I know that you're fighting every day to control the Nightmare, but you can't. I know... I know what Twilight wants. She wants you. Your position. She wants to be a pretty pony Princess again, to go back to the old times.” My own mind ran a million times into overdrive. Nightmare was still inside the Princess? But then why... why was she not letting her out to take over the world? Unless... a glance at Luna's face while Discord was speaking confirmed my suspicions. Luna was fighting the Nightmare, even as the two eternal beings spoke. She didn't want to let it out. She was trying to protect the world by keeping it in.

“Twilight... Twilight can never go back to those times,” Luna snarled. “This war... everything is riding on this war. If Equestria fails... we all die. Including you.”

“Please... I'm the eternal embodiment of the spirit of Chaos,” Discord said. He reappeared on the ceiling. All the moving about was really making me sick. “I'm afraid I simply can't die, my dear Woonaa. You're wasting your time too, with that little side project of yours.”

“You know about Stargazer?” Luna asked, raising an eyebrow. Discord grinned toothily.

“I know about more than you could possibly ever hope to know,” he said. “I just won't tell the full story. Not yet. That's for later. How is the little monster trapped inside your mind, by the way?”

“I...” Luna started to reply, turning her head away. “That is none of your concern, big monster. What did Twilight tell you when you saw her?”

“Hah! Changing the subject I see,” Discord said. “To be honest, the poor dear didn't really feel like talking. Her lips were zipped.” He lifted a paw, pulling a giant zipper across his face.

“She bound a very powerful spirit that night,” Luna said. “It would take a lot of energy out of a pony, even one as extraordinary as her.”

“Speaking of that,” Discord said matter of fact. “How did little Twilight Sparkle get the best of the Nightmare and seal up old Sparky-poo? I thought your dark friend and the wayward Element were best of buddies?” Luna's eyes narrowed at this.

“Nightmare was... preoccupied. Also... my sister was involved,” she said softly. Discord grinned widely.

“Oh, now that is too rich,” he replied. “And now the world is left without the Element of Magic. All because it wanted a little too much power in return. I wasn't lying when I said you had no way to get rid of me.”

“Neither was I,” Luna said, her eyes flashing. “I may not like Nightmare, Discord, but there is one thing that she is quite good at. And that's getting what she wants. Always.” The alicorn's horn flared to life, tendrils of dark magic snaking forth from it. They sped out, latching onto the draconequus' form. The chaos magic in the air began to dissipate as Discord writhed in pain. Luna's magic fed more into the spirit's anger, strengthening it against any defense that Discord could have put up. I could feel the hatred behind the magic as it insinuated itself into host's very essence.

“Such a petty thing, little Woon,” Discord choked out. “You want to know a secret? My last one? You will die. You won't win your pathetic little war. Your world will become a hollowed out shell of itself, burned by balefire and hate. You can't stop chaos, my dear. You can't even begin to understand it. And it... it will consume you.” Luna roared, pouring power into the magic more as the various parts of Discord's body began to solidify. In just mere moments, the draconequus was pure white marble. Luna huffed and puffed, her horn returning to normal. The vision of the memory became a haze, stopping against time itself.

You see, little Star... you see how Luna fought against the Nightmare. Twilight did the same... against Spark... Discord said from the back of my mind.

What does this have to do with you? I said. *It seems to me that Luna was justified in removing you from the picture.*

Ah, but she didn't remove me. Not fully, Discord replied. *She merely delayed the inevitable. I think she knew somehow, that Spark would return. And that she would not be around to stop it. Perhaps it is my job then, to take care of the wayward Element.* The spirit snickered.

No. I'm going to find Spark. She's my responsibility. I let her out, I said. *I will bear that burden.*

We shall see, Radiant Star. We shall see, Discord said as the memory faded into the smell of bananas and the real world came rushing back.

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I opened my eyes, groaning when I remembered that I was still wrapped in an imaginary wooden chair, sitting in front of the spirit of chaos. Discord was grinning widely as my eyes drifted up to him.

“Now then... are you going to free me? I do not relish this, Radiant Star. I like you. I truly do,” the spirit said. “But I will do what I must to free myself from this wretched prison.”

“I... I have a question first,” I asked. “Why did you leave the memory orbs in the first place?” Discord lifted a claw, pondering his response for a few moments.

“Twilight was never a very smart pony, if you've noticed by witnessing her memories,” he said finally. “But even she knew that there was power in knowledge. The memory orbs were to show you that, along with trying to explain what led Twilight to such desperation that she had to seal Spark away. It seems however, you didn't quite get the message.”

“What message?” I said angrily. I was starting to get really mad over all the crypticness.

“The message. The one I've been trying to tell you. I meant what I said before... there is a storm coming, Radiant Star,” Discord said, his tone shifting to a very serious nature. “A storm of immense and incalculable power.”

“A storm of chaos?” I asked. “All the more reason to not free you, I think.” Discord's eyes widened and he burst into laughter, cackling wildly.

“Oh, you ponies... you're so hilarious when you assume things,” he said. “I wasn't talking about *me*. I was talking about *you*.”

“Me? What do I have to do with any of this?” I said.

“You will be responsible for the oncoming storm, Radiant Star,” Discord said, his tone even and serious. “That is why you will free me. You will not be able to stop yourself. I've seen it.”

“What are you, prophetic or something?” I replied. “How do you know that I'm the bad mare?” I couldn't believe it. I wasn't bad, I wasn't! There was no way that Discord was right. He couldn't possibly be right. Could he?

“In a sense you could say I can see the future. Let's just say... I can sense chaos in the air and I breathe it like a fish does water, and I can sense it all around you,” Discord said. “You *are* going to cause a storm of great chaos. And it will be quite glorious.”

“Why did you want Twilight's power?” I said, trying to change the subject. I didn't need to hear anymore about how I was going to cause a storm of whatever. I knew what I was going to do. I was going to stop Spark, and end this. I wasn't the bad one, Discord was. He had been plotting this from the very beginning, even up until two hundred years beforehand. He deserved to rot in the stone for eternity.

“Changing the subject are we? Temper, temper, little Star. You want to know why I wanted her power? Because if I had it, I could forever be free, and never have to worry about the Elements sending me back into stone,” Discord replied simply. “I still want that power, very much. In fact, I am going to visit our friend Spark, should you agree to free me. I will make sure that you do not do what you plan to. I will take what is rightfully mine.”

“And how do you plan to do that? Spark has a body now. She's dangerous,” I said. Discord paused for a moment.

“Plans... who needs them. I make my own brand of fun,” he finally said. “More chaotic that way.”

“You don't know, do you?” I said. “You won't visit her. You couldn't even touch her when she was in my body. I'm sure that you still won't be able to.” I sensed I was beginning to get the upper hoof here. Discord scowled, revealing that he had in fact been bluffing.

“If you are trying to derail me, Radiant Star, you will find that it is not so easy,” he said. “Now then. I shall explain the rules of the game, so do try to keep up and follow along.” I blinked. All sense of having the upper hoof went flying out the window.

“Game?” I asked, confused. Discord grinned widely, snapping his claw. The chairs disappeared along with the table. They were replaced by a large checkered game board.

“Why, chaos chess of course!” The spirit of Chaos said. “The rules are quite simple. Move your pieces against mine, and try to take the king. But be warned... one wrong move... and you will lose. And there are many, many, *many* ways for me to win.”

“What happens if I lose?” I said, not sure I wanted to hear the answer. Discord's grin turned sinister. I really didn't want to hear the answer.

“If you lose, you agree to set me free. The information is there in your mind, you just need to act on it. You won't however... be able to do it in this form. You'll need to come here in your own body,” he instructed. “And you will not bring that... infernal gun of yours when you do.”

“And if I win?” I asked. I intended to win. I was not going to set free this monstrosity.

“If you somehow are capable of winning at a game *I* invented, well then I suppose that you would be able to exercise your right to not free me. But that would be akin to murder, now wouldn't it?” Discord replied. “As well, I will release you back into your own body, and we shall never have to see one another ever again.”

“Either way, you release me,” I said. “And Sunshine Sky. What if I decide to leave Manehattan and not free you?”

“Then I will have Malevolence hunt you down and eat your soul for breakfast,” Discord said flatly. It was the most serious I had ever heard the god of chaos be. I could tell by the sinister glare on his face that he meant every word. I gulped slowly, thinking about the implications of this. Sighing, I looked up at the spirit and nodded.

“Alright, let's do this then,” I said. Discord sneered and waved his paw, several flashes of light throwing the game pieces out onto the board. On my side... I had several pieces consisting of my friends, Dusk Blue and a bunch of other unicorns. *The Twilight Society*, I mused. In the center of my side was a large purple alicorn figure. This had to be my king. The other side of the board appeared to be made up of ponies dressed in combat armor. There were unicorns, earth ponies, and even pegasi tokens. I caught a brief glimpse of Captain Kirby. *The NCR?* Discord's king was represented by an ever changing statue of himself, the tiny draconequus writhing and molding into something new every

five seconds. The board itself began to change beneath us, turning into a scale model of the city of Manehatten. My friends and the Society were safely in Tenpony Tower, while the NCR was on the outskirts of the city. It was so...

"Since you seem to be so keen on beating me, you may have the first move," Discord said. I grimaced, realizing that I wasn't even sure how to play this stupid game! I thought back to the times I had sat, watching Nixis and Steeljack play their own crude version of chess. Those rules didn't seem to apply here. Discord chuckled as I sat there. "Do you have a move, or are you giving up already? I do want this to be a little fun, Radiant Star." I shot the draconequus an angry look and spoke.

"Do my friends count as one piece, or do I have to command them separately?" I asked. Discord's eyes lit up with glee.

"However you so desire, my dear. After all, what fun would it be to play chaos chess if the rules didn't change *during* the game?!" The spirit replied. I sneered.

"Fine. Then I'd like to move my friends out of Tenpony Tower," I said, narrowing my eyes. If I was going to have to face a game where the rules changed all the time, I'd have to do my best to keep on my hooves. I knew that there was something to do about the fact that the Twilight Society and the NCR were involved. Was Discord trying to tell me something about what was going to happen between the two rival factions? The pieces representing my friends, except for the piece representing me, began to make their way out into the city. They approached a section of the city board. Discord grinned widely.

"My move then! I move four manticores into place to attack your friends," the spirit of Chaos replied. I blinked as four tiny manticores appeared in adjacent squares around the others. They roared in miniature, rushing at the ponies and hellhound standing in the center.

"My friends attack!" I quickly shouted. "They attack the manticores!!" Discord sneered.

"Catching on, are we?" He said. "Fine, this is the first challenge then. Let us watch to see how it plays out, shall we?" He waved a claw, the tiny versions of my friends had begun to engage the manticores. Within moments, the monsters had been destroyed, turned into tiny broken pieces that littered the game board. I whooped in response.

"Yes! That's my friends for you," I said, chuckling. I mean, it was only a game after all. My friends could handle themselves. They always could, even when it wasn't real. Discord sneered, his eyes narrowing at me from across the table.

"Now the real fun begins. The NCR moves into the city," he said. The various figures that belonged to the NCR were starting to leave their camp and make their way into the city, heading towards Tenpony Tower. "I'd be careful if I were you, Radiant Star... The NCR is very trigger happy." I glared right back at the spirit.

"Fine then. I'm going to have my friends intercept the NCR and try to talk to them," I said, feeling rather smug with myself. My friends began to make their way towards the NCR troops. The troops stopped when my friends appeared in their square. They sat still for several moments. Discord grinned.

"I see how you're going to play this game," he said. "Not bad, not bad at all. However... I am the

undisputed master of chaos chess... and I declare that the talks will not go as planned, and the NCR sends your friends back to Tenpony Tower with a warning!" My eyes widened. My friends started walking back on their own to the Tower as the NCR held their position deep into the city.

"What?" I said. "Well, I order my friends to go back." They didn't. They kept moving towards the Tower. "Why aren't they going back?!" Discord chuckled loudly.

"I can see you haven't figured it out by now," he said. "I'd hate to ruin the surprise..." The gears in the back of my mind began to turn. The map, the game board, my friends, Tenpony, the NCR... all of it flew by in my thoughts. It was only then that I realized what was going on. It was ludicrous, but it made perfect sense when you realized just who you were dealing with.

"This isn't a game at all," I said. "This... This is actually happening!" Discord let out a massive chortle, nearly rolling off of his chair.

"You figured it out, Radiant Star! But don't think that makes you the winner, no... we're just getting started," he snorted. "Yes... my magic is leaking out enough to the point where I can influence minor events here and there. Just like the swarm of bloodwings that are about to eat your precious friends." I glanced down, scowling at the miniature forms (even tinier than my friends) that were soaring through the air right at them. I had to think of something. If this was really happening, then perhaps a little help could come through. I grinned.

"Then I call on Dusk Blue to save the day and get them back to Tenpony Tower safely!" I shouted. Discord growled as a blue unicorn appeared before my friends, teleporting them away to the base of the Tower. "Take that, Discord!"

"The bloodwings follow after, of course," Discord said rolling his eyes. I grimaced as I watched the bloodwings give chase.

"Well... well then I use my secret weapon," I said angrily. This game was getting too ridiculous. I had to figure out a way to end it and soon, before something bad happened to my friends.

"Oh? A secret weapon? Do tell," Discord said.

"Yeah. I call on Harry, the Yao Guai!" I said. Out of a nearby subway station emerged a giant black miniature bear. It roared as loudly as its little form could let it, charging towards the swarm of bloodwings. The mutated bats were apparently afraid of the creature and began to fly away, giving my friends enough time to get into Tenpony Tower safely.

"Ugh... fine. You got that, but here's the coop de grassy," the spirit of Disharmony replied. "The NCR issues an ultimatum threat to Tenpony Tower. The stage is set for the greatest of all chaos... war."

"Even you would never stoop that low, Discord," I said. The spirit shrugged.

"Doesn't matter. It means that I win the game. If we continue to play your king will be taken and I will have influenced chaos beyond measure causing you to lose anyways," he said. "As I said before... I always win." He waved a claw, causing the gameboard to disappear completely. "And now, you have to free me." I scowled again. I wasn't quite sure at all what caused me to lose, I wasn't even sure how to play the stupid game in the first place! But... I had to stick to what I had promised. I made a deal

with the devil, and it was time to pay up.

“You win,” I said softly. “But I have one more question before we end this.”

“Oh? And what could you possibly need to know now?” Discord said, grinning.

“Discord!” I barked. “If I do this... If I free you, will you promise to leave this place... to leave Spark be? I have to be the one to find her. I have to be the one to save her!”

“Save her? Why would you ever want to do that?” Discord said, his expression changing to one of befuddlement. The spirit of Chaos couldn't clearly understand why I would want such a thing.

“Because... because the world needs the Element of Magic, Discord. Harmony, Disharmony... both are needed to keep the world in balance,” I said. I closed my eyes, sighing. Discord was right about one thing. No matter how much I wanted to see him die, the world needed his force just as much as it needed Spark. Harmony and Disharmony existed together. Without one or the other to provide balance... the world would not survive. It was my only option. I just hoped that I could get Discord to agree to not go after Spark. “I see that now. But in order for the world to benefit from both, both need to be there. That's why I need to save Spark.”

“A dangerous proposition if there ever was one,” Discord mused. “I suppose that I can occupy my time, until the occasion arises that I must devour you to prevent you from destroying the world, and then take the power I so desire.”

“That's... not exactly comforting,” I said angrily. “Besides... I promise. I will not do what you think I'm going to. I will make sure of it.” Discord shrugged.

“It is what it is, Radiant Star. I will tell you something,” the spirit said. “Twilight's spell bound Spark so that she could never hurt anypony ever again. Nightmare was bound into Luna, all the way up until the end of the war. She did it to sacrifice herself, so that Nightmare could not longer corrupt the Elements of Harmony... but the damage was quite done. And now... here you are... harboring Twilight's connection. What will you do to prevent you from harming others? Will you sacrifice yourself?”

“I... If I have to, yes,” I said. “I will do whatever it takes... whatever I have to. I will restore Spark and stop this madness.” Discord grinned.

“Then come closer to the statue...” He said. “You know, it's a funny thing. I was lying before when I said you had to be in your original body to free me. All you need to do to free me is to touch the statue. Funny how things turn out don't they?” My eyes widened as I glanced past the ethereal spirit at the statue.

“And you will do as I say? Leave Spark alone? Leave this place?” I said. Discord nodded.

“Freedom... well, freedom is all I ever truly need,” the spirit said. “After all, I'm the spirit of Chaos and Disharmony. I can do anything I want! Perhaps I will have fun over the next century or so littering the Wasteland with useless junk and those silly bottle caps you ponies find so appealing. You never know what I might do!” I grimaced. I stood, trotting past the form of the draconequus. I had made up my mind. I knew what to do.

I placed my hoof on the statue, concentrating hard. Somewhere... somehow, I knew that a certain lavender alicorn would be quite unhappy about all of this. But right now, she wasn't around, and I didn't think this was something she needed to know. The statue began to glow unnaturally, cracks forming all over it. I stepped back away from it, watching as the ethereal form of Discord disappeared completely. The statue burst at the cracks, the sinewy form of the spirit of Chaos stretching out and cracking his neck. He glanced down at me with those malicious yellow eyes.

"Well, hardly the beauty sleep I had hoped for," he said. "However... you do have my thanks, little Star."

"Just... send me back to my own body, and Sunshine Sky too. Return her to Tenpony," I said. Discord grinned again, a real grin this time, instead of the spirit form.

"Oh, I did agree to that, didn't I?" He said. "Fine. But before I leave you, I have one more thing to tell you. If you're going after Spark... beware the world that lives inside Everfree. The magic there is... wild. Uncontrolled. It always has been and always will be. After all, it's a place where I thrived."

"I'm aware of that," I said. "Everfree has only gotten wilder since Red Eye cleared out of there." Discord chuckled.

"Then I shall leave you with a riddle, little Star..."

"Wild creatures big and small

Do not go near this ancient hall

Darkness taints the land beneath the moon

And winter is destined to come soon

For closer you arrive to what you seek

The one you should fear will begin her reap

So caution and warning to you and your friends

For friendship cannot save you in the end."

I blinked. What the hell did that mean?! Discord merely sneered as he snapped his claws at me. A massive surge of white light surrounded me, and I felt my entire mind and body being ripped away at the seams. After several moments of antagonizing pain, my vision went dark.

"Star...?"

"Is she awake?"

"I can't tell... poke her a bit to see."

“OUCH!” I shouted as my eyes shot open at the feeling of a hoof jabbing into my side. I craned my neck around to see Violet sitting there, a sheepish grin on her face. The others were standing around behind her, watching intently.

“I uh... was just trying to see if you were awake?” Violet said, retracting her hoof.

“How... how long have I been out?” I said, my throat feeling quite parched.

“About... two days, I'd say give or take,” Violet replied softly. “We... we weren't sure what was going on. Was the memory orb that long?”

“It... it wasn't the memory orb,” I said. “It was... it was Discord. He forced me to trade bodies with Sunshine Sky. He had captured her.”

“What?!” My friends collectively said. I sighed, and nodded. A glimmer of light between my forehooves drew my attention. Where before there had been a single memory orb, now there were two. One of them was the one I had just entered, which had gone dark. The other glittered brightly. The words *One final parting gift* were etched into its side. I picked it up and set it on the table in front of us.

“I... I freed him,” I said. “Discord, that is.” My friends continued to stare at me like I was insane. “He was trapped inside a stone statue in an old military base out on Manehattan Harbor.”

“Wait... when you say you freed him, you mean...” Patch said. I nodded.

“The God of Chaos and Disharmony is loose in the Wasteland,” I said. “I... let him out.” My eyes widened, when I realized what I had done. I'd let out possibly one of the most dangerous forces in the universe out into a veritable playground. And yet... I believed he would honor our agreement. At least... for now. I knew that somewhere... somehow in the future our paths would cross again. Would we somehow become friends? Something about the way Discord treated me still felt rather off. Like he was pushing me, prodding me forward, trying to help. He had mentioned something in Twilight's memory about being reformed. So was he actually good? Or evil?

I decided that in the end, it didn't really matter. He was Discord. Mysterious and mischievous to the very end. I looked back at my friends. Their expressions were ones of... fear and befuddlement.

“So are we like... going to have to run for our lives now?” Lilith broke the silence. I chuckled softly.

“No. I don't think we'll need to worry about him interfering with our plans,” I said. “We sort of... made an agreement.”

“How do you know he'll honor it?” Violet said. “I mean, this is Discord we're talking about here.” I nodded.

“I... I just know,” I said. “Now then... I've been out for two days. What's been going on around here? Have you guys gone to see Dry Rot yet?” I asked, feeling more invigorated than ever to get right back on track.

“Well... it's been a little more interesting, but not as interesting as what happened to you,” Patch said. “We went to go and try to talk to the NCR.”

“Ran into a pack of manticores on the way there,” Steeljack said. I blinked. *Well... that confirms everything that happened while I was playing that stupid game with Discord*, I thought.

“I... Really? That's... that's crazy,” I said, grinning nervously. Steeljack raised an eyebrow.

“You alright, Star?” He asked. My eyes widened.

“Never... never better. Yep, I'm all good!” I said. Steeljack coughed.

“Alright then,” he said, glancing over at Patch. “Go on, darlin'.”

“Well... we were on our way to the camp when we found a group of NCR soldiers in the city proper,” the green mare continued. “They're... they're moving into the city. I thought maybe I could use whatever pull I had with Kirby to try and convince him otherwise.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “That didn't work.” Patch shook her head.

“They ran us out of their extended camp,” she said. “I never even got a chance to talk to Kirby. Star... they're preparing for war.” I grimaced. I had hoped that was the one thing that Discord hadn't fully influenced, but it seemed that he had. Or had he? Had Discord actually made those events happen? Or had he simply had the foresight to see the chaos of them to predict what would occur? I couldn't rightfully tell.

“Our only option then is to seek out Captain Kirby and try and speak with him,” I said. “However... priority number one should be locating this Dry Rot. I will see if we can get a message to the NCR... try and delay this if I can. Once that is done, we will leave for Duskhoof.” I shot a sly glance over at Violet, who was looking a little red in the cheeks. “Anything else happen while I was gone? Violet?” The mare groaned and then finally exploded.

“Okay okay, you were right, he was real!” She shouted. I grinned widely, knowing exactly who she was talking about.

“Oh? And who might you be talking about, Violet?” I said.

“Harry, alright. You were right about Harry. He's not an imaginary bear,” she said. “In fact he saved us from some very nasty bloodwings.”

“Is he alright?” I said, remembering how I had countered the bloodwing swarm. I hadn't seen where the Yao Guai had ran off to after chasing the swarm away. Violet nodded. “Good. Perhaps in the future you'll believe me when I say I've seen a giant bear.” My green love grumbled under her breath. I giggled and stood, stretching out my wings. It felt so good to have them back! I never realized how much I'd missed them. Finishing my stretches, I opened my eyes.

“Feeling better?” Patch said. I nodded.

“I am. Now, if you all will excuse me. I must speak with Dusk Blue,” I said, moving towards the door.

I stopped and glanced back at my friends. "Do what you can to get ready, so that we can go visit Dry Rot." They nodded, going about their business. I sighed and pushed open the door, thinking about what I was going to do about the NCR. Discord worried me enough. His presence being free out in the Wasteland still didn't strike me as being a good thing, but there was nothing I could do about it for now.

I trotted to the elevator, taking it all the way down to the main lobby. Tenpony Tower in many ways reminded me of Theater, except the hustle and bustle of this place was far more... subdued. I could tell that the ponies here loved their comfort, as opposed to the raucous loud nature of the MMMM and their charges. Still... I realized that I didn't know exactly where to find Dusk Blue as I walked through the halls. A tap on my shoulder blade told me I didn't need to, however. I glanced to my side, seeing a very familiar pink unicorn.

"Radiant Star," Sunshine Sky said, her squeaky voice reminding me all too well of the time I'd spent inside of her body. "I believe I owe you a debt a gratitude."

"Sunshine," I replied. "I do believe you don't owe me a thing. After all, we were both imprisoned. What happened to you?" The pink unicorn motioned for me to follow her. As we walked, she started to speak.

"I was out around Central Station, looking for any clues on the alicorn that attacked the outlying settlements," she said softly. "I thought maybe... maybe it had something to do with you. I guess I was right about that?"

"You were. Did you find out anything concrete? When we asked around there, nopony really knew what happened," I asked. Sunshine sighed.

"I figured as much. I can confirm that the alicorn that attacked the settlements was Spark," she said. "Discord said as much when he captured me."

"Why did he take you?" I said. Sunshine shrugged.

"He said he wanted to use me as bait, to get you to come to him," the pink mare replied. "Before I knew it, I was watching you pilot my body."

"I... I uh... Definitely had a lot of trouble with that part," I said, chuckling. Sunshine giggled.

"That you did. Still, thank you. You saved my life," she said. I lifted a hoof.

"No worries. Really. I'm just glad you're alright," I said. "Listen... Sunshine. I need to talk to Dusk Blue. What happened with Discord... the NCR and the Twilight Society. We need to find a way to delay what's going on, at least until we can get them into the same room together to talk things out. I don't think either side really wants a war if it can be avoided."

"I agree," Sunshine said. "Dusk Blue is aware of this already. He asked for me to come find you and speak with you. He's very busy at the moment, but is hearing everything we're saying. Telepathy spell." The pink mare grinned, tapping the side of her head.

"I... I see," I said. "So then... what should we do? I want to help, but I have pressing matters that I need to attend to as well."

“Your friend, Patch,” Sunshine said plainly. I nodded. “Dusk says that he understands your needs, but wants to see if you can try speaking to the NCR again. I know that this is difficult, Star, but we cannot budge from our position. Celestia One belongs to the Twilight Society. The NCR will need to trust us that we will use it appropriately.”

“But if you don't compromise, the NCR will attack, Sunshine. Even Tenpony Tower couldn't withstand their combined military might if they chose to devote enough ponypower to it,” I pleaded. Sunshine sighed.

“Understand Star. This isn't greed. We're the only ones who understand how to use this technology,” she said. “This is the legacy that Twilight Sparkle left us.” My eyes widened.

“Well, she left me with a jumble of emotions and a boatload of manure,” I replied. Sunshine shied away as I lifted my hoof. I closed my eyes and hung my head. “Look... I'm sorry. I just... I've seen firsthand how bad things can get when ponies don't talk and work together. It never ends well.” Sunshine nodded.

“Dusk says that he understands, and will be willing to speak to the NCR, if you can facilitate an early meeting,” she said. Her horn flared, floating out a tiny circular device to me. “Take this with you. It's a long range hologram device, late Ministry of Arcane Science design. It's a little unpredictable, but it should let Dusk speak directly to the NCR Officer in charge.” I levitated the device out of her magical grasp, placing it into my saddlebags.

“And what about my friend? What about Dry Rot?” I asked.

“Take care of this for us, and you will be free to pursue your own plans,” Sunshine said. “All you have to do is deliver the unit, and the rest will be up to us.” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Deal. We'll go out first thing in the morning,” I said, turning away from the unicorn to leave her.

“Star?” Sunshine called after me. I stopped, glancing back at her.

“Yes?”

“I meant what I said before. I really am thankful that you saved me,” she said. I smiled.

“You're welcome,” I replied as I started my journey back up to my room. The others weren't going to be happy about this, but we didn't have much of a choice. We had technically made an agreement to help the Society with the NCR, and had to see it through to the end. Several moments passed before I pushed open the door to our room. Violet looked up at me expectantly.

“So... what's the word?” She asked. I sighed, shaking my head.

“No dice. Dusk Blue wants us to deliver something to the NCR. Something that would let them talk to each other,” I said. “Once that is done, then we can go seek out Dry Rot.” Violet's eyes narrowed.

“So... when do we leave?” She said.

“First thing in the morning. Sorry, everypony. I tried to get them to agree to it,” I said, glancing over at Patch. The green mare smiled.

“It's no big deal, Star. I can wait, you know,” she said. “I'm fine. Really, I am.” I sighed, plopping to my haunches.

“I know, I just... I feel like... I feel like I'm responsible for all of this happening to you. I just want to, you know, fix it,” I said. Patch smiled again softly. She stood, coming closer to me. Violet and the others nodded knowingly as they gave us some privacy, heading back to their rooms.

“I know... I know you feel like it's all your fault, Star. It's not. I don't blame you for this,” Patch said. I hung my head low as the green mare reached out with a hoof, placing it on my shoulder. “Trust me. It'll be alright. We'll make it through this. I'll make it through this.”

“I... Okay. Okay. You're right. You're right. I shouldn't be worrying this much about this,” I said, glancing up at the mare. “I think I'm just gonna try and get some sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us.” Patch nodded, trotting back to her own room. I slunked into the room and plopped down next to Violet. The love of my life nuzzled me closely, bringing a smile to my face. It had been far too long since I'd enjoyed something so simple in my life as a quick nuzzle. My eyes drifted down to the other memory orb Discord had left me. Violet followed my gaze and then looked away with a sad look on her face.

“We were all worried about you when you didn't come out of the memory orb,” she said softly. “I was worried.”

“I...” I started to say.

“No... you don't get it, Star,” Violet said suddenly, cutting me off. Her voice was edgy, angry. “You said before that it was my purpose in life to protect the things I love, but I can't protect you when you're off in those things. What if... what if next time you don't wake up?”

“I... I'm sorry, Violet,” I said softly. I glanced down at the memory orb again. Part of me really wanted to just grab a hold of it and drop right into it then and there. I almost did. Violet placed a hoof on my shoulder. I looked up at her, meeting her pleading gaze.

“I know. I know you are,” she said. “Just... try to exercise a little caution please? I... I love you so much, Star. I just... I don't want to lose you.” She was starting to tear up. I reached in, giving her a nuzzle. I opened my mouth, pressing my lips to hers in a brief chaste kiss. I pulled away, smiling.

“And you won't, I promise you,” I said. I looked at the memory orb and batted it away with my forehoof, knocking it across the room. “I will still need to view that at some point, but until we're done here, I promise no more memory orbs.” Violet smiled, wiping away her tears.

“O-O-Okay,” she said. “I'm... I'm okay with that.” She reached in and nuzzled me again. I sighed, resting my head against hers. We laid there for several long moments before we finally drifted off to sleep.

I glanced up from where I was sitting, groaning loudly. The library was the last place I wanted to be after everything that had happened. I stood, trotting towards the door. *Might as well get it over with*, I thought, pushing it open. The library felt cold and there was very little light. I cringed as I stepped inside.

“Hello?” I called out. No response. *Great*, I thought. *I'm sure I've probably royally pissed off little miss high and mighty*. I trotted into the center of the dark library, glancing about nervously. Where in the hell was Twilight? Hooves stomping on the ground alerted me to the alicorn's presence as she appeared at the top of the stairs. She tromped down the stairs, glaring at me.

“What did you do?!” She said angrily. I looked away for a moment, and then returned her glare.

“I did what I had to,” I replied. “I'm going to assume you know.”

“About Discord? Yes, I'm aware of what you did,” Twilight spat venomously. “Why? Why did you let him go?” I sighed, taking a deep breath.

“Balance,” I said. “Discord may be a little off his rocker, but he's not evil. He's just a force, like order. But the world needs both harmony and disharmony to survive. That's why I had to free him.” Twilight continued to glare at me.

“And you really believed that he wasn't interested in killing you? Or taking Spark? He's Discord! He's a liar! It's in his nature!” She shouted. I stomped a hoof.

“And what do you know about lying, Twilight? You knew what was going on all along. Why didn't you tell me about Luna? About Nightmare? About what you did to Spark?!” I shouted right back. Twilight's eyes widened. “That's right. I saw the memories. Why did you seal Spark away? Why did Luna do what she did? I want to know!”

“There are plenty of things you do not understand, Star,” Twilight said softly. “Life was not easy for any of us during the war.”

“Then enlighten me,” I said gruffly. “You brought me here to yell at me about Discord, so the only decent thing to do is to answer my own questions.” Twilight sighed, lowering her head. She finally nodded after a few long moments.

“First off... you have to remember... Spark is dangerous. She was dangerous back then, and she is still dangerous today. I recognized that. Yes... I might have been a little... extreme in my methods, but it was the only way to prevent her from pursuing her plans,” the lavender alicorn explained.

“What exactly did you do to her?” I said.

“I sealed her essence in a soul gem. A soul gem is something the zebras believe can hold the souls of their departed loved ones. It's often used in dark magic,” Twilight said. “I managed to get my hooves on one, thanks to an old friend of mine. A zebra named Zecora. She wouldn't say where she got it from, only that it was very old.” I cocked an eyebrow at this. Twilight had been friends with a zebra? I didn't quite remember anything about that. *Funny*, I thought. *A lot of things have been slipping my mind lately. Must be stress*. Twilight smiled softly and continued speaking. “The soul gem, combined with the spell energy and my sacrifice, were enough to seal Spark inside of it.”

"Then... how the heck did she get out? And how did you know how to seal her in the first place?" I asked frantically. Twilight scowled.

"I... I've never told anypony else this before," she said. "It... it was Celestia. She knew how to bind Spark. I don't know how she knew, but she did. As to how Spark escaped... that I don't know."

"Celestia?" I inquired. I cocked my head. "But Spark was with you all the time... how did she not see what was coming? She seemed genuinely surprised in the memory." Twilight nodded.

"That was because Celestia gave me a spell to block certain portions of my mind away from her," she replied. "Spark asked me about it from time to time. I told her that the spell was to organize my thoughts better. I had been feeling rather stressed from running the Ministry all the time. She bought it hook, line, and sinker."

"I... I see," I said. "What does Luna have to do with this? She sealed Discord away. She also had Nightmare inside of her still. Why?"

"Luna... Luna never lost the Nightmare," Twilight said. "It was always deep inside of her, somewhere. When I found out that Spark had been corrupted by her, I confronted Luna. She was... hurting. There were many reasons that Luna stayed in the shadows during the war. Nightmare was one of those."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Luna... she was trying her hardest to prevent Nightmare from escaping. Right after Celestia abdicated the throne and the Ministries were in place, she had an... episode. It was kept secret. Equestria did not need to give the zebras any indication that Nightmare Moon had returned. It took a lot of... effort, but we managed to calm her down," Twilight replied. The lavender alicorn sighed and lifted a hoof. "You have to understand... Luna wasn't bad. Nightmare was the evil one. Luna had to do everything she could to hold her inside."

"So why did she banish Discord?" I said. It was relieving to finally be getting some answers for a change.

"I... I don't know to be honest, Star," Twilight said. "Discord... he visited me after I sealed Spark. He said something about wanting her... our power. I suspect it had something to do with that."

"He did want it," I said without missing a beat. "He wanted it to be free. At least that's what he said." The more I heard of both sides of the story made me feel like Discord had some further motive for wanting Spark's power. Twilight's explanation didn't make me feel any better about it.

"I guess that's all I needed to know then," I said. "Look... I know that you're angry about what happened with Discord... but I had no choice. If I didn't free him, we'd never have been able to get to Spark. He had us locked into freeing him, either way." Twilight narrowed her eyes at me.

"I... I know," she said. "I'm... I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm tired of all these distractions. Every moment, I can feel the connection weakening. I don't know exactly what will happen if it's severed completely. Nothing good, I'm afraid."

“What?” I said, cocking my head in confusion.

“Well... if we take the principle of amniomorphic spells into account, factoring in the --” Twilight began, glancing up at me before blushing fiercely. “Sorry. Equestrian. Got it. I'm afraid... if the connection severs... there's a chance that you will die, Radiant Star.”

Footnotes:

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Quest Perk: Touch of Chaos – Your experiences with the spirit of Chaos have affected your internal systems. You now have a random chance to pass any skill check when under stress.

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 28: Tension Rising

But there's a catch. If I can't figure out which one's the real Pinkie, I might send her back by mistake!

Loyalty. What is loyalty? How can we be loyal in the face of insurmountable odds? When we are at our lowest, loyalty to the ones we love can save us. For it is in those times, the times that we are truly tested, that our loyalty gives us hope.

I often wonder what life would have been like if the ponies of old Equestria had stuck true to their loyalty. Would the war ever have made it as far as it did? I don't know for sure. Rainbow Dash stayed true to Equestria until the bitter end. Was she the only one? What about Twilight? Was she loyal to her own words? I still don't know what to think about the Ministry Mare in my head.

I consider the connection between myself and the Ministry Mare. What will happen if it disappears? Twilight said I might die if the connection is severed. I don't know what to think about that, but I can't let it get in my way. I have to keep moving forward, to stay true and loyal to my convictions. I will stop Spark, and save the Wasteland.

I have to. There is no other road for me. The only way out of this is forward.

“So... we're supposed to just... deliver this thing to the NCR?” Patch said as we trotted out onto the Luna line. She was comfortably perched on my back, turning the holo-emitter around in her hooves, peering intently at it.

“That's what Sunshine said,” I replied. “It's some sort of holo device. Supposed to let the Twilight Society talk to Kirby.”

“The NCR is preparing for war, and now they want to talk? Something's not right about this,” Violet said. I nodded mutely. I was still reeling from my talk with Twilight. I glanced back at the device. Was there something up with the Twilight Society's intentions? I didn't know who to trust anymore. On one hoof, Sunshine Sky and Dusk Blue hadn't given me any reason to mistrust them personally. But the Society was responsible for my current predicament, if only accidentally. What if they were planning something really bad? On the other hoof, the NCR was trying to help, even if it was only in their unique brand of forced assistance. But there this was threat of war to deal with. Was the NCR trying to force the Society to use their super weapon? What kind of goal was that?

I faced forward as we pushed into the nearest Luna line station, moving the thoughts out of my mind and trying to focus on the task at hoof. We made our way down the stairs quietly as Patch focused on the holo-emitter. The green mare had seemed extremely interested in the device. Despite the fact that it was rather tiny, she had been sure there was some sort of opening on it, even if she had yet to find it. As we trotted along she spent her time turning it about and examining it with a critical eye.

“I don't get it,” she finally said after several long moments, breaking the silence. I raised an eyebrow, looking back at her.

“What's that?” I asked. Patch sighed and motioned for us to follow her. She ducked into a nearby abandoned building, placing the device on the ground.

“This whole thing. It reeks of wrongness,” Patch replied, pointing at the device. “Look at it. I can't find a seam to crack it open to see what's inside at all. And the screen on it just keeps flashing the same numbers over and over. Whatever this thing is, it wasn't made for earth ponies to interact with.”

“You think that only myself or Star can make it work?” Violet piped up. Patch nodded. I glanced over at Violet and nodded.

“Let's see what we can find out then,” I said. “Violet. See what you can do. Patch, you keep watch for anything bad.” Violet grimaced and nodded, flaring her horn. She lifted the device into the air, keeping it floating in front of us. The device began to beep softly as her magic worked over its tiny buttons. The numbers on the screen began to cycle.

“That's... that's not good,” Patch said softly. “I've seen those kinds of number cycles before.”

“Where?” I said softly.

“On common timed explosive devices,” Patch said, gritting her teeth. “This thing is a fucking magic bomb, just a hell of a lot smaller and if I'm right, packed a lot deadlier. Violet... be careful. I think you just activated it.” Violet's eyes widened as she looked at the device.

“I... I don't think I did. I think it's been active. I think I just... turned its speed up,” she said. “I'm going to try and turn it off. Just... everypony stay back.” I blinked.

“Be careful, Violet. Please,” I said. I blinked again. “Wait, you mean that the Twilight Society sent us out here with a bomb?” I said, glancing at Patch as we took a few steps back. The green mare grimaced, and then nodded. I almost couldn't believe it. The gears started clicking in the back of my head. “They wanted us to take out the NCR. Or at the very least, Kirby.” Violet grimaced and flared her horn again.

“It's fighting any attempt at shutting it down,” she interrupted. “I need some help, Star.” I narrowed my eyes, stepping forward and igniting my own horn, latching onto the device. Almost immediately my E.F.S. was filled with arcane matrices and runes. I looked about, seeing the symbols everywhere. They even covered the others. I glanced back over at Violet, nodding. I accessed my magic, touching a nearby rune. It reacted, and in the distance I heard the device begin to beep faster.

“Shit!” I shouted. “What did I do?!”

“You accelerated the timer,” Patch yelled back. “What did the symbol you touched look like?”

“I... I don't know... some sort of squiggly line? I can't do this!” I called out. “I am not a smart pony!”

“Star, focus!” Violet said. “I'm going to join our magic together. We need to work in tandem to shut this thing down!” Her magic found mine in the void, intertwining with it and forming one singular beam of power. It was an incredible feeling, unlike anything I had ever experienced. I wondered why we had never joined together like this before. I closed my eyes and then opened them, seeing the runes in a whole new light. They actually started to... make sense. I could feel Violet's mind behind me, a

gentle teacher pointing out facts and naming the symbols. *Holy bucking Celestia's plot...* I thought. *This thing is way more complex than I thought it was.* The device was still beeping fast. We had to move quickly.

Star? Can you hear me? Violet's voice echoed in the back of my mind. I blinked. This must have been some sort of side effect of the magic.

Yeah... I can hear you, I sent back to her. *What now?*

We find the disarm trigger, Violet replied. *We're looking for something subtle. It's not going to be a big red button saying 'Turn me off'. I also would expect some sort of kick back.* I grimaced and nodded as we began to poke around the runes and symbols floating in the air around us. A blast of magic erupted from one of the runes, striking us hard. I growled loudly against the attack. My side erupted in pain from the force of the blast. It had hurt for real!

Violet, what the hell is happening?! I thought frantically. Violet's mind brushed mine through the magic, soothing the pain and calming me.

Star... cool it. We've gotta be focused if we're gonna find the trigger, she sent back to me. I grimaced, and finally nodded. She was right. Panic and fear wouldn't help us stop this thing. I started looking about. One of the smaller symbols floated across a corner of my vision. I did a complete double take when I saw it. It was an exact replica of Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark. Of course it was her design. The Twilight Society could never have come up with a device as sophisticated as this thing was. Twilight herself had designed it, but why? Twilight didn't seem like the sort to design weaponry. Perhaps this thing was never intended to be a bomb? I reached out, touching the cutie mark. It rippled in the air, telling me it was some form of emergency shutdown rune. I grinned.

"Hold on!" I shouted. "I think I found it... Violet, it does have a big red button, we can shut it off!" We sent a surge of magical power into the rune, gritting our collective teeth as the feedback from the rune flowed through our bodies. The device stopped beeping and the screen went blank. We both breathed a sigh of relief and set the device back onto the ground. I felt Violet's magic give mine a loving stroke and withdraw as Patch stepped up to the device and picked it up.

"So... the Twilight Society sent us out to blow up the NCR," she said. "No wonder I didn't really trust them."

"Why, though?" Steeljack said. "Why attack the NCR? Seems like a stupid move on their part."

"I don't know why they would do this, but we can't let it happen," Patch replied. "If the NCR were attacked so blatantly, it really would cause a war. We wouldn't be able to stop it. It would just escalate and escalate beyond our control."

"Patch speaks the truth. The NCR would not let such an act go unanswered. They would respond," Nixis said.

"But won't the Twilight Society figure out that the bomb didn't go off?" Lilith said. I grimaced.

"The timer was set very high, and I got the feeling that there was something watching it," Violet said. "I'm willing to bet they already know we disarmed it." I glanced around nervously, wondering if were

about to be attacked. Nothing happened though. I sighed and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Alright, so what do we do now?” Steeljack said. Nixis nodded in agreement.

“We move forward with meeting the NCR,” I said. “If the Society expects us to deliver the device, we'll deliver it. Violet, do you think that you can rig that thing to just emit a little light?” Patch cocked her head.

“Why?” The green mare asked. I grinned.

“Because after this is said and done, I'm going to cast a spell to try and tell us who's responsible for this. If the Society is truly responsible then we've got a very big problem,” I said. “But I think it's only fair that Kirby sees it too. We can work it out with the NCR when we get there.”

“You can do that?” Violet said, cocking an eyebrow. I nodded.

“Twilight designed this thing originally. I'm willing to bet that I can access her memories and figure out some form of divination spell,” I offered. “All we need to do is set up the intended effect and set up the timer. We'll make whoever did this think that the bomb is active again.”

“And when we present it to Kirby, then we'll explain who's really responsible,” Patch said. “That's... rather ingenious, even for you, Star.”

“Thanks – hey!” I said, my eyes widening. The green mare was chuckling. “That's not funny. I can think sometimes too, you know.”

“You did just say earlier that you weren't a smart pony,” Violet said nonchalantly.

“Yup,” Steeljack chimed in. Lilith and Nixis merely nodded. I groaned.

“Okay, okay, you got me. Chalk it up to a lucky guess,” I said, grinning. “Now, are we doing this or not? We've got a fake bomb to deliver!” Violet smiled coyly and flared her horn, dipping into the arcane matrix of the device once more. A few moments later her horn stopped glowing.

“It's done,” she said. “You turn.” I narrowed my eyes at the device, closing them and dropping back into Twilight's memories to search for the spell I was looking for. Several moments of searching revealed a direction I could take. I opened my eyes, lighting my horn and grasping the device with my magic. The mish-mash of arcane runes appeared once more. I found Violet's patch-work spell easily enough, and wiggled a redirector around it, changing the explosive output of the spell matrix to a display. Confident that it was going to work, I poked the trigger spell with my magic. The device beeped softly once more and the correct numbers appeared on its screen. Dropping my hold on the device, I looked over at the others.

“It's done,” I said. “Patch. Press the button on the front of the device.”

“You're... You're sure?” The green mare replied. I nodded. Patch looked down at the would-be bomb and pressed the small button. A pinprick of red light emitted from the device, painting the picture of a pony against the nearby wall. I glared at the picture as it came into focus. *Of course*, I thought. The picture was of a familiar unicorn stallion.

“It can't be,” Violet said. “Why would...?”

“Dusk Blue,” I stated flatly as the light disappeared along with the picture. “No others. He's been playing both sides, trying to force a war. But why?”

“Power,” Lilith said flatly. “Like all ponies want. Just another power play in the Wasteland, with innocent ponies as the stakes.”

“If Dusk Blue really is behind this... He has access to Celestia One,” Steeljack said. “That can't be good.”

“We should get a move on,” I said, breaking into the conversation between the others. “Once we get to Camp Hope then we can sort all of this out with Kirby.” My friends nodded in agreement and we made our way out of the abandoned building and back into the city. We walked in silence for a few moments before one of us broke the stillness.

“I just... I just thought of something pretty morbid,” Lilith said. “If that bomb was intended to go off when it did... it would have caught us too.” My eyes widened.

“Dusk... he meant to kill us too.”

We holed up in an abandoned building off the beaten path, forcing ourselves to take a much needed break after a few hours. The disarming of the bomb was still very fresh in our minds and we needed to take a bit of time to collect our thoughts about it. Thankfully with the means of turning off the timer, we had time to spare before we had to meet the NCR. After checking the building for any signs of bloodwings or other Wasteland terrors, we settled in and built a camp fire to cook off of. I sat apart from the others, poring over my thoughts.

I still couldn't believe it. Dusk Blue wanted to kill not only the NCR, but us as well? Why? What was his angle? How could the pony who once stood by me in Chicacolt want to kill me?

I wasn't sure why, all I knew was he was in the way of not only finding out what was wrong with Patch, but also preventing us from getting out of this city and finding Spark. I glanced over into my saddle bag, my eyes catching onto the memory orb that Discord had left me. I really *really* wanted to watch it, but I knew that I had promised Violet that I wouldn't until we left the city. I closed up my bags as my marefriend appeared next to me. The others were chatting amongst themselves next to the campfire.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she said softly. “You okay?” I nodded.

“Just thinking about things,” I replied. Violet gave me *that* look. The look that says 'I know you're lying to me, so you'd better pony up and admit it'. I grinned sheepishly. “Was also sort of thinking about looking at that memory orb, but thought better of it.” Violet's expression softened.

“Ah, sweetheart. I know that it's hard, and I... I didn't want to say it before, because I wanted you to stop...” she said. “But you do know what an addiction is, right?” My eyes widened.

“What? Are you saying that I'm... I'm addicted to those things?” I asked. I was mortified to think that might have been the case. “But... I can't be addicted...” Violet sighed.

“I'm saying that it's a fair possibility, sweetie,” my love said. “You do tend to stick your head in them whenever you have a chance.”

“But... they...” I stammered. Violet pulled me close, smiling.

“Honey. I'm not saying it's true. I just think it's something you should think about,” she said, nuzzling my neck. “I love you. And all I want is to see you safe. So if you want to talk about it, you can. You know that, right?” I nodded, closing my eyes and burying my muzzle into her neck. Was Violet right? Was I actually addicted to memory orbs? I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe it. Violet sighed. “I'm... I'm sorry I brought it up. I didn't mean to make you feel bad.”

“No...” I said. “You're right. Violet... I'm sorry. I just... with everything going on lately... I just don't know if I can handle it. Spark... Discord... Dusk Blue.... everything is just so crazy.”

“I know it is,” Violet said. “We'll get through it. I promise.” I looked up at her and sighed.

“We could have died if we hadn't disarmed that thing,” I said. “Not to mention the kind of damage it would have done to the NCR...”

“Yeah... I'm rather concerned about that myself. Why try to kill us? Wouldn't that prove that he's bad?” Violet said, putting a hoof to her chin.

“I don't think so,” I said, pulling myself out of my love's neck. “The NCR thinks we're working for the Society, whether we like that or not. Maybe he meant for it to look like a suicide bombing.”

“But that's ludicrous,” Violet replied. “He couldn't be that sloppy, could he?”

“Unless he's actively trying to get rid of us, and wanted to get us all in one go,” I said, narrowing my gaze at the green mare. “Think about it. We split up to go out to Central Station, and he told us explicitly that Sunshine would be there, but she wasn't. He's denied all of our requests to leave and go see Dry Rot.”

“Yeah... but that's because we offered to help,” Violet said. I grimaced.

“You're right there. Why would he want to hurt us? We've been trying to help him.” I said. “It doesn't make any sense.” To be fair, it really didn't. There was no logical reasoning why Dusk Blue would want to actually kill us. Even Sunshine didn't seem to belay anything other than her gratefulness for saving her life.

“Whatever the reason, we're going to have to confront him at some point,” Violet replied. “Hopefully we'll be able to get Kirby to listen to reason.”

“Yeah... hopefully,” I said, sighing. In a few hours we would see what the future would bring. For now, I tried to find some solace in the fact that we were still alive, and capable of changing that future.

The hours fled before us as we made our way around the perimeter of the city. Based on what Patch had told me from before, the NCR camps within the city wouldn't permit anypony to continue forward to Camp Hope. We were going to have to go the long way around Manehattan, and approach from the outside. I only hoped that my presence would lend some credence to the fact that we only wanted to talk to Captain Kirby.

The NCR encampment came into view sometime around the late afternoon. The NCR had certainly beefed up their reinforcements since we last had been here. Thankfully, we weren't shot at on sight. We trotted up to the gate leading into the camp. Two soldiers stepped forward. Both earth ponies, their firearms pointed at us from their battle saddles.

"Halt. No pony enters Camp Hope unless they're with the NCR," the first guard said. I grimaced and cleared my throat.

"I wish to speak with Captain Kirby," I said. "We have important information for him."

"No deal," the other guard said. "You're with the Twilight Society. That's been made quite clear to us."

"I am not *with* anypony," I said angrily. "Unless you count the green unicorn there, and quite frankly that's none of your business. But the Twilight Society? No. I'm not with them."

"Lies. You want to gain access to the Captain so you can kill him," the first guard replied. I blinked.

"Are you... are you really that stupid?" I said. "I'm the Ministry Mare. I don't kill ponies." The guards shrugged.

"Doesn't really matter. We're not letting you in here, and that's that," the second guard finally said.

"Privates!" A harsh voice barked from behind the two guards, causing them to jump three feet into the air. The familiar brown form of Captain Kirby loomed behind them, a tight grin on his face.

"Sir!" Both guards shouted, snapping to attention. Kirby flashed his grin at me and turned his attention to the two guards.

"You two. Didn't I make it explicitly clear that if Miss Star showed up that she would be shown the utmost courtesy?" Kirby barked.

"Sir, but you also said not to let in anypony who wasn't NCR," the first guard, a tan earth mare, replied. "They're not NCR."

"I don't care what I said. You were ordered to show Radiant Star to me if she appeared. Now, she is here. And I find you berating her and telling her to leave?" Kirby said. "You're both relieved of guard duty. Go report to the mess to start your tours on Kitchen Patrol. GIT!" Both guards saluted shakily before moving towards the center of the camp, but not before giving me and my friends a pretty hateful glare. I winked in response. I know, it was childish, but it made me feel good. I turned to look at Kirby.

"Come on, you lot. Let's get you out of the hot sun," the old stallion said. He shot a glance at Patch,

who smiled in return. "We've got some catching up to do and a lot to discuss." We nodded, following the unicorn into the camp and immediately to his tent. Along the way we received many more death glares from the enlisted soldiers roaming around the camp. None of them seemed to want to challenge the Captain's word, however. The tent belonging to Kirby was just as I'd remembered it, no furnishings other than the single desk and terminal. The stallion motioned for us to sit, stopping Patch before she could.

"You're looking well," he said softly. Patch smiled and nodded.

"You too, sir," she replied. Kirby chuckled.

"Please, Patch. You're no longer part of the NCR. You don't have to call me that," he said. "Come. I've got a pillow set aside for you. Sit."

"I really don't need a pillow, Si - Kirby," Patch said, rolling her eye. Kirby scoffed.

"I insist," he said. "You were one of my best officers, Patch. It's a damn shame the NCR pushed you out like they did."

"I thought you were all for the NCR?" I said, feeling very confused. This was a high ranking officer after all!

"I am, but sometimes our internal politics goes a little too far," Kirby said. "Old habits, I suppose. Not everypony follows the example of the Lightbringer. But you're not here to listen to this old stallion ramble on about politics. So why are you here?" I glanced over at Patch. The green mare nodded reassuringly. I took a deep breath and began to speak.

"We were originally coming here to try and broker peace between the NCR and the Twilight Society... however, due to... recent events things have changed," I said, removing the rigged would-be bomb from my saddlebag. I set it on the ground in front of the stallion, who studied it intently. With a brush of my magic, the device tweedled loudly and activated. Kirby nearly jumped out of his coat when the room was suddenly bathed in red light.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Kirby shouted. "Are you attacking me?!" I shook my head calmly. The red light began to coalesce into the familiar shape of Dusk Blue. His image hovered in the center of the room.

"Dusk Blue," I said. "Of the Twilight Society. I am not sure if he truly owes them his allegiance now or not, though. He intended this device to be a bomb, meant to kill not only you, but to kill us as well." Kirby's eyes widened. I grinned widely, motioning over to Patch and Violet. "Suffice to say, it didn't take. We disarmed the bomb and set it up to show who was responsible when the timer ran to zero."

"The... The Society intended to attack us?" Kirby said, narrowing his gaze at the tiny bomb. The former bomb chirped happily, and the light in the air collapsed back into the device. Dusk Blue's image went with it.

"No. Dusk Blue acted alone in this," I tried to stress. "Well, almost alone. He has accomplices within the Society, I'm sure of it. There's no other way he could have gotten this far without the Society intervening."

"This device. It's M.A.S. design," Kirby said. "The Society wouldn't have given up such a device easily, even to one of their own. Do you have any proof that this Dusk Blue is behind all of this?" I gulped. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything. Just the arcane signature on the bomb and my gut instinct to go on. I shook my head.

"I suppose I don't, no," I said, fearing the answer that would come next.

"Then we are at an impasse, Star. This kind of bold move is an open declaration of war," Kirby replied.

"It's not," Violet pleaded. "Not by the Twilight Society, it's Dusk Blue trying to goad both sides into war. And it's a war that won't end well, for either side." The other nodded, including Patch. Kirby groaned, standing from his chair.

"You all don't understand. They tried to kill not only myself, but you as well!" The Captain shouted. "Don't you get it? They sent you here to die!"

"Then ask the Society about it," Lilith said, interrupting. "If they really don't know about it, they'll likely look into what Dusk Blue has been up to." She glanced around at our bewildered faces. "What? Since when am I the voice of reason here?"

"That could be a bad idea," I said. "If Dusk Blue catches wind that we're on to him, he'll escalate, and quickly. And he has access to Celestia One. I don't know about you, but I'd rather not be fricasseed in the my own sauce." I looked over at Kirby. He was still staring down at the device. "Kirby. We need to do something to get to Dusk Blue. But we need your help to do it." Kirby mumbled something. "What'd you say?"

"I said, I'm ordering an attack on Tenpony Tower," the older stallion replied angrily. "Clearly, you don't know one thing about what's going on other than that we were nearly killed by a fucking bomb. Who knows how many others this thing would have taken out if it had been allowed to go off?! Hundreds? Thousands? I don't even want to think about that, Star."

"You're WHAT?!" I shouted, eyes widening. "You can't. That will just force Dusk Blue's hoof even further. Think about what that will do if we are right."

"She's right, Kirby," Patch said. "If Dusk Blue reacts to this the way I think he will, he'll use Celestia One. Then it won't matter how much you fire guns at the tower, you'll all be dead."

"Don't try and guilt trip me, Patch. If the Society is stooping this low, it's a matter of time before they try something worse, like using Celestia One without provocation," Kirby replied. "They'll do it, regardless of whether we do anything or not."

"You have a point there. That's why I want you to let us take care of this," I said. "We'll confront Dusk Blue, and force him to admit to his crimes. With any luck, we should be able to solve this peacefully." Kirby shook his head.

"A peaceful solution is no longer an option here, Star. As of now, the NCR is at war," Kirby said. The old stallion's horn lit up, bringing a radio from his desk. It clicked on and Kirby began to speak into it. "Seargant. Begin mobilization of the troops. This is a direct order. We are moving to attack Tenpony

Tower. I repeat, we are moving to attack Tenpony Tower.”

“Sir?” The voice on the other end said. “Are you sure?”

“Are you questioning me, soldier?” Kirby barked. “Just do it!” The stallion on the other end yelped affirmatively and clicked off. I glared at the stallion. He merely stared back and pointed at the entrance to the tent. “If you aren't going to help me with this, Star, then leave. Because whether you like it or not, the NCR isn't going to take this sitting down. We're going to handle this our way.”

“So... what now?” Lilith said as we were being escorted out of Camp Hope. I was being glared at by every NCR soldier we passed now. Was I missing some sort of memo or something? I thought back to my dealings with Discord. Had he caused all of this? No... he couldn't have. Not from his stone prison. This had to be all Dusk Blue's fault. He was playing both sides. And I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

“I... I don't know,” I said, shuffling out into the Wasteland. I looked back at the NCR camp. The soldiers were beginning to gear up. War was coming, whether I liked it or not.

“We've got to stop this,” Patch said. “If the NCR attacks, there will be no punches pulled between them and the Twilight Society.”

“I agree with Patch,” Lilith said. “I say we get in there and bash some heads in. If we can get to Dusk Blue before the NCR smashes things all to Tartarus we can blow this whole thing wide open.” I grimaced.

“As much as I hate to say it, or agree with such a messy metaphor,” Violet said. “She's right. We need to confront Dusk Blue.” I looked away, feeling my marefriend's hoof upon my shoulder. “Star... we can do this. We can stop this from happening.” I looked down at Violet and sighed.

“You're right. We have to stop this,” I said. “We can't let this happen.” I ignited my horn, floating out Stargazer. “Let's go. We have a bad unicorn to stop.” We started moving forward as one, Tenpony Tower floating off into the distance. We took shortcuts whenever possible, trying to keep ahead of the NCR, but with troops already entrenched in the city, it was difficult. I turned on the radio as we ran to get some idea of what was going on. The loud and brash voice of DJ-PON3 filled the air.

“Good evening, Wasteland kiddies! It's time for some news!

It seems that things are heating up in the city. NCR troops are on the move, and word on the streets is that they're headed to Tenpony Tower. If you're living in the city, stay out of the way kiddies. It might not turn out so hot for you.

As for the ponies living in Tenpony, I know you're scared, but keep positive my friends. I have no doubt that this will all get resolved peacefully and safely. All you gotta do is trust in each other, and the friendships you've made. Because fighting the good fight is all about staying true to your convictions.

Stay low, stay hidden, and keep each other safe. But if the fighting does start, give em hell!

And that my little Wastelanders, is the up to date news!"

I grimaced. We had to move faster. The NCR was going to be at Tenpony's doorstep within minutes. I growled loudly, flaring my horn. It had been a while since I'd tried a massive teleportation like this, but I didn't have any choice. We needed to be there quickly.

"Star... what are you doing?!" Violet called out. Her eyes widened as she recognized my magic working into overdrive. "Oh no no no no --" I released the spell, the teleportation enveloping all of us. I felt the familiar warmth of the magic overtake me, dropping me out of this world and through to my intended destination – the Luna line. I grunted as I hit the ground on the far side of the teleport, hearing the ***thud*** of my friends behind me. I glanced up shakily, seeing Tenpony a lot closer. I grinned.

"I did it!" I shouted as the others pushed themselves off the ground. "I did it! I..." I turned around, hearing the roar of gunfire.

I was too late. The NCR were already here. And they were *pissed*. Large detachments of troops rolled a wagon into place below the line while numerous other soldiers made their way up into the former station. A massive slug was loaded onto the wagon's back and launched into the air by a team of unicorns. I grimaced, reaching out with my magic to grab onto it. I was able to deflect the slug, sending it slamming into another building harmlessly. My eyes widened when I saw the soldiers manning the wagon turn and point at us.

"Shit!" I shouted. "Bad day bad day!" I threw up my alicorn shield at the last minute, the bullets slamming into it. I shuddered beneath the force of their shots. "We're not your enemy! You have to stop this!" The soldiers shouted back, lifting their firearms and firing again.

"I don't think they want to listen to us, Star!" Violet shouted as I held my shield up. I grimaced.

"Alright. We're gonna have to get messy here," I called back. "Everypony fan out, do what you can to try and stop the fighting. Don't kill anypony, disable only. Got it?"

"Right!" My friends shouted in return as I dropped my shield. I lifted Stargazer, launching into E.S.A.T.S. and targeting the wagon behind the soldiers. I let loose a steady stream of bullets, turning the thing into a pile of wood and metal, stunning the NCR troops temporarily and forcing them to focus on their broken siege engine. I took the moment to glance up at the Luna Line. The NCR were already entrenched on the concrete line, now meeting heavy resistance from the forces of the Twilight Society. Unicorns blasted NCR troops with magic, knocking soldiers from the line to the ground below.

"Violet, you stick with me. Patch, find some place to hide and get there," I said, motioning at the green mare. Her eye widened in anger.

"Star...? I can fight, just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean --" She started to say.

"I said go!" I shouted. "I... I need you in a safe place to provide cover fire. You're the best sniper we have. We can argue about this later, because now really isn't the time." Patch hesitated, but finally nodded, scampering off amidst the chaos. I glanced over at Steeljack.

"Where do you want me?" He said. I grimaced. I was glad that he hadn't chosen to comment on

sending Patch away. I was partially trying to keep the mare safe, while at the same time playing to her obvious strengths.

“Stick with Nixis. You two work on disabling weapons. Lilith. You work on disabling any siege engines,” I said. “Violet and I are going to focus on the Twilight Society. See if we can get this madness to stop.” The hellhound and the earth pony nodded, moving to take care of their own responsibilities. Lilith spread her wings, taking to the sky.

“Bit harsh, don't you think?” Violet said. I sighed. Leave it up to my marefriend. I motioned to Violet to hop onto my back. I spread my own wings, pushing off into the air.

“I did what I had to do,” I said shortly as I flew upwards. “It was the obvious choice. I have to think of everypony's safety.”

“I... I know, and I agree, but you still could have been a little nicer,” Violet whispered. I nodded, returning my attentions to my flight up.

Thankfully we had managed to evade the attentions of the NCR as we rose above the city. They were far too busy with the Twilight Society. I surveyed the damage. The NCR wasn't making much ground towards the Tower itself. The Twilight Society had managed to erect some sort of magical barrier around the entrance, preventing any form of access. I grimaced. This wasn't what I wanted. These ponies were fighting and killing each other because each side believed that the other had attacked them. They were all being played. The Twilight Society was merely defending itself at this point, and the NCR was doing its best to dig in as deeply as they could.

I banked down towards the Luna line once more, aiming for the side of the fight where the Twilight Society was holding their ground. The unicorns there were blasting away at the NCR soldiers, using their unique brands of magic to fend off any advances towards Tenpony Tower. I landed on the line with a **thud**, Violet dropping off my back and to my side, startling a few of the Society guards fighting.

“You've got to put a stop to this madness,” I said forcefully. “The fighting is only going to get worse the longer its allowed to go on!”

“Ministry Mare. You will remove yourself from our line of fire, or we will be forced to remove you,” a voice called from behind us, interrupting the Twilight Society member that was about to open his mouth. I glanced back, seeing several NCR officers glaring at me from behind their lines. One of them had a bull horn in his hooves.

“I'm trying to stop you from fighting!” I shouted back. “Don't you ponies get it? This is wrong! You need to stop! You're all being played for fools!” The NCR officer with the bull horn shook his head and motioned our direction. The grunt troops lifted their guns and fired. I grimaced, throwing up my alicorn shield, a bullet deflecting off of it and striking a nearby Twilight Society unicorn in the head. He fell from the Luna line to the ground below and I shuddered. Too many ponies were dying. I needed to end this, and I needed to end it soon.

Unfortunately, the Twilight Society's front line defenses also saw our presence as threatening because my shield was beginning to get peppered by blasts of magical energy as well. I roared angrily as Violet leaped back onto my back. I took to the sky, using telekinesis to try and force away any attacks. A

stray bolt of energy struck my side, and I howled with pain. My entire side felt like it had just been set on fire. I felt Violet shake a little bit on my back.

“You alright back there?” I called back.

“I’m fine, let’s get somewhere safe!” My love reported. I nodded, beating my wings as hard as I could. I flew straight towards one of the nearby abandoned buildings, diving through a broken open window and coming to rest behind the cover of the cement wall. I took a deep breath while Violet tended to my side.

“You’ve got a nasty cut from that last blast,” she said, her horn glowing brightly as it healed me up. “What in the heck is going on out there? It’s like they don’t even want to listen to us. All they want to do is fight.”

“I know. It doesn’t make any...” I said, my eyes widening. “No. It can’t be. He can’t have...”

“What, Star? What is it?” Violet asked. I narrowed my gaze at her.

“Discord. Maybe he’s the reason why nopony is listening to us,” I said. “He’s trying to force this war. He started it, when I was stuck in Sunshine’s body.” I quickly recounted the details of our chess match, and what had happened that had caused Discord to win. Violet grimaced.

“You think he set this whole thing up,” she said finally. I nodded.

“You wouldn’t be wrong,” a voice came from beyond the stairwell. I glanced up, lifting Stargazer into the air on instinct.

“Who’s there?!” I called out. “Show yourself.” A pink unicorn mare appeared in the door frame. Sunshine Sky.

“Don’t shoot. I’m not here to fight you,” she said. I growled.

“You sure about that? Your friend Dusk Blue seemed to have no problem with trying to send us to our deaths,” I retorted. Sunshine narrowed her eyes, but her expression remained serious.

“If I’d wanted to kill you, Radiant Star, I’d have done so already,” she said. “Dusk Blue however... he really does want to kill you. He’s not under Discord’s mind control like the rest of them are.”

“Discord,” I said flatly. The pink mare nodded.

“He tricked us all,” she said. “But I got free. I think it happened when you and I switched bodies. It freed me from his mind control.”

“But why? Why did he do this?” Violet said. “I don’t get it.”

“I do...” I said angrily. “He wanted to delay us. He wanted to go after Spark. The fucker lied to me. He still wants Spark and Twilight’s power.”

“I don’t exactly know what’s going on here, but I feel like you should know... Dusk Blue was the one

who brokered the deal with him. Discord gets free, and Dusk Blue gets Celestia One and Tenpony Tower,” Sunshine said.

“What happened? After you left Chicacolt?” I asked. Sunshine sighed.

“Dusk Blue... he became obsessed with power after he met you. He wanted the power to change the Wasteland, and he sees Celestia One as the ultimate expression of that power,” the pink mare replied. “The only way that he was going to get access to the megaspell was to trigger a war.”

“That's where Discord came in,” Violet said. Sunshine nodded in reply.

“Dusk Blue approached Discord. He somehow figured out where he was,” I said. “But he couldn't free him. He needed me. Why did he need me?”

“Spark,” Violet said. “It must have had something to do with you, Spark, and Twilight. Luna's spell must have held a concession that would allow the Element of Magic to free him.”

“But I freed him,” I argued. “Not Spark. I'm not the Element of Magic.” I was about to say something else before Sunshine interrupted the both of us.

“This is all well and good, but we've got a real problem out there. Not only is the NCR trying to lay waste to Tenpony, but Dusk Blue is convincing the Society to let him use Celestia One,” the pink mare said. “If they give him access to it... he will be unstoppable and there will be nothing we can do about it. He'll murder everypony.”

“Sunshine is right,” Violet said. “The how of Discord is important, but we've got to put an end to this now, before more ponies end up dead.”

“We need to get into Tenpony Tower, then,” I said, turning to Sunshine. “How do we get in without Dusk Blue knowing about it?”

“We don't. He's going to know when we enter, regardless,” Sunshine said. “About the best I can do is get you in. We should go now, before things get worse. The Society and the NCR aren't going anywhere, that's for sure. Listen... the fighting's stopped for the moment.” I blinked, glancing out the window. Sure enough, the NCR and the Twilight Society had withdrawn back to their respective sections they had claimed of the Luna line. They were at least temporarily balanced. The NCR couldn't break through the Society's barriers and the Society couldn't repel the NCR. Still... the death toll was staggering. There were ponies strewn about everywhere. I grimaced as I scanned the city for our other friends, praying to Luna that they weren't among the dead. My heart leaped when I saw Steeljack and Nixis hiding beneath the line station. Lilith and Patch stood next to them.

“We've got time,” I said. “Let's get the others and end this before Dusk Blue does.”

“So... you're saying that Discord and Dusk Blue used you to start this little war?” Lilith said as we trotted into the back alleys behind Tenpony Tower. The streets were eerily silent as the NCR and the Twilight Society held their places on the Luna Line. Sunshine had promised us a way into the Tower, using the old sewer entrance. The pink unicorn mentioned the possibility of feral ghouls down there as

well.

“Yes,” I said softly, averting my gaze from my pegasus friend. I wasn't particularly happy about Discord getting one over on me. I'd fallen for his trick hook, line, and sinker.

“Damn,” Lilith replied, looking down at the ground. Violet placed a hoof on my shoulder, smiling.

“It's not your fault, Star,” she said. “None of us could have been able to predict what Discord's plan really was.”

“She's right,” Sunshine Sky said. “Discord played all of us, to get what he wanted.” She motioned at the cellar door in the back part of the alley. “This is where we enter.” I grimaced, reaching out with my magic before she could and ripping the door open.

“I made a mistake,” I said calmly, standing at the pieces of door gloating in my magic. “Made too many mistakes. This is the last. Discord is going to rue the day he messed with the ponies of the Wasteland.” I started down into the cellar stairwell, the others following closely behind me. They didn't say anything else, and they didn't need to. I wasn't going to accept any consolation. The only thing for me to do was to move forward and finish this. Get to Spark. Get to Discord. Figure out the rest after that.

The stairwell turned into a tunnel that was dank and disgusting. I ignited my horn, filling the tunnel with a bright light. I kept moving forward, with Sunshine Sky calling out the directions. We made a turn to the left at the first fork, coming out into what appeared to be a filthy cavernous structure.

“Where to from here?” I said.

“Down deeper into the cavern there's a sewer entrance into Tenpony's basement,” Sunshine said. “I'm sure that we'll run into some resistance there. If not ghouls, then there will be Society. Dusk has already gotta know we're coming.”

“Why hasn't he used Celestia One yet if he knew that?” Violet asked, her voice filled with suspicion. I nodded.

“I agree with Violet. Why would he let us get even this far?” I said. Sunshine shook her head.

“I don't know, but I don't like it. It's too easy,” she replied as we continued deeper into the cavern. We turned another corner, hearing the telltale sounds of feral ghouls in the tunnels up ahead.

“Sounds like it's about to get a little more difficult,” I said, floating Stargazer out. Two ghouls rounded the corner ahead of us, howling with wild abandon. I took aim, reducing their heads to piles of rotting flesh on the floor before anypony else could even get a shot off. I was through playing games. All this was just in my way. I started past the dead ghouls before the others, intent on moving forward. A hoof grabbed my leg, forcing me down to the ground. One of the ghouls I'd thought I'd killed had latched itself to me. I struggled, bringing Stargazer around to bash it upside its head, which was strangely regrowing.

Then I realized just how stupid I really am when I heard the faint clicking coming from my PipBuck. Ghouls regenerate in the presence of radiation! The other ghoul was up too, leaving its fellow to deal

with me while it went for my friends. A flash of green vines appeared out of nowhere, yanking the two ghouls into the air and holding them against the cavern ceiling. Sunshine Sky stepped up, lending me a hoof.

“Careful,” she said. “The radiation is minor down here, but still enough to cause regeneration.” I grunted, my eyes falling past her on Patch. The green mare was glancing sidelong at Violet's clicking PipBuck.

“Patch,” I said calmly. “If you want to go, you can. No pony here will blame you. We all want you to be safe.” Patch glared at me. I felt the heat all the way across the room.

“I'm fine. Sooner we get up into the Tower, the sooner we won't have to worry about it,” she said with an edge to her voice. I grimaced. The way she had been looking at Violet's PipBuck worried me. Without knowing exactly what was going on with her pregnancy, I was genuinely scared for my smaller friend. Before I could say anything to rebuke her, Violet spoke.

“She has a point there,” she said. “We should keep moving.” My love looked up at the two ghouls plastered to the ceiling. They were still thrashing about. “What about those two?”

“Self-sustaining spell,” Sunshine said. “My specialty. They'll be up there until I say otherwise.”

“Why not just kill them and be done with it?” Lilith ask. The black pegasus bristled her bladed wings. I could tell she was ready to get out of here as well.

“Because the radiation would just regenerate them,” Sunshine replied. “We're better off just getting through here and closing off the door into the Tower.” More hisses and growls echoed from down the hall. “And by the sounds of it, we're going to be plenty busy just getting there.” Sure enough, three more ghouls appeared out of nowhere. Violet stepped forward, throwing out blasts of silver fire into the air with Thunder Flash. A stream struck one of the ghouls, turning it into a gelatinous pile of silver goop.

“Regenerate that!” She shouted, taking aim and firing at the other two, but missing. One of them got past her defenses, only to receive a face full of Stargazer's barrel. It staggered backwards, giving Violet the opportunity to lash the undead beast with more silver flame. A flash of green appeared to our side as another vine broke out of the ground, latching itself onto the third remaining ghoul. It snarled and snapped as the vine pressed it against the wall, holding it there. Violet grimaced as she brought Thunder Flash around point blank at its head. A quick press of the trigger and its head was gone.

Sunshine Sky motioned for us to follow her and we continued forward, taking care of ghouls in groups of threes and fours along the way. I was slightly concerned that the ghouls hadn't tried to attack us en masse. They had to have known we were here, since we were literally making enough noise to wake the dead. We arrived in the final tunnel, which appeared to be some form of old train station tunnel. At the far end of it was a crude but strong door, framed in steel and barred with rebar.

“That's our way in,” Sunshine panted. Even with her unique talents, she was still just a normal unicorn, and the overuse of her sustained spells was getting to her. I recognized magic burnout from my all-too-frequent brushes with it.

“Sunshine, are you alright?” I said, placing a hoof on her shoulder.

"I'll be alright. Let's hurry, we don't have time to talk," she said, moving forward. The pink mare put a hoof up to her chest, falling to the ground. She gasped for air, panting hard as Violet and I stooped down next to her.

"Shit," Violet said, flaring her horn. Her magic scanned the other mare, lingering on her heart and the base of her horn. "She's really been stressing her magic. We need to get her somewhere safe she can rest."

"Sunshine, can you hear me?" I said. The mare didn't respond, simply staring off into space. I shook her a bit which managed to get her attention. "Sunshine. We need to move. I'm going to carry you, alright?" Sunshine nodded blankly as I helped her onto my back, laid across my withers. The pink unicorn groaned, clasping her forelegs around my neck. I grimaced, I was starting to feel like a pack mule today.

"We've got a problem," Nixis said. The hellhound pointed at the tunnel behind us. The ghouls that had been restrained by Sunshine's spells were now free, and they were pretty unhappy with us. They filled into the tunnel, growling and snapping. There were even more of them than before, dozens or hundreds of the monstrosities driven out of the sewers and in our direction by their brethren. "I think perhaps, we should flee to see another day, as they say?"

"I don't know what he said, but I agree with the fleeing part!" Lilith shouted, turning tail and running past us towards the steel door. I followed behind, flaring my horn and latching onto the obstacle. Sunshine Sky shifted on my back slightly, forcing me to lend a little bit of my magic to keeping her still. The door buckled under the pressure of my magic, forcing open with a ***slam***. Everypony squeezed hurriedly into the tiny stairwell as I turned to face the growing horde of undead. I roared with righteous fury, my horn burning brightly in the dark sewer. No more death. No more. I was not going to let my friends die here!

"NO MORE!!!" I shouted, releasing the energy I'd built up in a wave of magic that slammed into the ghouls, knocking all of them to the ground in a heaping pile of necrotic flesh. I huffed and panted, turning to the door. The others were huddling just inside. I stepped in and brought my magic up once more, refashioning the barrier that had long held the ghouls at bay. Once I was reasonably sure it was stable, my horn darkened. Seconds later a slam of hooves against the door informed us that the monsters were at least temporarily contained.

"We're definitely not going back out that way," Patch said, taking a breath and grabbing a few packets of RadAway out of Steeljack's bags. She passed them out to the others before taking a huge gulp herself.

"Are you all alright?" I asked softly. They all nodded, and I turned my attention to Sunshine Sky. "Sunshine?"

"Wha...?" The pink mare said, glancing up at me. I smiled softly and lifted her from my back to the ground. Sunshine blinked a few times. "What happened?"

"Magic burnout," Violet said. "You need to rest."

"But... I've never..." Sunshine said shakily before sighing and nodding. "You've got to leave me here

then.”

“Not alone,” I said. “Nixis, Patch. You stay with Sunshine and stay out of sight. The rest of us will go on ahead to face Dusk Blue.” The hellhound nodded silently, while the green earth mare cocked her head at me.

“I thought you'd want me to stay somewhere safe? What if that door doesn't hold?” She replied. I gave her a soft grin.

“Then I know you'll be able to give them hell, Patch,” I said. I sighed. “I'm... I'm sorry about before... I...” Patch lifted a hoof.

“Say no more. We're cool,” she said. “I did promise to keep you in the loop, after all. And I wasn't exactly doing that. Now get going. We'll keep Sunshine safe, and catch up with she's feeling better.” I nodded, standing to look at the others.

“Let's go,” I said. “We've got an insane unicorn who wants to destroy the Wasteland to stop.”

“So just a typical afternoon?” Violet replied, grinning widely.

“Exactly.”

We raced up into the main lobby of Tenpony Tower, searching for any sign of where Dusk Blue's whereabouts. Patch and Nixis had managed to get Sunshine into a locked side room off of the basement level to rest while they watched the door we had barricaded. I was planning on strengthening that door, but that would have to wait on Dusk

I was certain that if Dusk was trying to get into Celestia One, that's where he would be. I grimaced. We hadn't run into any opposition so far, and a quick glance out the window showed that the fighting had started up once more. How many more ponies were going to die before all of this was stopped? I had to do something.

The main lobby was barren. Where before there had been the posh elite of Wasteland society (which wasn't saying a whole lot either way), there was nothing. It was strange. Where were the guards even? *Probably outside fighting. Fighting and dying*, I thought morbidly.

“Wow,” Violet said. “This place... never seen it like this before.”

“Yeah,” Steeljack said. “Where is everypony?”

“Don't know, but we need to find Dusk Blue,” I said firmly. “Everypony keep an eye out. My guess is that he's --”

“I'm where?” A voice said from all around us, interrupting me. I looked up, seeing the mad colt himself standing upon an open balcony. My friends fanned out on each side of me, glaring at the blue unicorn. “Oh, look. It's little Radiant Star. I guess if you're here, that means you've figured it all out, right?”

"Dusk Blue," I said, snorting. "I know that you're behind this. This war, Discord, everything." The stallion sighed loudly.

"It's a shame, really. I had so hoped to reign you in, Star. Properly controlled, your power would have been a force for greatness," he said. "But once I found out that the Element was no longer within you, you were meddlesome. You would have tried to ruin my plans."

"So you tried to get rid of us," Violet stated. Dusk grinned.

"Yes. We all saw how that worked out. Even better than I'd hoped. Even the mere threat of a bomb was enough to push the NCR into attacking," he said, stroking his chin with his forehoof. "Now then. What to do about you... Killing you at this point would be quite easy. It will certainly cement my place as the ruler of this Tower."

"I don't know what Discord promised you," I growled. "But I won't let you continue this senseless slaughter." To my utter surprise, Dusk Blue merely laughed.

"Discord? He didn't promise me anything!" He chortled, his eyes widening. "All he wanted was to be free! It was thanks to him that I knew about where to find you in Chicacolt. I almost had my chance to absorb your power, but then you were surrounded by your friends."

"Discord would have never let you take it," I retorted. "He wants Spark's power too." I unlatched Stargazer from its harness, floating it out. "Now... are we going to talk, or are we going to end this?"

"Hah! How quaint. You brought a gun to a magic duel," Dusk Blue replied. "I'm afraid you're quite wrong. Discord's goal was simple. Freedom, and nothing else. You're grasping at straws, Radiant Star. I'm the one who wanted Spark's power from the get go. It's the entire reason I cast the spell that made you what you are today!" My eyes shot open wide, and I nearly dropped Stargazer.

"You... you what?" I gasped, staring hard at the blue stallion. Dusk grinned widely.

"Yes... I was the one who cast Twilight's resurrection spell. I intended to bring back the soul of the Element of Magic," he said. "I wanted its power. If I could have communed with it, I could have been glorious! I would have ruled the Wasteland with an iron hoof! But something happened that I didn't expect. The Element of Magic wasn't the only thing that came back."

"Twilight's emotions, her memories... the link I have with her," I said. Dusk Blue closed his eyes and nodded. "It stopped you from pulling Spark to you. She came to me instead."

"Yes... I am quite annoyed at that. Twilight's spell was relatively simple, but it required a... host body, a subject if you will," Dusk Blue said. "That's why I kept Sunshine so close to me. She was to host Spark." My expression turned to pure rage. I snarled under my breath.

"You... you're a monster. You were ready to sacrifice your own friend for your sick goals!" I roared. I kept running it through my head as I readied Stargazer. If Sunshine was originally supposed to die to house Spark's spirit, why didn't I need to die? What made me so fucking special? I wasn't special. I was just... me. I didn't have time to consider anything more as I lifted my gun into the air. Dusk grinned, his horn glowing. His magic lashed out, grabbing ahold of Stargazer and ripping it out of my

own telekinesis, tossing it to the side where it clattered to the ground.

"I told you before. This is a magic duel," Dusk Blue announced. He glanced down at my other friends, who were getting ready to attack as well. A flick of his horn and magical barriers lifted over them, preventing them from moving. "And to reinforce that concept, we won't be having any help from your friends this time." The others were frozen inside the shield bubbles. I glared up at Dusk.

"Let my friends go!" I roared, flaring my horn and throwing a bolt of magic up at the unicorn. Dusk lifted a hoof, deflecting it without a thought. He leaped off of the balcony to the ground floor, grinning.

"I'm afraid," he said, an eerie hunger in his eyes as they flashed a sinister red. "That you will find that I am a lot stronger than you think I am." His horn ignited, conjuring a baseball bat with spikes coming out of the head of it out of pure magic. The deadly object soared through the air towards my head.

"Shit!" I shouted, jumping back and emitting a blast of telekinesis to force the weapon back. It kept moving forward. I grimaced, reaching into the back of my mind and bringing forth a blade of pure magic. It met the spiked club before it could bash my face in, deflecting the weapon. Dusk cackled madly, bringing the club around in a vicious slash. I flared my horn once more, lifting the purple magic sword and blocking. Dusk retracted the weapon, grinning as he made it disappear.

"You're a fair fighter, Radiant Star. But you cannot match my talent in magic," he said, his horn lighting up. His cloak shifted slightly, revealing a jingling amulet underneath. It was shaped like a unicorn's head, flanked by two silver wings. The eyes on the unicorn's head were tiny red jewels. In the center of the amulet a larger red jewel sat. "You see... this is something that Twilight Sparkle herself left in Canterlot originally. It took the Twilight Society many years to retrieve it from that festering hole."

"So you got some shiny necklace," I said, lifting the magic sword once more. "Big fucking deal."

"This is no mere necklace," Dusk said. "This is the Alicorn Amulet. It is very powerful magic, left by the great Twilight Sparkle!" I snorted, rolling my eyes.

"Again. Don't care. All I care about is stopping you," I snarled. "So are we going to fight, or what? Because I'm getting really fucking pissed off right about now. And no matter what kind of magic you've got, I'm going to beat your face in with it." Dusk glared at my interruption of his monologue. I cocked an eyebrow. "What? You really think I was going to let you continue? That'd be way too cliché." I grinned, surging forward with my weapon at the ready. The glowing purple blade soared through the air at the stallion. Dusk's horn flared, creating a magical wall in front of him as he jumped to the side. I grimaced, slamming through the transparent wall and hitting the ground, causing my sword to dissipate. Pain surged through my body, like I'd hit a pane of glass.

Dusk sneered, summoning his own blade of magic and bringing it straight down. My horn shimmered and my sword reappeared, cross-blocking the shining blue blade. I pushed hard with my magic, knocking the other sword back as I scooted to my hooves. I panted, my body still feeling like I was on fire. What was up with his magic? It was brutally strong, and he seemed to know exactly what I was going to do next. I caught another glimpse of his amulet. That had to be the source of his power. Regardless of what I said to him, I had been listening when he went on about it. Anything that was tied to Twilight Sparkle could have very well been extremely dangerous.

A flash of memory caught me off guard. Another mare, one that I hated hearing in my head, shouting about the Alicorn Amulet. The Goddess herself. *Trixie... she once wore it...* I thought. Twilight had managed to get her to remove it. But... how? The memory didn't cover that part! I realized quickly that I'd stood too still, letting myself think when a deep blue magical blade came slicing through the air right toward my neck. I ignited my horn, quickly forming a teleport spell. I came out of it behind Dusk, bringing my sword around and going in for the kill.

Or so I thought. The magical blade came in, slashing downwards onto the unicorn's back, halting before it could go any further. A hint of blue magic surrounded it. I growled as Dusk turned his head.

"Nice try," he said, his eyes flashing a sinister red. "But you can't catch me off guard that easily." He pushed back with a wave of his hoof, sending me flying through the air and into one of the lobby's support columns. I grunted under the force of the impact, and even heard a telling **crack** that indicated *something* had broken. I wasn't sure what, and I didn't quite have time to care, thanks to a bolt of energy flying through the air right at me. I rolled to the side, howling as my right wing starting started spiking pain directly into my head. *Well, that explains what I just broke*, I thought as I righted myself. Sure enough, my wing hung rather limply from my side. I wouldn't be able to fly at all now. *Smart move. Disabling my wing like that*, I thought. *I can't even get a blow in and he's already wounded me. There's gotta be another way to beat him!*

I looked over at my friends, still encased in their magical barriers. I couldn't count on them to get me out of this. I had to finish this myself. I briefly considered trying to contact Patch or Nixis somehow, but I knew it wouldn't matter. Dusk would just contain them like he had the others. I was screwed. I had bitten off way more than I could chew, without really knowing what was going on. I had effectively put myself into Dusk's trap.

Dusk fired another blast of energy at me and I ducked again, rolling to the side and feeling another blast of pain for my troubles. I had to do something to change the rules. My eyes rested on Stargazer, laying across the lobby on its side. If I could reach it... I could put up a better fight. I pushed off, tucking under and landing behind one of the support columns. I huffed, using my magic to try and float out some bandages to hold my wing in place. It could only manage a shitty job, but it would at least keep it from flopping around on me. Dusk continued to wildly fire, hitting the support beam I was leaning against. It shuddered against me.

"Hiding? I thought you were better than that, Radiant Star. The brave Ministry Mare. She doesn't hide from anything!" The unicorn stallion roared. He hadn't seen where I'd jumped to? That was... odd. Perhaps there was some hope for me yet. I felt a surge of magic in the air as Dusk ranted in the center of the lobby. Even if he hadn't seen where I'd gone, I was sure that he'd know soon. I needed to come up with something, anything.

I sighed. There was nothing. No memories, no spell that Twilight had left me. No simple truths. I had fucked up, and I was going to pay for it. I hung my head.

"Star..." a voice from around me said. It was feminine, familiar. "Star..." I looked up. Nothing. The voice continued, reaching shouting levels in my mind. "STAR!!!" I blinked, realizing that it was coming from elsewhere. A shimmer of pink flashed into existence in the lobby, distracting the evil unicorn who was searching for me. Her voice echoed into my mind. "Star... you have to get up. You have to fight back. You can do this! I can only distract him for a short period of time, you have to finish this!" I grunted, pushing myself to my hooves.

Sunshine Sky was here, and she was here to save me from myself. The pink mare appeared across the lobby from Dusk Blue, grinning weakly. A trickle of blood was coming from one of her nostrils and her mane was ragged. There was a nasty flicker to the magic pouring from her horn, and it was clear to me that she was pushing her magic farther than she ever had before.

"Hey Dusk," she said. "Miss me?" She gritted her teeth, a fresh trickle of blood seeping from her nose as a layer of overglow erupted from her horn. Vines erupted from the lobby floor and wrapped themselves around the stallion. Dusk grinned as his magic sliced into the vines, freeing him.

"Sunshine..." he said. "I find it very interesting that you would show your face here. It was you who assisted the Ministry Mare in getting here, I take it?"

"I'm not under your control any longer, Dusk," Sunshine growled. "I'm my own mare. And this mare is going to stop you once and for all."

"Clever," Dusk crooned. "But how do you plan on doing that? I have the Alicorn Amulet. My magic is far stronger than yours." Sunshine giggled.

"I don't plan on doing it by myself, silly," she said, grinning. "It's nice to have friends, after all." Dusk turned his head just in time to see me charging right at him. I'd had plenty of time to close in, bringing my sword across to smack the stallion in the face with the flat of the blade. Dusk went flying back, slamming into the ground. I kept moving forward, jumping and landing onto the stallion hard. Dusk snarled and snapped underneath me, his horn flaring up for another wave of telekinesis.

"Oh no you don't," I said, reaching out with a forehoof and smacking the unicorn's horn hard. It flickered out, cancelling whatever spell the evil stallion had planned on casting. I lifted the amulet from Dusk's chest and yanked, putting my all into the effort.

It wouldn't budge. The chain was taut, and wouldn't break no matter how hard I pulled on it. My eyes widened.

"Sunshine.... we've got a problem here!" I shouted, as Dusk grinned and blasted me back with a bolt of energy. I landed on the ground next to the pink mare, groaning in pain.

"What happened?" She asked. "Are you alright?"

"The amulet... It won't come off," I said shakily, pushing myself to my hooves. "I tried my hardest, and it just would not come off."

"Of course it wouldn't!" Dusk shouted as he strode forward. "Once the Alicorn Amulet is attached, it can never be removed except by its wearer!" I scowled. How had I missed that in the memory with Trixie? Oh right... It didn't bucking play that part!

"I don't suppose you'll come along nicely and take it off then, right?" I asked jokingly, knowing full well what the answer would be. Dusk chortled, his horn flaring.

"Very funny," he said. "Now then... I can destroy both of you with its power!" A bolt of energy shot through the air, splitting me and Sunshine up and knocking both of us to the ground. I grunted in pain,

craning my neck and looking over at the pink mare. She was back on her hooves already, her horn glowing. Several vines appeared out of nowhere, attempting to restrain the evil unicorn. Dusk snarled, reforming his magical blade and slashing the vines apart. Sunshine's magic reached out, grabbing the broken halves and swirling them around to latch onto Dusk's forelegs. She yanked down hard, sending the stallion into an undignified faceplant.

"Alright, Sunshine!" I shouted, pushing myself up and trotting over to her position. Dusk was already ripping the vines away, his horn now spewing an angry red. The stallion stood, roaring loudly, forcing into existence two wicked red blades of pure magic. He charged forward at Sunshine and I. I snarled, summoning forth my own blade.

"I've got your back, Star," Sunshine said. "But if we can't get the amulet off..." I nodded.

"I know. We're going to have to put him down," I said, lifting my blade to meet Dusk's charge. I'd summoned the magical sword several times already. How many more before I could no longer do it? And what about Sunshine? She'd just been desperately close to magical burnout... how in the world did she recover that fast? She certainly didn't look completely recovered. Her nose bleed had worsened, her muzzle covered in sticky red and drops splashing to the ground below. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her horn was sparking. She was running herself hard.

I didn't have time to ponder anything else before Dusk swung in with both blades. A flash of green appeared out of the corner of my eye and another vine shot out of nowhere, grabbing a hold of one of the swords and pulling it away. I struck, deflecting the other blade up as I rushed forward, leveling a hoof strike right at Dusk's face. The stallion reeled back, lifting his forehooves to try and block. Thankfully I was fast enough that my hoof drove right into his face, sending him straight into one of the lobby's support columns with a massive ***crash***. The two swords he had conjured immediately dissipated.

Dusk Blue shuddered, a line of blood emanating from his mouth. He coughed, sputtering out a puddle of his life force onto the lobby floor as he stood. The amulet swaying from his neck gleamed. How much punishment could he put up with? One of his eyes were swollen closed, and his mane was hanging around his neck raggedly. He stepped forward, grinning bloodily.

"You cannot defeat me, Radiant Star..." he said from across the lobby. "The Alicorn Amulet bolsters my strength! With its power, I am nothing short of a god!"

"What you are," I said, panting hard. "Is an insane unicorn with an amulet fixation. I mean, seriously... see a counselor, get a little help already." I snorted, glancing over at Sunshine. "You alright?"

"I'm good," she replied quietly, nodding. I raised an eyebrow. "Seriously, I'll be alright. I don't have time to let something like limitations stop me from helping my friend." I grimaced. I was beginning to reach my limits, and Sunshine looked like she was fifty leagues past hers. And with no way of getting the amulet off of Dusk, we couldn't subdue him. I closed my eyes for a brief moment. There had to be a way to stop him short of killing, but how? How were we supposed to stop this? What about the Society and the NCR? What if stopping Dusk Blue didn't stop the war raging on outside of this very Tower? I couldn't worry about that just yet. I had to worry about Dusk, first and foremost.

I racked my brain for anything and everything, but it was just... empty. I breathed out deeply. The only

other thing I could even think of was the zebra training I'd received from Envy. But it couldn't possibly work here... what good was a skill that required me to tap into natural energy that I was unable to even use! I'd been trying to keep up with my meditation, but ever since Grey's death... I'd fallen out of practice. Not that it mattered. Still, could I even try? My magic wasn't strong enough to defeat Dusk. We couldn't even get the amulet off of him!

"Sunshine, can you distract him? I... I want to try something," I said softly. I had to try something. Sunshine nodded, flaring her horn and summoning a wall of vines that wrapped around the evil unicorn trying to kill us. Dusk snarled, summoning his swords again with a flash and beginning to slice through the vegetation. I closed my eyes again, trying to feel the natural magic, trying to empty my mind. There was nothing. My mind couldn't even clear itself out properly. I scrunched my face, trying my hardest... but still nothing. Why was I such a failure at this?! I couldn't even meditate properly, let alone understand how Envy did what she did.

Mix your magic... use the six...

What was that? I thought as the words flittered into my mind. Scenes and images began to play forth in my mind. A zebra. The Alicorn Amulet. Twilight Sparkle. Trixie. The magic... The magic of friendship? Mix my magic? Use the six? What the fuck did that mean? There was another amulet. A trick that Twilight had played on Trixie. She had convinced the other unicorn to remove the amulet somehow, by making her... making Trixie want her superior power. Could something similar work here too? I opened my eyes once more. Sunshine was lying on the ground in front of me, panting hard but still alive. Dusk stood over us, his eyes flashing a horrible red. How long had I been trying to meditate? I didn't know, but the way forward was clear.

"Hold it," I said, calmly. Dusk stopped moving forward, taken aback by the tone of my voice. "I'm... I'm done. I surrender."

"Excellent," Dusk replied, dissipating his magical swords. "You are wise to recognize when you are beaten." I grimaced, looking over at my friends. They were still encased in their magical barriers.

"I will relinquish my power to you, oh great and powerful Dusk," I said. "But I warn you... it is a power you cannot wield, for it is greater than any power your amulet grants you." Dusk cocked his head at me curiously.

"Explain," he said. I looked down at Sunshine. She was staring back at me incredulously. I smiled softly at her before glaring up at Dusk.

"My power relies on the magic of Harmony. Spark left it inside me when she left my body," I said. I was lying, of course. Spark had left me nothing, but I had to do my best to convince Dusk to remove the amulet himself. "The Alicorn Amulet will not interact with it. At best you will do yourself harm." Dusk sneered at me.

"You're lying," he said. *Shit, well there went that idea*, I thought. "You are just an alicorn. You have no real power other than your normal magic. I have the greatest power in the world, and I will use that power to command Celestia One, and then the Wasteland will see me as its ruler!" I grimaced.

"I'm not lying," I protested. "You told me you wanted Twilight's power. The power of the Element of Magic. I can give it to you. You wouldn't even need Celestia One, then. You'd be able to command

Magic itself. I can prove it.” Dusk put a hoof up to his chin, pondering for a moment. I could see the gears turning in his head. He still wanted what Spark was. He growled, cursing under his breath before turning back to me.

“Fine,” he said. “Prove that your magic is greater than the Alicorn Amulet.” I nodded, reaching into my saddlebags. I glimpsed the broken tiara inside, along with the explosive device that Dusk had planted on us. Could I... could I use it to deceive him? It was worth a shot. I surreptitiously attached the device to the inside of the tiara, and lifted it out, placing it onto my forehead.

“Witness the power of the Elements of Harmony, Dusk Blue,” I said, trying to keep my voice as even as possible. I closed my eyes and lit up my horn, dropping into the magic of the device and its glowing runes. They surrounded me at all angles, flaring every so often. My mind ran back to when I’d worked with Violet on disabling the device. I had to make this look convincing. I dropped over to the Twilight rune, the failsafe one. I grinned and had an idea. All the old stories and memories I had of the Elements being used were all accompanied by one singular thing, the presence of good friends. I pushed a rune in each direction, landing one on Sunshine, Violet, and Steeljack. I hoped that Dusk wasn’t too invested in the mythos behind the Elements to realize there were only four of us. It would have to do. I pressed the Twilight rune into the base of the crown and linked it to the others, activating it.

Power radiated from my horn, causing the gem in the center of the tiara to glow brightly. A blast of energy shot forth from my horn and landed where the other runes had gone, causing the forms of my friends to glow as well. I opened my eyes, covering them with a milky white aura to complete the deception.

“The Alicorn Amulet pales in comparison to the true power of the Element of Magic,” I said calmly, using some of my magic to add a bit of buzz to my voice. “I will use this power to defeat you, Dusk Blue. Prepare thyself for oblivion!” I closed my eyes once more, pouring more magic into the illusion. In the course of doing so, I felt... something. Something inside me. A pair of velvet eyes staring back at me from the void. What...? What was going on? I wasn’t actually casting anything, was I? The eyes were accompanied by a smile in the void, disappearing as quickly as they had appeared.

The room around us lit up in a myriad of colors as I opened my eyes again, focusing on the unicorn stallion. He was enthralled at the display of magic, his expression turning into a cruel grin. He reached out with his own magic, grabbing the tiara from my head. I immediately let the spell drop, deactivating the rune so as to appear as if he had stopped me. The colors dissipated and I fell backwards. My feigned moan of defeat was lent authenticity by the stabbing pain from my injured wing. Dusk Blue brought the tiara over to his head, placing it onto his brow with a howl of triumph.

“Excellent! The Element of Magic, and it’s all mine! Now that I have this power, all the Wasteland will know my name!” His horn glowed a fierce red, the chain that held the Alicorn Amulet slowly evaporating. The amulet ripped away from the stallion's neck, the magic draining from his horn and eyes quickly. Dusk's eyes returned to their normal shade of blue and he stepped back as I shouted out to Sunshine.

“Now!” Sunshine nodded and flared her horn, summoning several vines that latched onto Dusk's body and tossed him across the lobby far away from the Alicorn Amulet. I reached out with my magic and grabbed the amulet. The stallion yelped in surprise as he landed at the base of one of the support columns. He groaned as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. Sunshine snarled and charged at

him, leaping into the air and landing on the prone unicorn. She roared and began to slam her hooves into him his chest. Dusk coughed and sputtered blood as Sunshine pounded. A blast of energy from his horn knocked the mare away and to the ground. The blue unicorn stood, growling.

“You... you bitch,” he said, spitting out a few teeth as he spoke. “You tricked me.” I grinned slyly.

“I knew that I had to offer you something you wanted. Something that you needed,” I said. “It was the only way to get you to take off the Alicorn Amulet.”

“Give it back,” Dusk snarled. “Give back my amulet!” His horn flared, firing a blast of energy at me. I leaped out of the way, depositing the amulet into my saddlebag. There would be time to deal with it later. I returned fire with a telekinetic blast of my own, striking the stallion in the chest. He grunted under the blow.

“Never,” I said. “You're done, Dusk Blue. Your control over the NCR and the Society? Gone. Give up now, and come along quietly.” Dusk sneered at me, his horn flaring to life once more. Sunshine snarled, rolling from her position to knock the stallion back.

“It's over,” she said. “Give it up, Dusk. The Society will be bearing down on us any moment once they realize that you've been controlling them.”

“Then I will destroy them all!” Dusk roared, pushing back with a wave of telekinesis that knocked both Sunshine and I to the ground. The stallion's horn lit up and he disappeared in the brilliant flash of a teleport. My eyes widened.

“Where did he go?” I said. Several flashes of blue light erupted in the lobby behind us. I heard groaning coming from my friends. I turned, seeing Violet standing there.

“What happened?” She asked as I pushed myself to all four hooves. I grunted, looking back at my injured wing. The haphazard bandages had begun to tear, letting the wing flop about painfully. Violet's eyes found me and she gasped softly, trotting forward. “Star! You're... you're hurt!” I grimaced.

“I'm fine, Violet,” I replied. “That's not important right now. Sunshine, where did Dusk go?”

“My guess is to the Celestia One megaspell chamber. He still intends to activate it, even without the amulet,” the pink mare said. I heard clattering up the stairwell, glancing over to see Patch and Nixis. Violet's horn flared, tending to my broken wing as best as she could. A fresh set of bandages was placed over it as the hellhound and earth mare made their way across the lobby.

“Star! The fighting's stopped,” Nixis called out. “The Society and the NCR... they're calling it off.” I grimaced again. Even if the fighting had stopped, there was still a danger. Shouts came from the lobby entrance as several unicorns and earth ponies entered. At the head of the group was Captain Kirby, flanked by a familiar red maned unicorn.

“Life Bloom,” I said. The unicorn nodded.

“Radiant Star,” the unicorn said. “You are responsible I take it for ending this unfortunate conflict?”

“It's not over yet,” I said calmly. “Dusk Blue... he had this. I believe it's how he was controlling you.”

I lifted out the Alicorn Amulet. Life Bloom grimaced.

"I... I see," he said, his horn glowing and taking a hold of the silver amulet. "I shall see to it that this... thing is put away where it cannot do anypony more harm." I grimaced, grabbing the amulet back out of his magic.

"I don't think so," I snarled. "This thing caused a lot of trouble for us. It's too dangerous to be left to be used by anypony else." Life Bloom stared at me.

"Star, I must insist. The amulet is a relic of the Ministry Mare's days, it must be preserved," he said. I shook my head fiercely.

"Negative. I will not let this thing exist any longer," I said, tossing the amulet to the ground before me. "It needs to be destroyed now, before it can do greater harm." Life Bloom started to protest as I brought my hoof down on the amulet, intending to crush it. Nothing. Nothing happened whatsoever. I growled loudly, ripping Stargazer to me on a surge of magic. The Alicorn Amulet went into the air from the balcony and I dropped into E.S.A.T.S.

Every shot I could queue went to the amulet. The spell released and Stargazer erupted a gout of fire, sheeting its starmetal rounds into the amulet. Sparks erupted from the repeated impacts, and when Stargazer fell silent, the amulet cracked. It emitted a dull red glow, spitting sparks of its own when it hit the floor.

"Umm, I think we'd better get down," Lilith said matter of fact. I reached out and cast my alicorn shield over us as the amulet flared a bright shock of red light and exploded violently in the center of the lobby. A rush of wind and flame compressed upon itself and then disappeared, leaving nothing behind. The amulet was gone. I glared back at Life Bloom.

"That is how you take care of things," I said. Life Bloom sighed.

"It is a shame that such a priceless artifact had to be destroyed, but I could not have stopped you from doing so, Radiant Star," he said. "That only leaves one question... where is Dusk Blue?"

"That's the problem," I said. "Dusk Blue teleported away. He was planning on using Celestia One. We need to stop him."

"He's what?" Kirby interrupted. "That's not good."

"Indeed, it is not," Life Bloom said. "Radiant Star. I shall leave you to deal with the traitor. We have much to do to reinforce Tenpony Tower, and I have much to discuss with Captain Kirby here." I glanced over at Sunshine, currently being bandaged by a Tenpony medic. She nodded.

"Life Bloom," she said. "I'm going to accompany Star." Life Bloom nodded his affirmation.

"Alright, let's go. We can't afford to waste any more time here," I said. "Sunshine, show me to where the megaspell chambers are." The mare motioned for us to follow her. We made our way to the stairs and headed up. I grew increasingly worried as we trotted along, Violet's warmth a pleasure against my side. What would happen if Dusk Blue got in to Celestia One? What if he already had? My mind ran over everything that I knew about megaspells. Weren't they supposed to be cast by multiple unicorns?

“Celestia One is just up here,” Sunshine said, pointing at the next level of stairs. “We should be careful. If Dusk is waiting for us...”

“Then we will fight, and end this once and for all,” I said, stepping onto the landing. The hallway before us led to a massive set of double doors that were now hanging off of their hinges. Scorch marks lined the walls. I tread cautiously down the hall, pushing past the doors. Inside of the room was a massive circular chamber. In the center of it was a pedestal with a shining amber jewel sitting on it. On the other side of the room, behind a glass sheet was Dusk Blue. He was growling loudly as his horn sparked and sputtered.

“Dusk!” I shouted. “It’s over. Give it up. You’re never going to be able to activate Celestia One.”

“No... I will make the Wasteland see! I will make them... I will be the master!” Dusk roared, flaring his horn again. The jewel on the pedestal lit up briefly.

“Dusk, stop this madness!” Sunshine yelled. “You can’t activate it. If you do... you’ll die!” Dusk Blue shook his head, continuing to try and activate his magic.

“Wait... did she say die?” Patch said. “I don’t like that idea...”

“Megaspells are designed to be activated by multiple unicorns,” Sunshine said. “Activated improperly, it could backfire.”

“Backfire?” I said. “I’m with Patch, I don’t like that idea either.” Sunshine grimaced.

“We have to get him out of here and subdue him,” she replied, looking over at where Dusk was still trying his hardest to use the megaspell. The jewel lit up a brilliant gold light. My eyes widened. It was working! I suddenly realized... Dusk knew he had lost. He had already moved to his end game.

“Everypony, out of here. Sunshine, you too. I’ll stay behind and stop this,” I said. The other filtered out of the megaspell chamber and down the hall. I looked back up at Dusk Blue.

“You took away everything from me, Radiant Star...” the blue stallion snarled. “First you took the Element of Magic, and then the Amulet! Now I’m going to use this megaspell and decimate this tower and you for good!!”

“Dusk, you need to back down. It’s over!” I shouted, lighting my horn and bringing up Stargazer. “Now stop this madness at once!”

“Never!!” Dusk roared, igniting his horn in a blaze of golden light. I glanced around. The sides of the walls were beginning to light up. This was bad, this was really, really bad! I had to do something. I lifted Stargazer, letting off a burst of fire at the glass shielding. One of the bullets punched through, slamming into the side of Dusk Blue’s horn. Raw magic sprayed out from it as the appendage shattered, causing the stallion to roar in agony. The magic in the room began to compress upon the blue stallion, leeching from the walls into his body. The unicorn’s horn began to spark. *Shit*, I thought. I’d intended to disable Dusk, stop him from casting spells. But he wasn’t stopping.

Sparks and light erupted from Dusk’s horn suddenly, forcing me to close my eyes. I grunted, stepping

back towards the entrance. Dusk lashed out, destroying the glass shielding and jumping out into the chamber.

“I will destroy you, Radiant Star... and then... then I will destroy everything you ever loved!” The stallion snarled, laughing maniacally as he forced more magic out of his broken horn. His entire body was glowing now. I did the only thing I could think of to do. I reached out with my magic and pulled the doors to the chamber shut, much to the surprise of my friends who were standing in the hallway. I looked back at Dusk Blue.

“Then do your worst,” I said, reaching into the back of my mind and casting Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple bubble extended around me and the doorway as Dusk reached out with his hoof. The stallion was no longer even blue. The magic had covered his entire body, coating him in a gold layer of energy. Dusk Blue roared, releasing the pent up magic all at once, his entire body turning into pure arcane matter.

Then he exploded. Magical energy burst from the stallion's body, expanding outwards in a wave that spread over my shield. I grunted under the force of the explosion. Within moments the energy had dissipated, and there was a scorch mark on the ground where Dusk Blue had been. The explosion hadn't even been big enough to do more than score the room. I lowered my shield, sighing as I stepped over to where the stallion had been. The door behind me opened, allowing my friends and Sunshine to enter.

“Star?” Sunshine said as she trotted up next to me. “What... what happened?”

“Dusk... used up the rest of his magic to turn himself into a bomb. I think he thought he could kill me with it,” I said, pointing at the scorch marks. “In the end... he was so desperate for power...”

“He was so desperate that he sought power above all else,” a voice came from the door. Life Bloom was standing there, with Captain Kirby. “It appears that everything is well intact here. Thank you, Radiant Star.”

“For what? I never intended for him to die,” I said. “Not to mention whether or not he did any damage to Celestia One.” Life Bloom chuckled.

“Oh, this room isn't Celestia One,” he said. “That chamber is elsewhere.” Sunshine glanced over at the red-maned unicorn, her eyes wide.

“What? This isn't... but I thought...” she said. Life Bloom nodded, waving his hoof and igniting his horn. The room suddenly began to transform, changing into a regular looking hall.

“Celestia One's megaspell chamber is a secret only known to the highest level members of the Twilight Society, for security reasons of course,” the stallion said. “Dusk Blue was... misinformed.”

“How? If he had the Society under his control... then how did he not know?” I said.

“Because he never had us under his control. Many of the members of the Society have been away, and thus never fell under Discord's sway,” Life Bloom said. “Trying to reach accords with organizations such as the NCR.”

"I've been told by NCR top brass to stand down the assault," Kirby chimed in. "We're working towards a truce. Thanks to you, Star, we were able to see what was going on and stop it before it got worse." I hung my head low.

"Doesn't change the fact that ponies still died over this," I said. Or that I had been responsible. I was the reason Discord escaped. I'd fallen into Dusk Blue's trap. No matter how you sliced it, this was my fault.

"No, it does not," Life Bloom said. "But this chapter is now closed, and our goal now is peace. Peace between our organizations, and our friends. Now... I believe that I have some business to attend to with Captain Kirby here. You may rest, and be upon your way as soon as you are feeling able."

I awoke with a start, before remembering exactly where I was. Violet lay next to me slumbering peacefully. A day had passed since Dusk Blue's death and the end of the conflict between the NCR and the Twilight Society. The ponies of Tenpony Tower had returned to their normal lives as quickly as they had fled them, cleaning up the tower and getting things back in order to accommodate the NCR troops who had survived the battle. In all, several hundred ponies had died during the battle from both sides.

I felt like a failure. Like I'd let this all happen. Given the state I was in after the battle, I was sorely in need of rest. My wing had sustained some major damage, and was going to take several days to recover. I had wanted to leave as quickly as possible, partly because I didn't want to have to face Kirby and Life Bloom again as well as my own pressing need to get Patch to see Dry Rot. Unfortunately I lost that battle after Violet put her hoof down.

I pushed myself out of my bedroll, taking care not to wake Violet up as I made my way to the other room. I needed something to get my mind off of things. I wanted to drop myself into a memory orb as quickly as possible. I shuddered to think that Violet was right about my supposed 'addiction' to those things. I grimaced. There was no way I was addicted to them. They weren't even a chem! I pulled out my saddlebags, rummaging through for that last memory orb that Discord had left me. If it could give me even an hour of time away from the shit I'd been through in the past few days, it was completely and utterly worth any punishment Violet would exercise on me later on. Just as I found the orb, I heard a soft cough behind me.

"Star?" A voice said from behind me. Thankfully it wasn't the voice I'd expected. I turned, seeing Patch standing there. I waved weakly.

"Oh... hey," I said as the green mare trotted up beside me.

"What are you...?" Patch said as she looked down at the memory orb in my hoof. She sighed. "Star..."

"I..." I started to say before hanging my head. I placed the orb back into my bags and looked back up at Patch. "I just needed to get away from things, Patch." Patch placed a hoof on mine, smiling softly.

"Tell you what then, how about we go out on the balcony and talk for a bit?" She said. I nodded mutely, following the earth mare out onto our decrepit balcony. I slumped, looking out upon the city of Manehattan. It still looked like shit outside at least. We sat there for several minutes before I worked

up the courage to speak.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Patch," I said, causing the green mare to look at me curiously.

"What for?" She said softly.

"Because I... I fucked up. I tried too hard to protect you, and I feel like..." I said. "I feel like I owe you, Patch. It's my fault your unborn foal is screwed up, and I just..." Patch sighed, smiling.

"Star... I told you before that it's alright," she said. "Whatever happens... happens. I accept that now. But that's not what you're really sorry for, is it?" I shook my head.

"I caused all of this, Patch. I freed Discord, and played right into Dusk Blue's hooves. He was going to use me to destroy the NCR and the Twilight Society, and I nearly let him do it," I said, tears forming in my eyes. "It's my fault that Dusk Blue is dead. My fault that this happened this way."

"No," Patch said calmly, forcing me to raise my head and look over at her.

"H-H-Huh?" I said shakily.

"This is not your fault, Star. This is the result of a pony mad with power," Patch replied. "What would have happened if you weren't here to stop Dusk, Star? He would have mastered Celestia One, and gotten his way. If anything, you saved millions of ponies from certain doom."

"But I --" I started to say. Patch grinned widely and cut me off with a hoof.

"Star. You've been an inspiration to me and the others since I met you. For once in your life, be proud of what you do best, helping ponies," she said. "Because that's what you did. You saved lives, Star. *You* did that. You saved me. You saved me when I was feeling the worst I'd ever felt in my whole life. You gave me hope, Star. Now, let your friends give some of that hope back to you." I blinked, the tears in my eyes storming out now like a waterfall that had burst a dam. I rested my head on Patch's shoulder, crying as hard as I could. We sat there for what felt like hours until my tears dried up and I could no longer cry. I looked back inside our room. The others had awoken and were getting things ready. Patch nodded at me slightly and I stood, stepping back inside. Violet looked up as I appeared.

"Sweetie, are you alright?" She said. I sighed.

"I've got something to say," I said, addressing my group of... of family. My friends, who had been there for me through it all. "I'm... I'm sorry. For acting as silly as I have been lately. I thought I could deal with everything myself, but I... I can't. I need you all." I looked over at Violet. "Violet... I love you. So very, very much. There is no other in this world I want at my side. I know that no matter what, you'll keep me honest and true to myself." My eyes drifted over to Patch and Steeljack. "Patch, Steeljack. You two are the most loyal friends I'll ever know. You've always been there for me, and I promise I will not rest until we find out what is wrong with your foal." I turned to Lilith and Nixis. "Lilith... Nixis... you have been steadfast friends, and I am ever-grateful for your support. I know I've put you all through a lot, but I want to try to fix this."

Violet was the first to embrace me, before the others joined in. They smiled and hugged me close, and told me that everything was going to be okay. For what felt like the first time in my life, I believed

them. I truly believed that everything was going to work out. A knock at the door interrupted our bonding time. I trotted over, opening up to a smiling Sunshine Sky. The pink mare had several sets of saddlebags draped over her body and she was wearing a crude set of armored barding.

“S-S-Sunshine?” I said. “What's going on?”

“I'm coming with you,” Sunshine said. “There's nothing here for me now. The Society has everything well in hoof, and I want to help you find Spark. I figured that you wouldn't mind.” I blinked.

“I... I guess that's fine,” I said, letting the pink mare inside of the room. “Everyone... Sunshine is going to be joining us.” The others smiled jubilantly and chattered amongst themselves, each of them welcoming Sunshine into our little group. As I watched, I smiled. Despite our differences, and despite all we had been through... we were like a family to one another. It took me a long time to truly see that, and understand what it all meant.

I noticed out of the corner of my eye Patch. The green mare was headed towards the ruined couch at the far side of the room. She grunted under her breath, reaching out for support. She missed the arm of the couch and dropped to the ground with a ***thud***.

“Patch!” I called out, making my way to the mare's side. Violet was next to me in an instant, her horn glowing brightly. Patch was lying on her side, panting and breathing hard.

“I'm... I'm alright, just need to... need to lay down,” she wheezed. “Just had the wind knocked out of me, is all.” Violet grimaced, lifting a hoof to the other mare's forehead.

“She's burning up, Star,” my love said. “Something's not right. I'm trying to do what I can, but she needs a real doctor.”

“Dry... Dry Rot,” Patch huffed, coughing heavily. She covered her mouth, coming away with blood on her hoof. My eyes widened.

“Patch!!!!”

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

New Temporary Companion: Sunshine Sky, unicorn. Specialty: earth magic

Chapter 29: Born of Destiny

Do I look like I speak squirrel?

Foalhood. New life. I don't pretend to know too much about this subject, to be quite honest. As far as I can remember, I never was a foal myself. If I had been, my memories would at least give me something to work with. I often find myself wondering... what was I like before Unity? Was I different before I became an alicorn? I've been like this for so long now that I can't even consider anything else.

I wish I knew. The only memories I seem to have of the deep past are of Twilight. I can remember only bits and pieces, but a particular memory of a young filly in Canterlot learning magic beneath the gentle hooves of the Princess rings quite clear through the void of my mind. How did such a wonderfully bright and talented young pony become the Ministry Mare that guide Equestria on its path to destruction?

Was the war truly so corrupting that even the innocence of foalhood was tainted by its influence? The old adage that war never changes certainly rang true for Equestria. War did however, change us. We changed into a race born into a destiny of hate and balefire. We were destined for destruction from the get go. We're only waiting for it to take us away from this land of insanity and death.

"Patch!!!" I shouted, throwing my weight underneath the ailing mare and lifting her onto my back. I looked up at Sunshine. "We need to get her to a doctor."

"Follow me," Sunshine simply replied, motioning to the door. I followed behind her, Patch being held in place by my remaining good wing on one side and Steeljack on the other. The stallion had a concerned look on his face as he kept his gaze solely locked in on his love. We shuffled into the tiny elevator, leaving the others to get our things ready to go. Patch groaned as she tried to turn over on my back. I grimaced, lighting my horn and using my magic to secure her in place.

"Lemme down..." she whispered softly. "I'm... I'm fine..."

"No, you're not fine, Patch," I said sternly. "You're not well at all. Don't worry, we're taking you to see a doctor."

"The... the foal..." Patch said hoarsely. I grimaced. Did that have something to do with what was going on? Was the foal alright, or was her body rejecting it and causing a reaction? I didn't know for sure. I was not smart when it came to these kinds of things. I sighed as the elevator came to a stop and we funneled into the main lobby. Ponies were still cleaning up, but for the most part the tenants of the Tower were back out in full force. We received all sorts of looks as we marched forward. I didn't care. All I wanted was to make sure my friend was alright.

The primary physician's office came into view and I flung the door open, stepping inside to a very bewildered looking receptionist.

"Doctor. Now," I said angrily. The receptionist nodded frantically, motioning for us to follow her. We made our way down the hallway, pushing our way into a tiny room with a bed in it. I laid Patch down on the bed carefully with my magic. The green mare groaned and grunted, rolling over as the door behind us opened up, revealing the doctor, a tan unicorn.

"I understand that you needed to see me," he said. I glared at him.

"It's my friend. She's not feeling well," I said, motioning to Patch. The doctor stepped up next to the green mare, placing a hoof to his chin. Patch rolled over, and the doctor sighed. His horn lit up, bathing the mare in a soft light. Within several seconds she was beginning to snore. The light covered my friend for several minutes more before retracting. I raised an eyebrow hopefully.

"Your friend is experiencing some form of negative reaction related to her pregnancy. To be honest, Miss Star... I'm no expert at this sort of thing. I've applied a sedation spell to help her sleep, but she needs to rest and recuperate. I'm sorry, I'm not an obstetrician. I'm not sure what else we can do here," he said softly. I stamped a hoof angrily.

"That's not good enough," I said. "You said yourself, you're not an expert at this. We need an expert, we need Dry Rot."

"And what do you plan on doing? Bring him here? Dry Rot is a ghoul. His kind is prohibited within Tenpony Tower," the doctor replied casually. Before I could respond he lifted a hoof to continue speaking. "Conversely, your friend is in no shape to be moved. She needs rest. Moving her is only going to make her condition worse."

"Sitting around here waiting for her to get worse isn't going to help either!" I shouted. I became acutely aware of the fact that the door had opened behind us and that the others had filtered inside the tiny hospital room. I didn't care. I wanted to save my friend. She couldn't get worse. If she got worse... she could die. And it would be my fault. I'd already had enough deaths on my hooves. Images of Dusk Blue exploding ran through my mind. *No, I thought. I can't be responsible for any more death. Dusk... all those ponies who died in the battle. No matter what anypony says... I made that happen, that was my fault.*

"She needs proper medical attention," the doctor argued, his voice edging closer and closer to anger. I growled under my breath.

"And what exactly have you been giving her?" I snarled.

"Star, that's enough," Violet said softly, stepping up next to me and placing a hoof on my shoulder. "I know you're angry, but yelling at him isn't going to solve anything."

"Thank you," the doctor said, straightening his smock. "I'm glad somepony here sees reason." Violet glared at him. The doctor gulped loudly.

"Oh, I agree with Star," Violet said casually. "Your medical care has been rather... lacking. You have nopony on staff that knows anything about pregnant mares? I'm amazed you manage to even reproduce. Or do you do it asexually, by budding like other lesser organisms?" The doctor huffed loudly.

"I... I never," he said. "Fine. Take your friend, do whatever you want. She can stay here for as long as you would like. We will not deny her care, no matter how rude you are." The doctor turned and pushed open the door. I glanced down at Patch. The green mare was still quite profoundly asleep. Our loud outbursts thankfully hadn't woken her. I sighed and looked at the other. Steeljack was standing on the other side of the mare.

"I think we should take her to see Dry Rot," he said softly. My eyes widened. "She's only going to get better if we know what's happening, and he's bound to know what is going on if he's any good at this stuff."

"I agree," Violet said. "However, some of us should stay behind here. We can't ignore our obligations to the ponies here completely. Only a few of us can go and take Patch, while some of us stay behind to help with repairs and anything that could be needed." The others nodded in agreement.

"It's decided then," I said, pointing a hoof at Sunshine. "Sunshine. You know this city fairly well. Do you know where Duskhoof is?"

"It's... it's deeper in the city," the mare replied. "It's located inside an old Ministry of Peace hospital. Duskhoof is... it's a ghoulish settlement. They've been isolationist for quite some time."

"I see... I suppose then we shouldn't try to scare them too badly," I said, placing a hoof to my chin. Steeljack coughed, interrupting my train of thought.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll be coming," he said. "I'm not going to leave Patch, not now." I nodded.

"I sort of expected that," I said, smiling softly. "I will go as well. I'm seeing this through to the end."

"We can probably rig up something so that you can just carry her," Violet said, glancing down at the sleeping mare. "Either way, I'm going to stay behind. My medical spells can probably help around here, given the... questionable quality of medical care they have been giving ponies."

"I wish to stay as well," Nixis said. The hellhound lumbered in the corner of the small room. "My strength and claws may be of some assistance." Lilith nodded.

"I'm coming with you," she said, bristling her wings as she looked down sadly at her friend. "I want to help as best as I can." I smiled softly.

"Alright. Sunshine, Steeljack, and Lilith will accompany me to Duskhoof," I proclaimed. "Once we have Patch better, we'll return." The others filed out of the room one by one, until it was just Steeljack and myself. The dark gray stallion grimaced as I looked down upon the mare he loved. She was sleeping peacefully at least. I reminded myself silently to ask the doctor nicely if he could re-cast the sedation spell before we left. It would make things much easier if Patch wasn't trying to climb off my back.

"Star?" Steeljack asked. I looked up at him, cocking an eyebrow. "Are we sure everything's going to be alright?" He didn't look good. His mane was ragged and I could tell that he was nearing his breaking point. I lifted a hoof, placing it on the stallion's shoulder. A smile crept along my face as I remembered an old rhyme that Twilight had once said.

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," I said, miming the motions of the Pinkie Promise. "I will do everything in my power to see Patch get better, Steeljack. Now go on, get your things together. I'll be along shortly so we can get something rigged up." The stallion hesitated for a moment, almost not daring to leave his love's side. Finally he relented, nodding as he brushed past me and exiting the room, leaving me alone with the sleeping mare. I sighed and looked down at her.

"You were wrong," I said to the air. "I am to blame. For all of this. For letting Discord out, for the battle, for Dusk.... for Dusk Blue. And for you. I wish... I wish it wasn't true, but it is." I hung my head over the sleeping earth pony. "I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry. If I hadn't... If I'd been stronger... you wouldn't be like this... You wouldn't be sick."

But she is sick, I thought. Something's gone wrong with her pregnancy, she's sick, and possibly dying. And it's all your fault.

I stood, groaning. The road ahead was not going to be pleasant. But I had to do something. I wasn't going to let Patch die. I was going to do what I could do to save her life. I turned, determined to keep moving forward, pushing open the door and heading into the hallway. I stopped by the receptionist's desk, letting her know that we would be returning to retrieve Patch and to see if the doctor could renew the sedation spell. I made my way back into Tenpony proper, trudging along amidst the high and mighty elite of Wasteland society. I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't notice almost running into a familiar unicorn. I tripped over myself, nearly tumbling into him as I came to rest on the ground.

"You alright there, Star?" Captain Kirby said. I glanced up.

"I'm... I'm okay," I said softly, grunting as I pushed myself back to my hooves. Kirby extended a hoof of his own, helping me get all the way up. "Thanks."

"You look... distraught," Kirby said. "Is something wrong?" I hung my head, looking away from him.

"It's... It's Patch. She's not doing well," I said. "We're getting ready to take her to a doctor in Duskhoof. He's supposed to be an expert on pregnancies." Kirby's eyes widened.

"I... I thought that something like that was going on," he said calmly. "If you'd like, I can send along any troops you might need to get you to this place. Anything I can do for Patch." I shook my head.

"No need, we should be fine... I'm just... I'm worried about her," I said. "She collapsed in our room, and the doctors here don't even know why. I fear... I fear I've caused more harm to her than good." Kirby cocked an eyebrow at this. He motioned for me to sit next to him at a nearby table.

"Star... you've got to get a grip on yourself. What happened to Patch is not your fault," he said. "I need you to trust me on this. Now, what did the doctors say exactly?" I sighed.

"They want us to leave her here, but this doctor in Duskhoof... he might be able to help her. I have to take that chance, Kirby. I can't let Patch die," I said. "I've got to do something." Kirby nodded.

"I understand. If you need anything, Star... please let me know. It was by your hoof that we were able to end this silly conflict, and I will do whatever I can to lend aid," he said.

"I... Thank you," I said softly. "How are things going with the effort to restore order?"

“Well, better than we'd hoped. The Twilight Society has been working rather closely with some of our top scientists to get a better understanding of Celestia One. They've been quite accommodating,” Kirby said. “Much more than I'd hoped for. In return, we're helping them care for any of the refugees and helping to restore building efforts.”

“That... that sounds pretty amazing, actually,” I said, blinking. “I wish I could have helped more. I feel like I've been so helpless since things went to shit.”

“Star... you helped us all in a big way. By defeating Dusk Blue, you lifted the veil on the rest of us,” Kirby said, resting a hoof on my shoulder. “We all appreciate what you did.” I grimaced.

“I don't,” I said softly. “All I did was get a bunch of ponies killed. I was responsible for Discord, and for Dusk Blue.”

“From what I hear, Dusk Blue was a bad egg all around anyways. You didn't cause him. He chose to be the way he was, and that was something you couldn't change,” the unicorn replied. “Now... I'm holding you up. I'm sure that you have to get ready for your journey. Remember what I said, though. If you need anything... just let me know.” I nodded.

“I will... thanks,” I said as the unicorn stood and made his way back into the throng of ponies. I grunted, standing myself and stretching out my neck. I made my way back to the elevator and up to our room, where it looked like Steeljack, Lilith, and Sunshine were all ready to go.

“Let's get moving.”

We stepped out onto the Luna line, the midday sun resting comfortably above our heads as we walked. Thanks to the doctors having an old stretcher, we were able to fashion together a crude harness that strapped to my back. Patch lay inside of the harness, secured so that she couldn't roll out. My wings itched from the leather straps as well as the bandages that covered my damaged wing. It was just as well that I still could not use it. I wasn't relishing the thought of having to fly with Patch lying on my back.

The mare in question shifted a bit in her makeshift bed before murmuring in her sleep. I breathed a sigh of relief that the doctors were able to recast the sedation spell before we left. Even if the one doctor was giving us the stink eye the whole time, he still allowed us to leave. I couldn't understand why he cared so much, but then I remembered that he was a doctor. That meant was supposed to care for his patients, regardless of what he could actually do for them. He was only looking out for Patch's well-being. I grimaced as I let my mind wander. Were we doing the right thing? What if Dry Rot couldn't help her?

“Based on my knowledge of the city, Duskhoof is... this way,” Sunshine said, interrupting my train of thought as she pointed off to the left. “The hospital is deeper in, a little closer to the balefire crater but not in any of the dangerous zones. The ghouls that live there visit the crater occasionally for radiation healing.”

“Have you ever been there before?” Lilith asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"I... I haven't. No," Sunshine replied. "I've only ever been outside of the Twilight Society a very few times. Dusk Blue... he..." I grimaced even more. I knew what Dusk Blue wanted Sunshine for. He had been planning on using her body to bring Twilight's spirit back into this world with the resurrection spell. The same spell that had made Twilight's connection to me draw Spark into this whole mess.

"Do you know anything about the ghouls living there? Are they nice?" Lilith pressed forward, seeing my expression and moving to change the subject. Sunshine shrugged.

"I know they will let normal ponies into their settlement, but usually not for very long. Most normal ponies wouldn't stay anyways, not with that many ghouls in one area," she said. "It's nothing against them, they just... kind of smell, is all." Lilith giggled at this.

"Oh, I know that one all too well. Sloth smelled like dead fish sometimes," she said, bristling her wings. I winced at her statement. Cranky hadn't been the most pleasant smelling donkey, but the old ghoul had proven to be dedicated to his lover. Which brought me back around to the warm weight strapped to my back.

"Sloth?" Sunshine said, cocking her head.

"Long story, old friend. Canterlot ghoul," Lilith said. Sunshine nodded. Lilith grimaced, glancing back at me. "You holding up okay there, Star?" I met her gaze, sighing.

"Yeah... Yeah I'm alright," I said. "I just want to get there and find out what's wrong with Patch, is all." Lilith smiled softly, pulling back to walk next to me while Sunshine and Steeljack trotted ahead.

"There's something else wrong, and both you and I know it," Lilith said softly. "Now spill it."

"It's nothing, really Lilith, I'm fine," I said, trying to shrug her off. Lilith's wings flared angrily.

"It isn't nothing. Now talk to me. We've been through too much together for you to ignore my help, Star," the black pegasus said. "You've been off ever since Dusk Blue. So spill, or we take Patch ahead and send you back to Tenpony Tower."

"You wouldn't dare," I said hoarsely. Lilith's eyes lit up.

"Try me. I most certainly would. I'm far faster than you on any day," she said. "If you can't handle this..." She motioned up at Patch on my back. "Then you most certainly don't deserve to be here." I grimaced. She was right, of course. I didn't deserve to be here, but I was going to do it anyways. I had to help Patch. I had to make sure she was alright, that she didn't... that she didn't die.

"I can handle this, Lilith. Trust me," I said, my voice raising. I glanced past her to see Steeljack and Sunshine. They were watching patiently while Lilith snarled loudly.

"Trust you? Really? You're not telling us a damn thing, I don't even know what to trust you with?!" She shouted. I sighed, shaking my head.

"It's not... we don't have time for this!" I said. "Patch could be... she could be dying!" Lilith's eyes widened and she halted immediately. She looked away for a brief moment.

"That's it, isn't it? You think you're responsible for her," she said softly. "Just like Diamond. Just like... like Cranky."

"And Discord, and Dusk Blue," I said, tears beginning to fill my eyes. "I'm responsible for them all, Lilith. I caused all of this to happen. So many ponies... they all died because of my fuck ups. I don't... I don't want that to happen to her..." Lilith sighed deeply, stepping up to me and placing a hoof on my shoulder.

"Star... none of that is your fault, and neither is what happened to Patch. Now come on, you are right about one thing... we do need to get her to Duskhoof, the sooner the better," the black mare said. "But listen to me right now... we're going to see about getting you some help, there, at Tenpony, wherever. You are not responsible for this. You saved a lot of ponies lives, Star." I hung my head, letting the tears fall to the ground below. Lilith wrapped a foreleg around my neck, pulling me into a quick embrace. She patted me softly.

"I just... I'm so sorry... I thought I was past all this, but it keeps coming back..." I choked out. "And now with Patch... I just can't help it..."

"Shhh... I know, I know," Lilith said. "But we've got to focus on the present. Patch can still be helped, after all. And you do want to help her, right?" I nodded. "Good. Now let's get going. We've still got a ways to go to get to Duskhoof."

We began to walk on, in silence this time. Patch stirred slightly on my back, but didn't wake up as we made our way down the streets of Manehattan. Tenpony Tower was far behind us now. It seemed so far away, yet so close at the same time. As we walked, my mind was wracked with thought. Despite what Lilith had said, I couldn't pull myself away from the fact that everypony was wrong about one simple truth. I had caused Discord's freedom, that was something I was responsible for. In a way, I was also responsible for what Dusk Blue did.

I sighed. Maybe I really did need psychological help. It would certainly have explained my frame of mind. I was a mess, plain and simple. My mind was fractured and broken, between Twilight's memories and my own shattered recollections. I couldn't tear my thoughts away from the deaths I had witnessed in the past week alone. Dusk Blue's demise kept replaying itself in my mind over and over. I glanced back at Patch, and grimaced. She was still sleeping soundly, but how long would that last? What if we didn't get her the help she needed in time?

I allowed my mind to work its overdrive as we found ourselves in what appeared to be a massive open square, leading off in three different directions. Several large buildings dwarfed the clearing of broken rock, towering over us and preventing us from seeing beyond. They were covered in billboard signs, namely Sparkle Cola and Ministry advertisements. Twilight Sparkle's face looked out from one of the massive signs, sitting next to an open book. The words **Reading! It's a hoot!** were emblazoned on next to it with a picture of a cartoon owl. Massive pieces of rubble and debris blocked off the exit in front and to the right of us.

"Duskhoof is just beyond this square of the city. The hospital is on the other side of that barrier," Sunshine said, pointing out across the clearing.

"How do we get over there?" Steeljack said. "It looks like we're making a big circle." Sunshine

nodded, grimacing.

“We need to be very careful. This area is a well known habitat for manticores,” she said. “That's why we need to go around and approach from the other direction. There's a reason we call this Claw Pass.”

“Manticores? Great...” I said, grimacing. My mind went back to when I was captured by Discord. Manticores were not fun. We continued forward, keeping an eye warily on the surrounding buildings. The side street we were forced into was like a tunnel, the concrete towers on each side dwarfing the span of asphalt beneath our hooves. One of the buildings had fallen over, resting comfortably across the street on top of a smaller building. I glanced up at it as we trotted beneath, worried that today would be the day that it would topple down to land on somepony's unfortunate heads.

Without much to do or say, I slipped my earbud into my right ear and turned my PipBuck's radio on. The smooth sounds of Sweetie Belle's voice filled my mind, giving it a much needed break from its current thought track. Was I going crazy? Had Discord somehow invaded my mind and was slowly driving me insane? No... That one was right out. If he had there'd be more chocolate milk involved. After assessing the airtime properties of chocolate milk and the lack thereof, I tossed that idea out the door. It would have been too easy to blame him, after all. The real blame lay solely with me.

We found ourselves nearing the end of the long street as the music wound down and the smooth voice of DJ-PON3 came onto my radio.

“Good afternoon, Wasteland kiddies! It is I, DJ-PON3 with the greatest news show in two hundred years!”

Now I know you all are probably wondering, what in the heck is going on in Manehattan? Well, kiddies, it seems that the problems between the NCR and the Twilight Society were all due to one unicorn, by the name of Dusk Blue.

Y'see kiddies, Dusk had this plan to force the NCR and the Society into a war, one that would have inevitably ended with the utter obliteration of everypony in the city. Dusk wanted to use Celestia One as his own little private sun cannon, and manipulated everypony he could into achieving his goals.

Weeeeelll... that didn't exactly go too well for the old chap, because our friendly neighborhood Ministry Mare put the smack down on him! After sending Blue sailing into next Tuesday, the Ministry Mare managed to convince the NCR and the Twilight Society to set aside their differences and find a way to work together! Isn't that simply beautiful, children? By working together, we can accomplish just about anything.

Now, some of y'all out there are wondering what happened to yours truly while all this was going down... well kiddies, that's what we like to call a 'secret' in this business. Sorry to get your hopes up!

Thanks again to the Ministry Mare for all her help. If ya see this pony on the mean streets, think twice before shooting and offer her some love. She needs it.

And I'm out for a while! Have some music, kiddies.”

I grimaced. DJ-PON3 made me sound downright heroic. No mention at all of Discord and his freedom, and no mention that Dusk Blue actually blew himself up. Just... lavish praise draped over a

pony who didn't deserve it, shaping a hero that didn't exist. I wondered when I had begun to separate the Ministry Mare of legend from myself. I certainly wasn't that mare anymore. I wasn't the good pony who fought for truth and justice. I just wanted to get rid of these memories, these emotions, and stop Spark from doing whatever it was that she was up to.

We made our way around the corner, stopping cold when we found that the path had been blocked by a large field of debris scattered all over the ground.

"Great," Sunshine said softly. I noticed that she had tensed up.

"What's wrong?" Lilith said. Sunshine put a hoof to her mouth.

"We're being watched," she said. "Have been since we started down the last street." I blinked as the mare motioned for us to follow her. We huddled down behind some rubble on the side of the street, trying to obscure ourselves.

"How do you know?" I said. Sunshine grimaced.

"I can feel it in my hooves. My special talent relates directly to earth magic. Plants, natural soil, you know what I mean," she whispered. I nodded, having used some of her spells while inside her body. "It's a very unnatural talent for a unicorn to have, but I can feel through it. Makes me more aware of my surroundings. Something, and I don't know what has been following us."

"Can you tell what it is?" Steeljack asked. Sunshine shook her head.

"It's too unclear. But given this area's reputation, probably manticores," she said, levitating out her tiny beam pistol. I unlatched Stargazer, while Steeljack let Tempest's visor slide back into place, obscuring his face entirely. Lilith did the same with her helmet, her wings bristling at the chance of real action. As one we stood, moving forward carefully towards the square's exit. We were roughly twenty feet from the exit when I heard a guttural growl that stopped me in my tracks. I looked up, seeing the burly frame of a manticore climbing out of a window of one of the skyrisers. The beast looked gaunt, like it hadn't eaten in days, but still strong enough to take down a pony. It roared, staring right at us.

"Everypony, run!" Sunshine shouted, breaking into a gallop. I started running too, splitting my magic between holding up Stargazer and keeping Patch's makeshift harness in place. The roar got louder, accompanied by the crushing sound of rocks as the manticore pounded the rubble into dust beneath its massive paws. The beast leaped from the wall of debris it was running along, landing on the street in front of us with a ***crash***. Sunshine stopped dead and ducked as a large set of claws soared above her head. Her horn ignited, summoning a patch of vines that struck out and snagged the creature's arm, giving the mare enough time to leap away from the chimeric creature.

It wouldn't last that long, unfortunately. The manticore lifted its other claw, severing the vines completely. It flexed its batlike wings, snarling and roaring. Steeljack jumped to the side of the creature, firing off several bullets from Tempest's rifle. The rounds slammed home in the manticore's leg, which only seemed to infuriate it even more. The thing stomped forward, extending its forearm in a slash that caught the stallion across the chest, throwing him into a pile of rubble.

"Steeljack!" I shouted as the monster turned back towards me and Sunshine. Lilith snarled loudly, flaring her wings and taking to the sky, prepping herself for a charge. A shadow cast over the airborne

mare, another roar coming from above her. Lilith spun about, the second mantichore barely missing her as it crashed to the ground. Sunshine's horn flared, covering the beast in vines. It struggled to remove itself from its predicament as the first mantichore disregarded it and instead opted to charge at me instead. I tucked in to the right, lifting Stargazer with my magic and dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up several disabling shots and dropped the spell, letting my gun take aim and do what it did best. The bullets struck home with unnerving accuracy, striking the creature's back legs as it reared up to attack. The beast howled in pain as blood poured from where it had been shot. Almost as if sensing that I was a bigger threat, the mantichore took the sky and flew away. I let it go. There was no sense in chasing after if we'd managed to scare it off.

The other mantichore however, did not. It snarled and snapped its way out of Sunshine's prison, a claw catching the pink mare in the side. It knocked her to the ground, but thankfully didn't pierce her barding. I turned quickly to intercept the creature. Just as it was about to come down on Sunshine, Steeljack's hooves came down, striking the beast in the back of the neck repeatedly. The mantichore roared, flapping its wings to try and get the stallion off. Eventually, the creature got mad enough that it grabbed the earth pony with its tail, tossing him to the side. I lifted Stargazer and pointed it at the beast.

"Leave us alone!" I shouted. "Or I use this!" The creature snarled under its breath, glaring at me. For several tense seconds I thought that it wouldn't listen. After moments however, the beast's wings unfurled it and flew off. I looked back at Patch, checking on her. She was still asleep. *That sedation spell must be working quite well*, I thought, silently thanking the doctors for at least making that happen. I made my way over to Sunshine Sky, who was being helped up by Lilith.

"You alright there?" Lilith asked. Sunshine nodded.

"This sort of thing happen to you guys often?" She said. Lilith rolled her eyes.

"You have no idea," she replied. I snorted in derision.

"Not all the time," I said as Steeljack rejoined us. "Steeljack, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just a little bruised and sore," he said as his visor retracted. He lifted out a potion bottle out of his bags, taking several draughts of the liquid inside. He sighed in relief. "Much better. What about Patch? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Slept right through the whole thing," I said, looking back at the mare again.

"Do you think those things will come back?" Sunshine asked.

"I don't know, but I'm not about to find out," I said. "Let's keep moving." We started forward again, watching for any signs of the two manticores that had attacked us, as well as any other threats. The trail of blood left behind by the one I'd shot indicated that it had made its way back inside one of the abandoned buildings. Almost as if we had been gifted with a kiss of luck, we made it out of the square without any other issues. The next corner we turned presented us with what we'd been looking for this whole time.

A large hospital sat at the far end of the next street. It was surrounded by makeshift walls of steel and skywagons. The hospital itself looked like it had seen better years, the very top floors of the place

having been crushed into rubble and debris. Several ghouls patrolled alongside the walls, keeping a close eye on the Manehattan Wasteland. The emblem of three butterflies, Fluttershy's symbol of hope and peace in a dying world, was emblazoned on the side of the hospital's outer walls. The colors of the Ministry of Peace's symbol had been changed however, to a muted gray tone with black background.

We continued moving forward, raising our hooves to make our intentions known to the guards on the wall. One of them leaped from the wall, spreading his... his wings? No... that's not quite right. They looked like wings but they were tattered remains of leathery appendages. It was a wonder they could even fly on them. The ghoul landed in front of us twenty feet away and flashed a sharp grin. I could see fangs beneath his rotting lips. His eyes flashed a bright blue and his ears tapered off into sharp points.

“Welcome to Duskhoof. Please, come in.”

The town's gate lifted, a screeching sound of steel upon steel as the massive doorway allowed us to enter the courtyard. Our escort, who hadn't said anything beyond his initial welcome, led us to a guard station. After depositing our weaponry with the gate guards and the promise of getting it returned when we left, he motioned for us to follow him. The ghoul stopped before the main doors of the hospital.

“I'm sure you'll understand, we don't get a lot of smooth skins like yourself around here often,” the... creature said, his voice gravelly. “But that doesn't mean that we don't treat em fairly. Stay out of trouble and you'll be fine here.”

“We're here to see Doctor Dry Rot,” I said. “We have a friend who is very sick, and needs his expertise.” The ghoul nodded, his expression darkening.

“Well, I can take you to see the Mayor. He'll explain everything,” he said. “My name is Silmetra. If you need anything else while you're here, just ask.” I smiled softly.

“If I may be so bold, what does the Mayor need to explain? Why can't we just see the Doctor?” I asked as Silmetra opened the front doors of the hospital. The lobby / waiting area had been converted into what looked like a common area for the denizens of the small community. Several ghouls sat around, playing games or reading books.

“I apologize, but the Mayor will need to tell you what is going on. We're not to discuss it outside of his office,” Silmetra said as he motioned for us to follow him to the elevator at the far end of the lobby.

“I... I see,” I said. “Alright then. Second question... what are you? I've never seen a pegasus ghoul like you before.” Silmetra flashed a toothy grin.

“That's because I'm not a pegasus. Well, not exactly, anyways,” he said. I cocked my head at this.

“Huh?” I replied.

“Not a pegasus? Could have fooled me,” Lilith said, bristling her wings. Silmetra nodded.

“I am... I am a duskhoof,” he said. “The common Equish translation of my race's true name is 'bat

pony'."

"Bat pony? I didn't even know there was such a thing," I said. Silmetra smiled as the elevator dinged softly. I went in first, moving to the far back and cramping in so the others could get in as well. Sometimes, I hated being bigger than other ponies.

"I assure you, we do exist. There are very few of us in the world that are alive, many more of us are ghouls, like myself. There are even a few Canterlot varieties," Silmetra said.

"You're very well spoken for a ghoul," Sunshine said. Silmetra offered a smile to the pink mare.

"Thank you," he said. "I was a graduate from Trottingham University, after all. Let it never be said that old T.U. didn't know how to educate its ponies!"

"So you were alive during the war?" I said, looking up at the ghoul.

"I... I was, yes. I was a contractor for the government. I studied engineering, you know... made quite a living off of it, until the very end. I was stuck in Manehattan on the day the megaspells dropped," he replied. "The rest is... well, history."

"Interesting," I murmured as the elevator dinged softly. The bat pony pushed open the door, allowing us to filter out. We walked down the hall into another waiting area. Silmetra pointed at an empty room.

"You can set your friend down here," he said. "Then we will go see Mayor Ichor." I raised an eyebrow at this. Silmetra smiled softly. "Don't worry. Your friend will be well protected here. We all mean you no harm."

"It's fine," Steeljack said, glancing up at me. "Star, let's get her down here." I nodded, flaring my horn and reaching out with my magic to lower the mare onto the floor in her harness. She flopped over, yawning as her eyes opened. She glanced up at me and I smiled.

"Star? Where are we?" She said.

"We're in Duskhoof, Patch. You're going to be alright. How are you feeling?" I asked. She let her hoof run down to her stomach, and sighed.

"Better... but still not a hundred percent," she replied. "I was out for a while, huh?"

"Sedation spell. We had to make sure you wouldn't move around until we got you here," Lilith said, stepping up next to us. "You gave us quite a scare, sweetie."

"Sorry... The, the foal? Have we seen Dry Rot yet?" Patch said. I shook my head, motioning at Silmetra behind us.

"Silmetra here is going to take us to the mayor. Something's going on here. We don't know where Dry Rot is yet," I said. "We're going to find him, Patch. I'm going to make sure that we fix this, and find out what's wrong with you." Patch smiled and nodded, laying her head back.

“Well if it's all the same to you, I'm still pretty tired. I'm gonna lay here,” she said. Silmetra's wings bristled as he stiffened to attention.

“Stay here as long as you desire,” he said. “If you require anything, do not hesitate to ask. We have food and water if you need it.”

“Thank you, Silmetra. Let's go meet the mayor,” I said. The bat pony nodded, motioning to us to follow. We left Patch and started down the hallway towards a sign that said **Administration**. It made sense to me for the mayor to be there. Silmetra pushed open the door, waving us inside.

“I will remain here while you speak with the mayor. When you are ready, I will take you back to your friend,” he said. I nodded, wondering just what exactly was going on here. Why all the secrecy? What was the problem keeping us from seeing Dry Rot already? I shuffled inside the Administration office behind the others. The office itself was sparsely populated other than a few broken bookshelves along the walls and an oak desk in the center of the room. Behind the desk sat a earth pony ghoul who looked like he'd seen better days. He looked up as we entered.

“Ah, hello. You must be the normies that Silmetra allowed into town,” he said jovially. His voice didn't certainly sound Manehattanite. “I'm Mayor Ichor Sludge. A pleasure to meet you.”

“Radiant Star,” I said. “These are my friends Lilith, Sunshine Sky, and Steeljack.”

“Ah yes... the Ministry Mare. Now I recognize you,” Ichor said, smiling. “It's not every day we get a visit from a celebrity.”

“Let's cut to the chase here, Mayor,” I said. “I need to find Doctor Dry Rot. I've got a friend here who desperately needs his help.”

“Yes... I'm afraid that the good doctor will be unable to see your friend,” Ichor replied. “Unfortunately, Doctor Rot has gone missing. We fear that he is no longer among the living, or rather... unliving as it were.”

“What do you mean, missing?” Lilith said. Ichor sighed, motioning to a map laying on the desk.

“One of the major issues we've always had with living here in Duskhoof is mapping out the whole hospital. It is a large place, one of the largest in all of Equestria, I'd gather to say,” the ghoul said. “The ferals don't make it easy for us, after all. We've been determined to scavenge any medical supplies we can out of the place, but they have been attacking our expeditions recently.”

“I thought feral ghouls never usually attacked lucid ones,” I said.

“Yes... that is normally true, but there is something about these particular ghouls,” Ichor said, grimacing. “They work in groups, very fast, and they seem to show some form of intelligence. Intelligent for a feral, that is.”

“You think somepony is controlling them?” Sunshine piped up. Ichor sighed.

“I do, and I believe I know who. When we first set up shop here in Duskhoof, we did so because of two ghouls. The first was a unicorn by the name of Blind Faith. He was everything that ponies looked

for in a leader, fair and just... and friendly. He believed that we rotters deserved a place in the world where we could be ourselves, and that we should open ourselves up to the ponies of the Wasteland,” the mayor explained. “The other... he was a pegasus ghoul by the name of Red Death. I don't know what his original name was... he never told us. I do know he was alive during the war, like most of the ghouls here are. Red Death thought that Duskhoof should cater only to ghouls, and opposed Blind Faith's friendly outlook. Ghouls were ghouls, he had said, and we have to stand together.”

“I'm sorry, but what does this have to do with Dry Rot?” I said, narrowing my gaze at the ghoul. I was getting impatient the longer Patch wasn't well.

“Right, getting to that. Red Death wanted to experiment with our feral brethren, applying science to try and help them regain their memories. He used collars to try and fire synapses in a feral ghoul's brain. He thought it would help them become lucid. In a freak accident, his test subjects escaped and murdered Blind Faith. Of course, it looked like Red himself let them out to destroy his most hated rival, but then a few days after he himself disappeared. He hasn't been seen since,” Ichor said. “The attacks that have started up recently bear a striking resemblance to Red's work, as those that have survived report that they were wearing collars.”

“So... Dry Rot went missing during one of these expeditions?” Lilith said. Ichor nodded.

“Doctor Rot was a firm proponent of finding more medical technology to assist in studying the general ghoul condition. He thought Red's experiments were risky and unethical, and the right way was to advance medical science as a whole. He'd picked up little bits here and there, but nothing major. This expedition was going to delve deeper into the hospital than we'd ever gone,” the mayor said. “No pony has heard from any pony in the expedition since then.” I grimaced. If Doctor Rot couldn't help Patch, then what could we do? Just make her comfortable until we found some pony else? She couldn't travel, not in the state she was in. An idea struck me.

“What if we go into the hospital and find him?” I said aloud. Every pony glanced over at me. Ichor had an expression of surprise painted on his face.

“You can't be serious,” he said. “It's dangerous. The feral ghouls won't let you that far in, and who's to say you'll even find him alive? He's most likely dead.”

“I don't care. I still need to try,” I said. “Patch is a good friend of mine, and if Doctor Rot can help her, I'll do whatever it takes.”

“Me too,” Steeljack said. “I'll join you, Star. If you'll let me.” I smiled and nodded.

“If you're going to do this, then I will remain here with Patch,” Lilith said. “I can keep an eye on her, and besides... I'm really getting sick of enclosed spaces.” I chuckled.

“Understandable,” I said. “Sunshine, why don't you stay with Lilith? That way if anything happens you can send a message to the others.” The pink unicorn nodded, smiling softly. I turned to Mayor Sludge. “Show us where the expedition went missing, and we'll take it from there.”

“Are you... are you sure? I mean, we'd greatly appreciate it... the good Doctor was very helpful to have here,” he said. I nodded, confirming that I was indeed going to do this. Ichor sighed. “Alright... I'm sending Silmetra with you. He knows a lot about this hospital's layout and he can help navigate better

than any other ghoul here.”

“Let's get this over with, then,” I said, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. I narrowed my gaze at Ichor Sludge. “I've got a friend that needs saving.”

“Are you certain this is the right way?” I asked, gulping as I glanced down the gloomy hallway in front of us. Silmetra stood to my side, a sly grin on his face.

“Frightened, Ministry Mare?” He said. My eyes widened.

“I'm not scared of a scary looking hallway,” I exclaimed. “I just want to make sure that we're headed in the right direction, is all.” We had been walking forward for a half hour through the part of the hospital that still had some power. Based on what the bat ghoul had told us, we were just about to pass the point at where the expedition had stopped communicating. The last report that had came in was before they started down this hall.

“Both of you, be quiet,” Steeljack's voice resonated from inside Tempest's helmet. “We don't want to be caught by any feral ghouls before we're ready.” I nodded, carrying Stargazer along in my magic.

“Steeljack's right,” Silmetra said. “We should keep moving, and quietly. I can feel that we are being watched.” My eyes widened as I glanced about our little group. There didn't seem to be anypony else here but us. The bat ghoul moved forward with confidence that I didn't have, making his way to the end of the dark hallway. It ended in a large set of double doors with a broken electronic sign above them. Lining the walls were gurneys and shredded and bloody sheets among other various broken medical tools.

Silmetra pushed open the door slightly, peering inside past it. He motioned to us to follow him and stepped through. The hallway on the other side of the door was more of the same, except for the fact that there were doors leading to large rooms on each side. Each door bore the familiar three butterflies of the Ministry of Peace. The hallway curved to the left at the end.

“What is this place?” I whispered to Silmetra. The bat ghoul pushing open a door to one of the rooms. It had a table inside of it with two chairs. Two pony skeletons sat across from each other.

“War-Time Stress Disorder. This is where they treated it,” he said quietly. “The Ministry of Peace was devoted to trying to help ponies cope with war, that this wing of the hospital was designated solely to treat ponies with the disorder. The expedition was supposed to have stopped in here and mapped the whole place before leaving with whatever they could find.”

We kept moving down the hallway, checking each room as we went. Many of them held tables and chairs with skeletons, while others were solid white (or would have been solid white if they were clean) and padded. At the end of the hall, we made the turn and found ourselves in a large open area with tables and chairs all over. Tiny offices branched off from the main area and two hallways could be seen at the far end.

“What do you think happened to the expedition?” I wondered aloud. Silmetra frowned.

"I believe that the majority of them perished," he said coolly. I grimaced.

"How do you know?" I asked. Silmetra pointed at the far end of the large hall.

"Because I believe we just found them," he said. Before the two hallways forked off was the makings of a tiny camp. Several bodies were strewn about, appearing to be ghoul in nature. Silmetra's eyes scanned the dead bodies, his tongue clicking as he looked them over. "It appears our friend the Doctor is not among these."

"Then he's not dead?" I said, feeling hopeful. Silmetra grimaced.

"That means he's not here. This is definitely the expedition though... but he's the only one of the group that's missing," the bat ghoul replied. "Still... they were attacked by feral ghouls, alright. See the bite marks and the scratches?" I nodded, following his motions. The scattered chunks had clear bite marks on them, equine bite marks. Silmetra's ears perked up as he was looking down at the campsite.

"What is it?" I asked. The bat ghoul's eyes flashed.

"Company," he said. Shuffling sounds emanated from the hallway on our right. Two feral ghouls came into view, growling loudly. The first thing I noticed is that they weren't immediately just charging at us. The second thing I noticed were the silver collars around their necks. The one on the right grunted, tapping the other ghoul. It snarled, starting forward at Silmetra. The bat ghoul craned his neck and opened his mouth and began to screech. I immediately slapped my hooves to my ears to stop the sound, wincing from the pain of hooves striking my head. In retrospect... the headache that followed wasn't entirely the fault of the sound.

The feral ghoul stumbled, falling to the ground. It writhed in pain as the other ghoul watched. It reached up with its bloody and rotted hooves, ripping off its own ears. It roared, charging at Silmetra. The bat ghoul closed his mouth and leaped back, enabling me to remove my hooves from the sides of my head. I grimaced, lifting Stargazer with my magic and clubbing the earless ghoul with it. It went flying into the wall with a ***thud***. A sharp retort from behind us caught my attention. I turned about to see Steeljack firing on three more ghouls who had appeared out of nowhere.

"What the...?" I said, more snarls and snapping drawing my focus back on the hallway. Four ghouls were coming down it, each one wearing one of those strange collars. "Silmetra... We need a plan here!" The bat ghoul extended his wings, leaping out of the way of a feral attack. He opened his mouth again, screeching loudly directly at the feral, whose head promptly *exploded*. I blinked at the sight of it. *Remind myself to never piss off this pony*, I thought. His blue eyes flashed again and he grimaced.

"Down the other hallway!" He shouted. "We'll get them on one side of us and try and make our way to the upper level!" He lifted into the air, flying towards the left hallway. I nodded, swinging Stargazer like a baseball bat at each ghoul that got close. More sharp retorts indicated that Steeljack was holding his own. I glanced back at the stallion.

"Steeljack, we gotta move!" I called out. He nodded, kicking out with a hoof to push back a ghoul that had gotten too close. The ghoul slammed into a wall, snapping at air. The collar on its neck caught the light for a second as Steeljack turned his rifle on it and blew its brains out. He turned tail and followed after Silmetra while I stayed back. I grinned, an idea forming in my mind. My horn ignited, casting

the anti-gravity spell as fast as I could on the ghouls in the room. Each one went soaring upwards to the ceiling above, grunting and growling as they tried to get down.

I galloped down the hallway, nearly running right into the others. I panted, spinning about and tossing as much hospital gear in the path as I could with telekinesis. It made for a nice pile, blocking the hall from any pursuing ghouls.

“Star, you alright?” Steeljack said. I nodded, breathing heavily under the load of the magic.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “Let’s keep moving and process what we know.”

“Well... we know that Dry Rot is most likely not dead,” Silmetra said as we continued forward. I could still hear the ghouls in the other room until we made it to the far end of the hall, where there was a set of doors leading to a stairwell. A set of broken elevators sat off to the side. “And we also know that whoever is controlling the ghouls knows we are here. I wonder though, what he wants with Doctor Rot. Arcane technology of this nature isn’t his forte.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I said. “Maybe whoever is controlling the ghouls is trying to figure out how to fix the collars, but its not working the same old way. A more natural, biological means makes sense.” Silmetra nodded.

“Regardless, we’re going to need to move up,” he said. “There doesn’t seem to be much more in this section besides the offices and waiting area. If we can reach the security core of the hospital we might be able to re-activate the camera system and find out where Dry Rot really is.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Steeljack said. “Do you know where that is?” Silmetra grinned sheepishly.

“I... I only have vague information to go on,” he said. “I’ve only been here for a few years at most. A drop in the ocean for a ghoul, really. The Duskhoof *hospital* has been here much longer. The best we know is that the security core is located up, and deep within the hospital’s administration offices.”

“Then up we’ll go,” I said, hearing the snarling and snapping of the ghouls down the hallway. Crashing sounds indicated that my gravity spell had finally worn off and that the monsters were trying to bash through the barricade. I grimaced, flinging open the door to the stairwell with my magic. “Come on, I’ll bar the door after we’re through.” The two stallions nodded, making their way up the stairs. I stepped inside, slamming the door closed and focusing in the back of my mind for something that could help us. A flicker of memory shot into the forefront of my thoughts. I grinned, casting the spell that Twilight’s memories had granted me. A part of me wondered why I had been able to find it as quickly as I had, but I had no time to complain as a beam of light shot forth from my horn, melting the seams of the door so it wouldn’t open.

I pushed on the melted door hard and it wouldn’t budge. *It’ll have to do. We’re definitely not leaving this way*, I thought. I turned tail and started up the stairs after my friends. The stairwell seemed to go upwards for forever. I cringed at the amount of stairs. What was it with prewar ponies and all these stairs?! I groaned, taking step after step. At the very least, my wing was starting to feel a little better even with all the strain of moving around. I could rotate it a bit without pain screaming through my side, so that was a plus.

We stepped onto the first landing and checked the door. Just on the other side of it there was a hospital map plastered on the wall. It was faded, but a giant red arrow pointing to a location with text saying **YOU ARE HERE** could be made out clearly on it.

“Well, now that's helpful,” Silmetra said, scrutinizing the map. He turned his head and opened his mouth. A shrill cry emanated from it. I winced at the pain it was causing me, causing the bat pony to notice and stop. “Oh. I'm sorry for that. I was just getting an idea of where things were.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I said, glancing over at Steeljack. The other stallion was busy reading the map, and hadn't reacted to Silmetra's cry.

“My guess is that being an alicorn, your hearing is slightly enhanced?” Silmetra said. I nodded. “I thought so. We duskhooves have a special talent that we can use to fight as well as to determine our location. It's all in our voice. Being a ghoul for as long as I have, it doesn't seem to have diminished that talent.”

“So wait... you can just... open your mouth and know where you are?” I asked, feeling very confused. Silmetra smiled.

“Yes... but the sounds we emit are typically too high for a normal pony to hear,” he said. “It seems that with your enhanced hearing you can actually hear me.”

“What about the feral ghouls? They certainly reacted to your screech,” I said.

“Yes... when used for combat, a duskhoof can project force with their screech. It can be used for many applications, but fighting is the most common one,” Silmetra replied. “It was a weapon unique to my kind, and frequently used by the Night Guard of Equestria. Princess Luna herself trained many of our kind to fight for her, and so we did.” I nodded.

“So does that mean you know where we are?” Steeljack said. “Cuz I can't make heads or tails out of this silly map.”

“It means I know where we need to go,” Silmetra said. “Our destination is here.” He pointed at a location on the map, its designation slightly smudged by the wear of time. Still, I could make out the word *Administration* over it. It was up four more levels and across the ER wing of the hospital.

“Great... more stairs?” I groaned. Steeljack chuckled as we shuffled back into the stairwell. “That's not funny. I swear, the Goddess of Stairs is punishing me for something.”

“I do not recall there ever being a 'Goddess of Stairs',” Silmetra said casually. I glared at him, but decided to drop it as we made our way up the cursed stairs once more. I decided after several minutes that the silence was killing me.

“So... Silmetra?” I said, catching the bat ghoul's attention. “You said you worked for the Military. Did you ever meet Luna? Or any of the Ministry Mares?”

“I... I met Luna several times, actually. Of the Ministry Mares, I only ever met Twilight Sparkle, and that was once,” he said.

“How did you meet Luna?” I said, scratching my head. Silmetra smiled.

“I was a duskhoof, and a contract engineer for the military. We met several times over the course of the war to discuss our involvement in military projects,” he said. “I believe that the Princess of the Night trusted those she kept closest to her most of all, and no other race were closer to her than the duskhooves.”

“Do you know anything about a project called Stargazer?” I said, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Yes... the ultimate weapon for the Princess herself. It was said that it never finished completion,” Silmetra said. I grinned sheepishly, pointing to the minigun slung off my harness.

“That's... not exactly true,” I said. “You're looking at that weapon.” Silmetra's eyes widened as he scanned up and down the minigun.

“I... I see,” he said finally. “It is an impressive find. Where did you locate it?”

“It was under the Mall of Equestria,” Steeljack interjected. “Just sitting there.” Silmetra frowned.

“What's wrong?” I said. The bat ghoul waved it off, smiling.

“Oh, nothing. Just amazing to see that it was actually completed. Many wondered about the possibility of using starmetal in weapons, but the risk and the costs of it were too high,” he said.

“I've wondered myself about how this even exists,” I said, glancing down at the minigun. “It seems like it's a technological impossibility to me. It's... it's very special. I can see why Luna wanted it to be completed.”

“Luna had nothing to do with it really. The gun was actually Twilight Sparkle's idea,” Silmetra said. “She believed that the Princess would need to be able to defend herself, and commissioned Star Gazer to build it secretly. I don't believe Luna even knew that it was she who came up with it.” I stopped in my tracks cold. Twilight knew about Stargazer? Something wasn't right there.

“Twilight? How did you know...?” I said, as the other two realized I'd stopped walking.

“Duskhooves have excellent hearing, Radiant Star,” Silmetra said. “I overheard Miss Sparkle discussing it with Star Gazer the day she commissioned it. Of course... she caught me eavesdropping. I was trying to get a better idea of what the Ministry was up to. Twilight's work had devolved at that time, and she was... troubled, I'd like to think.”

“What did she say?” I said, narrowing my gaze at the bat ghoul.

“That I shouldn't worry about it, and that if I told Luna... she'd... well...” he replied. “It wasn't pretty. It was the first and thankfully the last time I'd ever meet Miss Sparkle. Several months later... well you now the rest.”

“I do,” I said calmly. “Thank you Silmetra. We should keep moving.” The bat ghoul nodded and we continued up the stairs while I tried to process things. What did Twilight knowing about Stargazer mean to me? Was the weapon my back merely an extension of Twilight's power in this world? Was

that why it could damage beings like Discord or Nightmare? I wasn't sure. The gun had been built for Twilight, not by. A gun named Stargazer made by a unicorn named Star Gazer? I had to smile at that.

I woolgathered my way up the stairs, thinking back to Patch and wondering how she was doing. I was sure that Lilith and Sunshine were doing their best to care for her, but I was upset that I still didn't know how to really help her. I sighed to myself, letting my thoughts drift to my discussion with Patch and the later talk with Lilith. We'd all been through so much. At what point did I tell my friends to leave? To stop following my insane path of destruction that had left so many sacrificed or dead? Regardless of what Lilith had tried to beat into my brain, I was not feeling better about any of it. I'd put on a brave face for the others, but she had seen through it, having gone through far worse than I could even imagine.

Still... the fear gnawed at me. I feared that my friends might not make it away from all of this alive. I feared that I would be left alone. I feared that I would lose Violet and everything I ever cared for. I feared. It was unsettling, trying to contain it while we walked ever closer into what was certainly a death trap for us all. I only hoped I could maintain the courage necessary to press forward, for Patch's sake.

We eventually stopped four landings above where we had started from, finding two massive oak doors with the sign that said **Administration** over the top. I stepped forward, trying the door and finding it locked. I grimaced, flaring my horn in anger. A hoof gently touched my shoulder and I glanced over, seeing Silmetra. He shook his head and smiled, producing a bobby pin and a screwdriver.

"How about you let me deal with this?" He said softly. I sighed and nodded as the bat ghoul went to work against the lock. It took several minutes, but he managed to get it open. We pushed the door open and peered inside.

The hallway was much different than the rest of the hospital that we'd seen so far. Instead of off-white dirty linoleum the floor was hard wood, as were the walls. Pictures of happy ponies and fields of flowers, half blown apart by balefire and worn by the ages adorned the walls. There were no skeletons or anything to speak of, but the far end of the main hallway had collapsed onto itself. We made our way down it, noticing several hallways branching off deeper into the Administration offices. Many of the offices were closed, while a few were wide open. None of the lights were working either.

I grimaced, lighting my horn to provide some illumination while we walked. We turned down the first hallway, finding our way to a large open waiting room next to an even larger office. The name plaque on the door was unreadable for the most part, the only words that were legible read *Hospital Director*. I pushed open the door while the others checked around the immediate area. The security offices were somewhere in this maze of hallways, and maybe the director's office would provide some information.

The office was filthy, with papers strewn everywhere. Thankfully, the terminal in the corner was still lit. Sitting in the chair in front of it was a skeleton. *I guess we know what happened to him*, I thought as I gently lifted the chair with my magic and moved it aside. The terminal itself was still active and logged in, so I didn't need to hack it. I began to tap through the messages on it, rolling my eyes. The director had apparently been having some form of illicit affair with one of the senior nurses, and many of the communications were rather... *vivid* descriptions of their trysts. I was about to give up when I noticed a function on the main menu called **OPEN SECURITY DOOR**. I blinked, moving down to the option and selecting it. A soft *hiss* emanated from the other side of the room and I looked up, seeing a door embedded in the wall opening. From what I could see, there were rows and rows of

monitors and lights inside.

I stepped inside the tiny hidden room, confirming what I had seen from the outside. The room was basically a square box stuffed full of security and surveillance equipment. I scanned the monitors that were working, looking for something, anything that I could use to find out where Dry Rot was. I was a little frightened when I noticed there were plenty of cameras showing Duskhoof. There was even one showing the room Patch was in. The mare was laying back in a bed while Lilith and Sunshine sat nearby, occupying themselves with a game similar to Nixis and Steeljack's pastime. But still no sign of Dry Rot, anywhere.

A gunshot echoed through the air, taking my attention away from the screens. Steeljack's rifle was firing at something. *More ghouls?* I thought as I moved to leave the security room. I stepped back into the director's office and stopped. The pony sitting at the desk was best described as the ugliest pegasus I'd ever seen. His coat, what was left of it at least, was blood red and rotting, resulting in what appeared to be pure muscle and sinew in pony form. The soulless eyes of the ghoul glanced up at me from the desk, a sharp grin appearing on his face.

"So... you've come to my little abode," he croaked with his gravelly voice. Shouts and gunfire echoed from outside the office. I noticed then that the door was closed and worse, locked. Two feral ghouls with the collars on them stood guard. The ghoul noticed my attention to the door and chuckled. "No worries, there'll be no need for the lock soon enough."

"Open it, right now," I said, growling as I unlatched Stargazer. "Or so help me, I'll--"

"Do what, alicorn? Kill me? That would do your friends a lot of good, wouldn't it?" The ghoul interrupted me. "Besides... I know why you're here. You're here for Doctor Rot, am I correct?"

"Where is he?" I hissed, pointing my minigun at the ghoul. Pounding on the door. I grimaced. I needed to save the others, and fast. I couldn't let Steeljack die, not if his foal was going to live. I wouldn't let that happen.

"He's around," the ghoul replied. "I daresay he's rather comfortable, working for me. We've made so much progress here."

"By killing other ghouls? By attacking the town you helped found? You are Red Death, aren't you?" I said angrily. The ghoul snorted.

"The others, they did not understand the process of science. Sacrifices need to be made," the pegasus ghoul replied. "But you brought me exactly what I really needed, and at a perfect time."

"And what's that?" I said.

"A perfectly healthy pony brain. Of course, we'll have to extract it from him, but he is an excellent specimen," Red Death said. I scowled. More gunshots on the other side of the door. I wanted to move, to throw open the door, but I didn't know what this ghoul would do if I did, let alone his two guards.

"Let them go," I said. "All we want is to talk to Doctor Rot."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," the pegasus ghoul said casually, returning his attention to the papers at the desk. "You see, I need Doctor Rot. He's going to help me cure the ghoul condition."

"Cure... what?" I said, trying to process this. "But can't you do that... without killing anypony?" Red Death groaned.

"Oh... you're just like the ponies in Canterlot, when I worked as a Ministry of Peace doctor," he said. "Too extreme you are, Red. Why does nopony understand that sacrifices must be made to progress the world?" I sighed, taking a step forward.

"Because they don't always need to involve sacrificing pony lives," I said. "There's too much death in this world already. You're trying to cure what you are? That sounds brilliant. But the way you're doing it? You need to take a long hard look and figure that out."

"You don't understand... They never understood me!" Red Death shouted. The door opened suddenly, revealing a gaggle of ghoul guards guiding my friends inside. Steeljack's visor was retracted and he had a grim look on his face, while Silmetra focused immediately on the pegasus ghoul. Red Death sneered at the two. "Excellent. Execute the ghoul, and leave the earth pony. He and the alicorn will prove useful in my experiments."

"Don't do it, Red Death. I do understand... You want to make things better... I get that," I said forcefully. "That's all I've ever been trying to do. I have a friend who needs Doctor Rot. She's pregnant and very ill, and he's her only hope. You can give her a chance... a chance to bring forth new life." Red Death snorted.

"I always hated that name. Care was my name once. But, Red Death... I accepted that title because I didn't want anypony to know the wrongs I'd done to pony society," the doctor mused. "But enough of that. My experiments are more important. I'm very close to curing ghoullism. I'll be able to save hundreds of ponies with it."

"Some of us don't want to be 'saved', Red," Silmetra said quietly. Red snarled, turning towards the bat ghoul.

"I want to be saved!" He roared. "Do you think I like being like this? Do you think I like my body parts falling off and my skin rotting?! Do you?!"

"I know that this is our penance, Doctor Care," Silmetra said. "We should have died in the war. Life is punishing us for our sins, for our involvement in that senseless conflict. We can only deal with what we are." The bat ghoul sighed.

"Please... Doctor Care... I've seen enough death recently to know that I don't want to see anymore of it," I said. "You have an opportunity to do the right thing here... please... help us." The ghoul dropped his head to the table, moaning as he clutched it with his tattered hooves.

"Punishment, penance, death, I'm so SICK of it, Radiant Star! I regret every one of my fallen brothers, and it kills me to use these poor mindless fallen as... Shock troops!" Red Death straightened, waving his hooves angrily. "The 'right thing' is to cure my condition, to cure all of us! And I can't make any sort of progress in this sort of environment, I just want to be left alone! Left alone to do my work..."

“Then do better,” I said. “BE better. Help us. You don’t have to be the bad guy. You can do the right thing.”

“I... I will help you,” he said. “But not because I want to, not because it’s the right thing, but because I want something from you if I am to let you go.”

“What is it?” I said. “Nothing gross like a live pony brain, or nothing, I hope.” The pegasus shook his head.

“No... there is a portion of this hospital that I can't get into. The morgue. The door is locked tightly by a security system. Inside of it is enough unspoiled tissue for me to continue my experiments unfettered,” he said. “Help me, and I will allow you and Doctor Rot to leave.”

“We'll do it,” Silmetra said. “And the raids on the expeditions?” Red Death sighed.

“I won't attack your little groups, if that's what you're asking,” he said. “I am a civilized stallion after all. All I will request in return is that you stay away from this part of the hospital. This is my domain, and I will not have anypony interrupting my experiments.” Silmetra narrowed his eyes at the doctor, but nodded all the same. Red Death nodded in return, and motioned to one of his guards. “Retrieve Doctor Rot and bring him here. As a sign of good faith, I will allow him to go with you.” The ghoul left the room. Red picked up a device from the table, passing it over to me. It was a broadcaster, designed to go into a PipBuck.

“What is this?” I said.

“This will let you contact me to let me know that the morgue is accessible. Use it when you've opened the place, and you're free to go,” Red replied. He waved his hoof, and the guards hovering over my friends scattered instantly. The door opened again, revealing the ghoul guard from before and a grizzled unicorn ghoul. He looked at me and Silmetra, blinking.

“This some kind of joke?” He said, grunting. “Silmetra. Ichor Sludge send you?”

“Yessir, Doctor Rot,” Silmetra said. The unicorn grunted again.

“Right then. Red?” He said. The pegasus turned, meeting the unicorn's gaze. “I'll be in touch. We can make this happen, I know we can.”

“Wait...? You're actually working with him?” I said, feeling very confused. Dry Rot glanced over at me.

“Who are you?” He said. I grinned sheepishly.

“I'm... I'm Radiant Star. I came here to see if you could help my friend. You see, she's pregnant and...” I started to say. Dry Rot raised a hoof.

“I'll look at your friend, for a moderate fee, of course,” he said.

“This one is to open the morgue for us, Rot,” Red Death interjected. “You'll go with them to the morgue and then back to the town.”

“What about you?” Dry Rot inquired. The pegasus motioned to the other ghouls in the room.

“I can't leave, you know that. I have to help these unfortunate souls. It's sheer luck that the collars stave off their base urges, you know that. I need what is in the morgue to continue my work,” he said. Dry Rot sighed.

“Alright, Red. But I will be back, to help - and to visit. It's not healthy to stay alone all the time,” he said, looking over at us. “So... where to?”

“I guess we need to find the morgue,” I said. “Doctor, do you know where that is? I'm fairly new here after all.” Red Death nodded, motioning to my PipBuck which beeped softly as it picked up a new marker.

“I've sent the marker to your PipBuck,” he said. “Again, once you find it and open it, then just send me a message on the broadcaster.” I nodded, turning to follow the others out of the director's office. I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that we were doing the right thing. I didn't want for Red to be a problem. I'd had enough of maniacal masterminds for several weeks. I hoped that letting the pegasus ghoul to his own devices would actually do some good, rather than harm.

I sighed as we started down the hallway back towards the stairs. All we had to do was get into a morgue. What could go wrong with that?

“You've got to be fucking kidding me,” I said, staring at the giant metal door. Since leaving Red Death, we'd made our way down to where the morgue was. Traveling through the hospital without fear of feral ghouls was quite frankly boring. Dry Rot glanced up at me.

“Yeah... it's a fuckin' door, alright,” he said. “Our mutual friend has been trying to get in there for some time, but he can never crack the security.” I blinked.

“Well, we're fucked,” I said aloud. “I cannot break into terminals. I'm horrible at that.” Dry Rot chuckled as I stepped up to the terminal.

“I like you, you know that?” He said. “But unfortunately we don't have a choice. We've never had anypony around with access to a PipBuck, so we couldn't properly hack the thing. Now, we do.” I sighed, nodding.

“You're right,” I said, connecting my PipBuck to the terminal. It came up to the security menu, providing me with a list of several words that could possibly be the password. I racked my brain, trying to figure out what the password could be. I was absolutely not the smartest pony to be doing this. Still, I had to try. Violet wasn't here, and I had to get into this terminal now, or risk going back on my deal with Doctor Care. I picked the first word I saw *death*, and received an error. I grunted. *Wrong choice*, I thought. *Three left*.

I scanned the word listing, feeling more and more confused. I hit another word - *broken*, and received another error. I growled under my breath. *How does Violet make this look so easy?* I thought. I hit a third word, hoping that it would get me into the terminal. Wrong again. The terminal flashed,

pronouncing that I only had one attempt left. I snarled loudly.

“Dammit!” I shouted, ready to give up and smash the terminal to pieces in my normal fashion. Just as I was about to blow the terminal sky high, Steeljack place a hoof on my shoulder.

“Star, breathe. Back out of the terminal and try again, fresh,” he said. I blinked.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m such an idiot. Thanks, Steeljack.” The stallion grinned as I flipped off the terminal and back on. The device went through its security reset, and redisplayed a fresh list of possible passwords. I gained entry on the word *trauma* on my first try, which made me snort. A soft ding echoed from the terminal as I received a success message. My eyes gleamed as the menu came up. This hacking thing wasn’t so difficult, when I had the time to back out and be patient.

“I’m in,” I said, grinning. “Now let’s see what we have here...” I moved my way down the menu, looking for the option to unlock the door to the morgue. I found it all the way at the bottom and selected it. The door began to hiss as it started to open. I disengaged my PipBuck and stood next to the others.

“Excellent,” Dry Rot proclaimed. “With the tissue contained inside, Doctor Care should have enough samples to continue his work for a very long time.”

“Do you think he can actually do it?” Silmetra said. “Cure ghouлизм?” Dry Rot shrugged.

“It’s a hell of a lot better than the alternative,” the unicorn said. “Let’s just have a looksie --” Dry Rot’s words trailed off as the door opened wide enough, revealing two massive ceiling turrets that each fired blasts of energy towards the old ghoul. I reacted without thinking, using my telekinesis to push Rot out of the way as I leaped in to deflect the blasts with my shield. The purple barrier shuddered beneath the force of the laser fire as the guns wound up for another round.

“Everypony, get down!” I shouted, lifting Stargazer and taking aim. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up shot after shot at the two turrets. Dropping the spell, Luna’s mighty weapon launched a payload of destructive fire that rendered both defenses into piles of molten slag falling to the ground. I heard a grunt as Dry Rot stood.

“Geez,” he said. “I didn’t think there’d be active security after all this time.”

“Neither did I,” I said. “Wonder what they’d need to protect here?” I lifted the broadcaster that Red had given us and slapped it into my PipBuck, turning it on. “Doctor Care? We’ve managed to open the morgue. There were active turrets just inside the door, so we’re just going to go in real quick and make sure everything is safe inside.” A burst of static emanated from the device as the pegasus ghoul’s voice came on its speaker.

“Excellent. Just... don’t touch anything useful,” he said. I chuckled as I cut off the connection.

“No worries there, Doc. I’m ready to get the hell out of this place, myself,” I muttered, taking a step inside of the old morgue. Dry Rot followed with a laugh. Surprisingly, besides the slag on the ground from the turrets, the room was fairly clean. Rows and rows of metal cabinets lined the two walls on each side, extending to where there were several terminals along the back wall. Gurneys sat neatly in spaced rows in the middle of the room, each one with the body of a pony on it. I blinked, turning to

Dry Rot. "So... how are these things still preserved after so long?"

"Well... I'm not an expert in this end of the life cycle, but I know a little bit. This hospital was the place of my residency after all," he said. "The morgue was magically sealed to preserve ponies who were coming in from the war. With so many deaths, it was imperative that the bodies be preserved so that they could be buried appropriately."

"I... I see," I said. "So all those cabinets?" Dry Rot nodded. I gulped. That was a lot of dead ponies. I made my way towards the back where the terminals were, finding that they were still intact and working. There wasn't much to speak of, really. E-mails here and there to the mortician about scheduled pickups and a death record database. Whatever the turrets had been protecting certainly didn't seem like much.

"Well, it seems like everything is in order here," I said finally. "We should get back to Duskhoof." The others nodded and we started out of the room and into the hall. I fell back behind Silmetra and Steeljack to walk beside Doctor Rot. "So... you said you used to work here?"

"Before the war, I did, yes," the ghoul replied casually. "I was the premier specialist in the region in fertility and pregnancy studies."

"So that's why the unicorns at Tenpony said you could help us," I said, more to myself than anything. Dry Rot chuckled.

"Yes, it's nice to know that my reputation precedes me," he said. "While we walk, though, tell me a bit about your friend. It will be nice to have some information, don't want to go in cold, after all." I nodded and started talking about Patch as we continued down the hallways. It seemed like it took forever, but we finally arrived back in the main hall that led to the lobby area where Duskhoof was situated. As we trotted back into the town proper, we were stopped by none other than the mayor himself. He nodded at Dry Rot.

"So... it seems you were successful," he said. "We were beginning to get worried. Doctor, are you well?"

"Better than ever, you old muck-bucket," Dry Rot replied. Ichor's gaze narrowed at the old ghoul.

"And what about the feral ghouls?" He said.

"Ah, I'll field that one," I said. "The feral ghouls won't trouble your medical expeditions any longer. Doctor Care has promised to keep them contained to the Administration offices and the Morgue. As long as your expeditions don't bother them, they won't bother you."

"Doctor... you mean Red Death?" Ichor said. I nodded. "And you actually let him live? He's a monster! He's building an army in there!" Dry Rot snorted.

"Please. Care wouldn't know how to build an army if you gave him instructions," he said, striding past Ichor. "Just leave him alone, Sludge. He has what he wants, so leave it be." The mayor stammered as Dry Rot kept walking. I gave the earth ghoul a pained smile as I walked past myself.

"Best to listen to him, I think. He *is* a doctor after all," I said. Ichor grimaced and pushed past

Silmetra, heading towards his office. The bat ghouel had an amused expression on his face.

“I believe Mayor Sludge is going to be unhappy for some time,” he said. I grimaced.

“Yeah... sorry about that,” I said. Silmetra waved a hoof.

“That's no problem,” he said. “If it isn't one thing, it's something else. He'll come around. Now, let's go see your friend.” I nodded and we made our way after Steeljack and Dry Rot as the unicorn pushed open the door to Patch's room. The three mares inside looked up, rather surprised. Dry Rot grunted.

“Which one of you is Patch?” He said. The green mare raised a hoof. “Excellent. All of you, out. I don't work well with others. Go wait in the lobby, and I'll come out when I've finished.” I was about to protest until the old unicorn's horn lit, picking all of us up in a bout of telekinetic strength I'd only ever witnessed on a pissed off Violet and depositing us comedically outside the door in a heap. The door slammed shut and I groaned as I felt something furry resting across my cheeks.

“Can somepony get their hoof off my face?” I said.

“Uh, sorry about that,” Lilith said as I felt the offending appendage remove itself. We managed to untangle ourselves quickly enough and I glanced at the door. Sighing, I pulled my gaze to the others.

“There's not much we can do now, Star,” Steeljack said. “We've gotta trust in Dry Rot to find out what's wrong with her.” I nodded.

“I'm going to take my leave. I have duties to the town to patrol our borders,” Silmetra announced. “I will meet you all later, under hopefully good tidings.” The bat pony raised a wing and took off down the hall. Lilith grunted.

“Well, I don't care what that old hornbag says,” she said, plopping down next to the door. “I'm staying right here and guarding them.” Steeljack turned to her, placing a hoof on her shoulder.

“Thanks,” he said. “I know she'd appreciate that, Lilith. You're a good friend.” The black mare beamed at the stallion's compliment. He looked up at me. “If it's all the same to you, I'm gonna stick around myself. You two go on, check out the rest of the town.” I nodded, walking past the two with Sunshine as we made our way to the main waiting area.

“So... what do you want to do?” Sunshine said. I grimaced. With no time frame as to when Doctor Rot would be finished, I had to think of something. A tug in the back of my mind told me that I still hadn't looked at the memory orb that Discord left me.

But you promised Violet you wouldn't do that, a voice said from my mind.

Violet's not here, I thought.

So? That doesn't mean you should just break your promise like that.

What she doesn't know won't hurt her, I thought back. Having internally justified my plan of action, I turned to Sunshine.

“Actually, I think I'm gonna go get some rest,” I said shakily. “I could really use a breather.” Sunshine nodded, taking her leave of me. I sighed, thankful that I didn't know the pink mare well enough yet for her to be suspicious. I trotted along, finding a room off the beaten path from the rest of the town. I plopped in the middle of the floor, setting my bags next to me. I rolled the memory orb out, and activated it, taking the plunge as darkness filtered into my vision.

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I blinked, not recognizing the body I was in. I looked down at myself, seeing the body of a blue stallion. *Oh... no*, I thought as I realized who I was. Dusk Blue looked up, walking down a hallway that was very familiar to me. It was the main hall of the Manehattan harbor military base where I'd found Discord. The stallion made his way into the main hangar, stopping in front of the robots patrolling the path.

“Take me to Discord,” my host said. The robots beeped and turned towards the compartment crate. It hissed, opening softly and revealing the spirit of Chaos and his statue. My host sneered. “It's done.”

“Oh? Is it now?” A deep and dark voice rumbled from around the stallion. “Does she suspect anything?”

“Not a thing,” my host replied. “She will come to you when she is ready.”

“Excellent,” Discord's voice emanated from the statue. “You have been completely loyal to me, Dusk Blue. Your loyalty shall be greatly rewarded.”

“Thank you, Discord,” my host said. “The other thing you asked about... it's done as well.”

“The shard? It has been hidden appropriately?” Discord replied. My host nodded. “Good. Spark will never suspect my involvement in this. This should delay her sufficiently until Radiant Star can find her.” From the back of Dusk's mind, I blinked several times. Discord wanted me to find Spark? What sense did that make? Was the shard he was talking about the shard that Twilight had sealed Spark into?

“Forgive me, but what was the purpose of hiding the shard? Why not take it for yourself, and become the ultimate power in this world?” My host said. Discord snickered.

“Because... that would be far too predictable, Dusk Blue,” the spirit said. “Our little Star has a destiny to meet, and she's very important to what's coming next. And I do not want to miss being in the front row for that.”

“I... I see,” my host said. “You have what I asked for?” A rumbling laughter emanated from the stone. One of the Ponitrons rolled forward, a glinting metal amulet hanging off of the thing's hoof. It was the Alicorn Amulet.

“This was very easy to acquire, after the Twilight Society left Tenpony in search of the alicorn from those attacks,” Discord said. “Spark gave us the perfect distraction.” Dusk Blue grinned, his horn igniting and grabbing the amulet. He wrapped the chain around his neck, feeling the power of the amulet filling his horn with its magic.

“Excellent...” My host said, his eyes flaring red. He grinned widely as the voice of the spirit of

Disharmony cackled madly.

“Once our little Star has freed me, you will be poised to reveal yourself to her,” he said. “Just like you've planned to all along, right... spell caster?” My host's eyes widened.

“You... you know?” Dusk Blue said. Discord cackled again.

“Yes... I know of your part in this game, Dusk Blue. That is why you were selected for this little soiree of mine. You are of great importance to our little Star,” he said. “Isn't that right, Radiant Star?” I blinked, glancing behind me and seeing the form of the spirit himself. The memory faded to black, leaving us to our own devices. He chuckled loudly. “You have that look on your face again, it's killer you know that right?”

“Discord... what's your game? Why show me... this?” I said. Discord sneered.

“Because I felt like it,” he said, crossing his arms. He snapped a claw, making a fancy lounge chair appear out of nowhere. “And because I thought it would have been funny.”

“The shard. You had Dusk Blue hide it? Why?” I said. The spirit put a paw up to his chin, thinking for several long moments.

“Balance. Spark represents an upset in the natural order of the world. Order and Chaos must exist at the same time,” he said. “And I hate Order... more than anything. Chaos is sort of my thing, after all. Spark wants to control everything.”

“But I thought you wanted that power?” I asked. Discord grinned at me.

“I've got front row tickets for everything, so I can't really complain, Radiant Star. After all, you do have a destiny to meet,” he said.

“I... I don't get it,” I said. Discord shrugged.

“You see, Star... I really was reformed so long ago. And I've got an old friend to visit, the one who helped with my reformation. There's nothing more important than that,” he said. “Friendship... they say, really is magic. You're doing a fair job of that one.”

“What do you mean?” I said angrily. “I'm doing just fine with my friends.”

“And yet, you are breaking the promise you made to your lover right now,” Discord sneered. “You are pushing away your friends, and why? For some misguided ideal of how you're to blame for everything?” I growled.

“That's not fair. Who are you to lecture me?” I said. “I am to blame for what happened to all those ponies out there, and for what happened to Patch. I'm responsible for Dusk Blue.”

“I hate to point out the brahmin in the room, but I'm responsible for him,” Discord said, grimacing. I glared at the spirit, considering his words. He was right about that. All this time, I'd been pointing hooves at myself for what had happened, but it was Discord who'd manipulated me. It was Discord who'd pushed and pulled every step of the way. And yet... he looked remorseful for it. I found that I

didn't care. He was still to blame.

"That's right," I said, snarling. "You are responsible. You did all of this. And when I find you..."

"Oh, but you won't find me, Radiant Star. I'm no longer here, of course. I'm off, busy doing whatever it is I do best," Discord replied. He snapped a claw, producing two golden tickets. "Biding my time until I can cash these in for the greatest fight to ever grace the Equestrian Wasteland." He snapped another claw, disappearing into nothingness. "We'll be seeing each other again... Radiant Star. Arrividerci!!"

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I groaned, opening my eyes to the dark room as I remembered where I was. The thoughts of the contents of the memory orb filtered through my mind. Discord... he had manipulated Dusk Blue, and all for what? To try and force me towards Spark? I wondered about what he had said about balance. Did that truly justify what Discord had done? He tried to use chaos to enforce balance? It didn't make any sense to me.

I silently cursed to myself. He was right about one thing. I'd just broken my promise to Violet. Who knows what could have happened while I was stuck in the memory orb. I sighed. Violet was right. I was addicted to these things... I needed some help.

"You're awake," a voice said. I became aware that I wasn't the only pony in the room. I looked up, seeing a set of bright blue eyes in the darkness. Silmetra flashed a toothy smile at me as he appeared out of the shadows.

"Silmetra?" I said, cocking my head. "What are you doing here?"

"I was asked to keep an eye on you," the bat ghouled said.

"I'm not a foal," I said angrily. Silmetra frowned.

"No. You most certainly are not," he said. "But even I can tell when a pony is hurting. So tell me, what ails the Ministry Mare?"

"What are you, a psychiatrist when you're not a guard?" I challenged. Silmetra only chuckled.

"No... I'm a friend. A friend with excellent listening skills," he said, flipping his ears a little as he sat next to me. "So speak, and I shall listen." I sighed, dropping my head.

"I've done some bad things," I said. "I released an evil spirit of chaos... I nearly caused a war... I let the spirit of Magic out into the Wasteland... I'm fucking addicted to memory orbs and I couldn't even keep a simple promise to the one pony I love."

"And you came all the way here because you wanted to save a friend. You chose to speak to Red Death's good side rather than attack him. From what I've heard on the radio of you, you're a hero," he said. I chuckled, looking down at my hooves.

"I'm no hero," I said. "Heroes do awesome things for everypony. Everypony looks up to them. I'm

just a hot mess with a wagonload of problems.”

“Problems... that in the scheme of things mean absolutely nothing,” Silmetra said. “Life... it comes and it goes. I’ve witnessed at least two hundred years worth of it... and if there’s anything I’ve seen is that even the ordinary can do something extraordinary. You are meant for something, Radiant Star. Something... fantastic.”

“Lately, it seems all I’m meant for is screwing things up,” I said, sighing. “Sorry, Silmetra. You’re trying, I know that.” The bat ghouel shuffled his wings.

“You will find your role, Radiant Star. You will find what virtue drives you,” he said. “This, I know. Now... I also have come because Dry Rot has finished with your friend. I am to take you to them.”

“He’s done with Patch?” I questioned, standing. The bat ghouel nodded silently. “Well why didn’t you say so?”

“Because it was you who needed the help,” Silmetra replied. He motioned with a wing. “Follow me.” I nodded, following behind the bat ghouel as we made our way towards where Dry Rot’s offices were. Silmetra held the door open, allowing me to enter. I blinked as I noted the lack of the unicorn ghouel, while the others sat in the middle of the room around Patch. The green mare waved happily.

“Star! You’re here!” She said. I smiled.

“Hey Patch,” I said. “How are you feeling?” The earth mare beamed at me.

“I’m feeling a lot better,” she said. “Just waiting for the doctor.” A cough from behind me caught my attention. I glanced back, seeing Dry Rot. The unicorn ghouel had a grim expression on his face. I moved aside, allowing him to enter the room. He stepped forward, setting a folder onto the desk in the corner. He turned to us, and his face twisted. It took me a second to recognize the expression as a smile, and one that went all the way to his eyes.

“Well. I surmise you wish to know what is going on with your pregnancy?” He said to Patch. The mare nodded. “I’m happy to report that you have a very healthy pregnancy.”

“Then why did I... you know, fall over and faint?” She said. Dry Rot nodded.

“You haven’t exactly been taking good care of yourself, and your foals were taking what strength they needed from your body. They are developing at a slightly faster rate than normal, but still healthy. We also had to purge a fair amount of radiation from your system,” he said casually. I blinked.

“Did... did you just say foals? As in... plural?” I said. The ghouel nodded.

“I’m going to have two foals?” Patch said, looking up at the old doctor. Lilith squeezed her friend’s shoulder, smiling brightly.

“Indeed. You have two healthy foals inside you. I’m absolutely sure of it,” he said. “I’m an expert in the field of fertility, however, not radiation. After what you told me, the only thing I can guess is that the developing cells split due to the amount of radiation you took in. It’s... not a perfect explanation, as I am only guessing at this point.”

“Could you... could you see what race they were? Gender? Were there any problems with them? Extra hooves? Mutated bodies?” Patch said frantically. Dry Rot chuckled.

“Easy there. Both of them are fine. Based on my analysis, you have a unicorn and a pegasus, female and male respectively,” the ghoul said. “And they are both normal and healthy, as long as you take care of yourself.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean... she needs to eat a little better, as best as she can at least, and rest,” Dry Rot said. Patch grimaced.

“But... I want to keep going on with Star,” she said. “I can't just stop that.” The ghoul nodded.

“I know. I'm not going to keep you from your friends, but you do need to take care of yourself,” he said. “I don't have much, but I can provide you with some medicine to help regulate.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” I said. “I... you have no idea how much I am happy to hear that.” The ghoul grinned.

“No big deal,” he said, waving a hoof. “You did a great service to this town by helping with the expeditions. Now... if you'll excuse me. I have some business to attend to with the mayor.” Dry Rot made his way out of the small room, leaving us alone. I glanced down at Patch.

“I'm... I'm gonna be a mom,” the green mare said, tears streaming down her face as she looked over at Steeljack. “Steely... our foals... we're gonna be parents...” Steeljack smiled softly, taking his love's hoof.

“I know. I never doubted it for one minute,” he said. Lilith wrapped her wing around her friend in a spine-crushing hug. I stepped over to the others, catching Patch's eye.

“Star...” She said, reaching out for me. I nodded. Nothing else needed to be said as she reached out and pulled me into the group hug. I started to cry, letting everything out. Despite everything that had happened, the prospect that life, as Silmetra had put it, would go on got to me finally. I let it all out, and didn't feel bad about it.

As long as I had my friends, as long as I was surrounded by their love... Maybe... maybe there was hope for me yet.

Footnotes!

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 30: All is Lost

It's not about the weather, Spike. Rarity had Rainbow Dash's cutie mark and said this was Rainbow Dash's cottage. Something strange is going on...

Promises. A promise is something that one says they will do in order to maintain and retain a trusting relationship with another. Promises are supposed to be steel-clad, proving that the pony is trustworthy.

Promises are hardly that strong. In truth, promises are fragile and easily broken. I should know. I've broken more promises than I'd care to admit. I promised my friends that I would take care of them, and I managed to let Patch's unborn foals be nearly killed by radiation. I broke my promise to Violet, allowing my... addiction to memory orbs to consume me in Duskhoof.

I often think back to the past, to the world of yesterday, and the promises made by the Ministry Mares to the citizens of Equestria. They too, broke their promises, despite their best efforts to keep them.

How many more promises would I have to break before I would learn to keep them? How much death would I need to see before I could look away, and witness life?

I stood over the pile of junk, sweat pouring from my brow as my horn moved pieces of trash and rubble about. It had been a day since Dry Rot had given Patch the news I'd been wanting to hear since she had told me she was pregnant. It was like some great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Still, I felt like I needed to do something to just think. Mindless labor made for great thinking.

I grunted, picking up a pile of steel and setting it in the 'to use' pile. The courtyard in the middle of the hospital provided for some excellent scrap, given that several skywagons had crashed in the middle of it. Most of them were utterly unusable, but the parts themselves were just right for what I was attempting to build.

The stress, the pain, the hurt of the last week alone all fell into line with my tiring work. Even with my pool of magic, I was still exhausted from lifting piece after piece of metal and rock. My mind overworked itself with the prospect of new life, of Patch's foals, and of the death that I had seen. I thought about what Silmetra had said, of finding my role in the world. What was my purpose? Was all I ever intended for was to bring death to those around me?

That couldn't be right. Somewhere, deep down inside, I knew that it couldn't. I had a purpose, after all. I had to find Spark. To end whatever her plans were for the Wasteland. Discord had given me an edge there, by hiding the shard, whatever it was. I still had no idea there. As I worked, I thought about everything that I had done and still planned to do in the world. I was floundering, getting drawn into conflict after conflict like I was some Celestia-forsaken Wasteland heroine. Everything ended in death, in heartache.

And yet... out of the heartache there was good. Times shared with friends. Love and warmth with Violet. Violet... I knew deep down I'd done her wrong, breaking my promise to her over my use of the memory orb. I wasn't honestly sure how she was going to react to it. I loved her, so very much that it

hurt me deeply to realize that she was right. That I was addicted to memory orbs, and couldn't even keep a simple promise.

Regardless, I knew that in the end, Dusk Blue wasn't truly my fault. Lilith was right, I was attempting to shoulder too much burden on myself, without thinking about how my actions impacted everything else. I was giving myself too much blame, too much credit. I didn't cause the NCR to attack the Twilight Society. I knew that, somewhere. Part of me still tugged, still wanted me to blame myself, but I knew I couldn't act like that.

I had to be better, much like I had told Red Death. I had to do better. It was time to stop running from my problems, and start facing them. To stop blaming myself for every little piece of Wasteland that tugged at my soul. In my solace, I knew that I could do it. I could push past the blame, past the self-hate, past everything. I could do it, because I had my friends to show me the path.

I had to be ready to take that first step, and that step began with a very simple task. I was building a wagon.

I grunted again, igniting my horn and lifting a massive metal wheel. It was heavily rusted, but it would still work for what I was wanting it for. I managed to get lucky enough to find another one of similar size and shape. I took several pieces of steel, using my magic to weld them together in a rough approximation of an open box. I panted, pulling up two large bars off of some of the skywagon carcasses to serve as axles. *This can work*, I thought, grinning. *This will work!*

I glanced around, searching for any small pieces of metal that could serve as pins to lock the wheels into the back of the makeshift wagon. A quick shuffling of my piles revealed a few tiny cylinders of steel. I grinned, carrying the metal pieces over to where I had set the wheels. My horn flared, lifting both the wheels and the pins up to the frame on the bottom of the craft. I grimaced as I inserted the first pin. It started in smoothly, and I smiled.

Then it *fucking broke*. The pin snapped off like it was a piece of bone. I growled under my breath, igniting my horn and forcing the broken pin out of the wheel. I picked up another pin and started to force it in, trying my best to insert it as carefully as I could. Everything was going well, until that one also broke, in the same place no less. I snarled loudly, flaring my horn and trying another pin. The third one held, and I welded it in place with a brush of magic. The pin slid easily into place on the other side, and the cart hung in my magic as I gently set it down..

The cart sat, gleaming gently in the glimmer of my magic. I doused my horn, and the cart settled under its own weight.

And promptly collapsed as the wheels broke. The box bounced apart as the frame hit the ground, I roared. Everything I had collected, including the ruined wagon, came up in the grip of my magic. I repeatedly smashed it into the ground in front of me. The pieces of metal transformed from something recognizable into something completely *unrecognizable*. That was when I heard a cough coming from behind me. I turned my head, my manic eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and overwork, seeing Steeljack standing there. Hitched to him was a simple two-wheeled cart, from where Patch sat within its confines. She was smiling.

“Where... where did you get that?” I managed to breathe.

"Found it," Steeljack said. "Intact, too. What were you trying to do?" I looked down at the slag beneath my hooves.

"Uhh... nothing. It's not important," I said, deciding that I didn't really need to explain what my goal had been. An engineer I was not, apparently. Regardless, some form of transportation had been acquired for Patch. That was all that mattered. "Patch, how are you doing?"

"Feeling a little better," the green mare said. "After everything that's happened, I'm still finding it a bit hard to believe that I'm having more than one foal. I'm... not even sure if I'm ready for it." I smiled softly.

"You will be a fine mother, Patch," I said. "Of that I have no doubts. You are a good friend, and your foals will learn that from you. Did Dry Rot give you a timeframe on when we can leave?"

"He said tomorrow," Patch replied. "He wants to watch me for another night, make sure that everything is working properly. He also wants to make sure I eat a proper meal." I nodded, smiling.

"Seems like you really like him," I said. Patch grinned.

"He's a great doctor. I won't deny that," she said.

"We can use this to take Patch and any supplies back to Tenpony with us," Steeljack said, motioning at the cart. "Also, Silmetra had a runner sent there to let Violet and Nixis know when we'd be back." I flinched at Violet's name. Regardless of whatever epiphany I'd worked out on my lonesome, it was still not going to spare me from admitting my transgression to my lover. Apparently my twitch had been a little more visible, because I caught Patch's attention.

"Something wrong, Star?" The green mare said. I sighed. *No more running*, I thought. *No more hiding*.

"I... I messed up, you two. You of all ponies deserve to know. I... I broke my promise to Violet, over the memory orbs, while Dry Rot was looking at you, Patch," I said, hanging my head. "I... I tried to justify it, tried to tell myself that it was necessary, but there it is." The green mare smiled softly, pulling herself out of the cart and trotting over to me. She put a hoof on my shoulder and spoke.

"Star... It's going to be alright," she said.

"I... What if Violet doesn't forgive me?" I said, looking down at my friend. Patch snorted in derision.

"Violet not forgive you? Sweetie, Violet is yours. She always will be. You'll work past this," she said. "Trust me. Everything will be just fine. Just be honest with her." I nodded. A shadow appeared overhead and I glanced up. It was Silmetra. He was coming in fast. The bat ghoull landed in the courtyard and began galloping over to us.

"Star, thank the Goddess I found you," he said. His voice was frantic.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Silmetra's gaze narrowed as he motioned back towards the hospital.

"We've got a problem. You three need to come with me. I only pray we're not too late," he said. I

grimaced, nodding and trotting after the bat ghoul as Steeljack and Patch hooked up to follow as well. The closer we got back to Duskhoof, I began to hear shouting coming from the market area. The entire town of ghouls appeared to be present, surrounding some sort of spectacle. I heard Dry Rot's voice, and Ichor Sludge. Silmetra looked pensive as we pushed our way through the crowd.

Ichor Sludge stood at the center of it all, with two unicorn ghoul guards standing across from him. In their hooves was none other than Red Death. The pegasus ghoul looked down at his hooves, saying nothing. Dry Rot stood across from the earth pony ghoul, glaring at him.

"Let him go, Ichor!" Dry Rot roared. "He's of no threat to you."

"I'm in charge here, Doctor. Not you," Ichor said. "We cannot afford to let this... madpony go free. He's an abomination!" Half of the crowd roared in response to their mayor's call.

"What in the world is going on here?" I said, making my presence known. The crowd grew quiet as I stepped into the center of it. On the other side, Lilith and Sunshine watched carefully. "What have you done, Mayor Sludge?"

"I've done what was necessary to protect my ponies here, Ministry Mare. It's none of your concern," Ichor replied. "Now I would appreciate it if you would take your things and leave. I will take care of this... this monster."

"Red Death is not a monster," I said harshly. "He's trying to save you all. Don't you see that?" Ichor snarled.

"He's building an army!" He seethed, baring his teeth at me. "I'm the mayor. It's my job to protect this town, and what good would I be doing if I let some... some *thing* build a fucking army of ferals right under my nose? Huh?" I grimaced, lifting a hoof to my forehead.

"Luna, give me strength..." I said before glaring at the earth pony ghoul again. "Are you really so short-sighted? Did you not see the research that he was doing? He was trying to cure ghoullism!"

"Of course they didn't see it," Dry Rot said. "They burned it when they captured him."

"What?" I said. "How did they even get to him?"

"Because I fucked up," the old unicorn ghoul replied. "I led them back to Red. His defenses were down. It's my fault they got him."

"Yes... we greatly appreciate your... assistance, Doctor," Ichor said. "Now then, all of you! Go back to your homes. We will take care of the traitorous beast you see before you!" The crowd didn't move a single inch. They were too focused on me, on what I was going to say next.

"Idiot!" I shouted. "You burned the only chance that you had at keeping yourselves from going feral! Of saving those who have already gone! You... I just can't fucking believe it!"

"I can," Dry Rot said. "You never did think too highly of Red, did you Sludge?"

"He killed Faith! And not to mention the research he's been doing. Do you really believe he's trying to

cure ghouls?” Ichor Sludge said angrily. I grimaced. I had to do something to defuse this whole situation. I carefully nodded across the room at Sunshine and Lilith. They glanced over at Ichor, and nodded in return as they began to move into place.

“Yes I do! I saw it, Sludge! He was close to finishing something that would have made feralism a thing of the past!” Dry Rot snarled.

“More like a way to control his feral army,” Ichor replied. “Now... unless you are planning on stopping me, I have business to attend to. Gentlecolts, take the traitor to the jail.” He turned towards the two guards holding the pegasus ghoul. The guards had their hooves up, the massive barrel of the Bitch keeping their attention while a thorny green tangle of vines held them rooted to the ground. Sunshine had a sharp grin on her face as her horn flared, releasing Red Death from his bonds. The pegasus ghoul fell to his hooves, rubbing his sides from where the guards had held him. Still, he remained silent. Ichor Sludge growled, stepping forward.

“I’m sorry dear mayor, but I’m afraid I cannot let you do this,” a voice said as Silmetra landed behind the earth pony ghoul, grabbing a hold of him. The bat ghoul looked at me, smiling.

“Let me go! I will have your head for this, Silmetra!” Ichor roared. I stepped forward into his line of sight.

“No. You won’t,” I said. “I agree with Dry Rot. You’ve made a big mistake here, Sludge. You may have just single-hoofedly stopped medical progress that could have saved ghouls all across the Wasteland. Your hate has blinded you.”

“I’m protecting the welfare of the ghouls under my care!” Ichor replied, struggling against Silmetra’s hold. “You’re all insane!”

“You’re pursuing insanity, Ichor!” Dry Rot said.

“Stop, Rot,” Red Death said suddenly. “It’s... it’s over.” The unicorn ghoul grimaced as he turned towards his friend.

“No, old friend. You deserve to be treated better than this,” he said, returning his attention to Ichor Sludge and Silmetra. “Silmetra, what do you plan to do with him?”

“Lock him up,” I interjected. “No pony should have to die for this. Let Ichor Sludge ponder what he’s done.” The others nodded. The crowd around us was deathly silent as they watched. It was almost as if they were unsure who they should be rooting for.

“I agree with Star,” Silmetra said. “Ichor Sludge, you are hereby placed under arrest. May Luna show you her grace and mercy.” He moved to push the other ghoul forward, when Ichor Sludge growled and bucked Silmetra, breaking his hold. The earth pony ghoul kicked back, knocking Silmetra to the ground. Time seemed to slow down as we moved to intercept Ichor, the ghoul reaching into his pockets and pulling out an ancient looking pistol with his teeth. He took aim and fired.

BLAM BLAM BLAM

My eyes widened as I stopped cold in my tracks. Red Death had jumped in the way, taking the full

force of the bullets. The pegasus ghoull went soaring through the air, sliding across the ground as his wet and slimy lifeblood spilled out upon it. The crowd parted as he lay there, unmoving. I turned back, growling as Silmetra regained his hoofing. Ichor Sludge wildly pointed the gun around, but was too slow to avoid Silmetra's hoof striking him against his neck. The earth pony ghoull fell to the ground, the pistol clattering away from his grip. Immediately the crowd erupted into a frenzy, with the ghoulls shouting loudly for blood.

"Red?!" Dry Rot yelled, shoving his way through the others as he made his way to his friend. He dropped to his haunches, placing a hoof on the pegasus ghoull's shoulders. I grimaced and looked over Silmetra, who stood over Ichor Sludge.

"You have this under control?" I said. The bat ghoull nodded, turning to address the crowd.

"All of you! Disperse! There is nothing to see here! Return to your homes, and I promise once this is all sorted out, that we will continue forward! I will see to it! Now, go!" He shouted. The crowd, unsure at first of what to do about the bat pony's challenge, quickly decided to heed his words. Soon we were left alone in the lobby. I trotted over to Dry Rot.

"Is he...?" I asked hesitantly. Dry Rot shook his head.

"He's... barely there. C'mon, Red... talk to me. Let me know you're alright," he said, shaking his friend. The pegasus groaned loudly and looked up at the old unicorn.

"Sorry... I had to do it... I couldn't stand watching this tear apart our town," he managed to choke out. "I'm... I'm truly sorry old friend." His head lolled to the side and he moved no more. I sighed, placing a hoof on Dry Rot's shoulder.

"Damn Ichor..." he said, pushing me off and standing. He turned to Silmetra. "Silmetra, move out of the way. That fucker doesn't deserve to live." I grimaced, putting myself in between the two.

"No," I said. "My advice still stands, Dry Rot. Ichor Sludge should be imprisoned for the things he has done. If we allow ourselves to fall to his level... to murder him, we would be just as horrible, just as short-sighted. We must do better." Dry Rot snarled and lifted his hoof, but stopped and sighed.

"You're right. You're right," he said. "I want with all of my black heart to kill him right now..."

"You're a doctor," I said. "You're here to preserve life, not take it away." Dry Rot nodded. I looked over at Silmetra. "Do you have somewhere safe for him?" The bat ghoull nodded silently as he began to work on binding the former mayor. "I don't suppose you hold elections here for who gets to be the next mayor?"

"I will do it," Silmetra said softly as he finished the bindings. He slung the unconscious ghoull over his back. "I will shoulder the burden. After all, if I had not been strong enough, then Red would still be alive."

"Silmetra..." I said quietly, trotting over to him. "This isn't your fault. It happened. I get that now. I know why I felt like everything was my fault. It was because I took too much of the burden, and lost my purpose. Maybe your purpose now is to lead this community, not because you have to, but because you can." The bat ghoull nodded, pondering my thoughts for a brief moment. He was about to say

something when a rumbling noise caught our attention. I glanced around. None of the others had noticed it yet.

“You hear that?” Silmetra said. I nodded, a stray thought filling my mind.

“Umm... guys? If Red is dead, then who's controlling the ghouls he was studying?” I said aloud. Dry Rot's eyes widened.

“Oh, fuck,” he said. I turned my head towards the old ghoul, narrowing my gaze at him.

“What do you mean, ‘oh fuck’?” I asked.

“I mean, Red's tech... it works a lot like a sonic emitter. Lulls the ferals into a bit of a haze. The remote control was... it was on him...” Rot replied, searching over the pegasus ghoul's body. He lifted something square shaped out of Red's front pocket and lifted it up. It was a remote control device, and it was destroyed, a bullet hole dead center in the hoofmade face of the unit. My eyes widened.

“Everypony, fall back!” I shouted. The others didn't have a chance to respond before a slobbering feral ghoul burst through the main lobby doors leading into the hospital tunnels. The collar around his neck was blinking. Howling in mindless rage, the ghoul charged into the center of the room right at Steeljack and Patch.

“Oh, no you don't,” Steeljack said, his visor sliding down. The armor-clad earth pony disconnected himself from the cart and wheeled about, delivering a buck to the skull of the ghoul that crushed its head in a second. The ghoul fell to the ground in a heap. I grimaced. Stargazer and most of our gear was back in our room. The only ones that could really fight were Lilith, Sunshine, and Steeljack. I glanced over at the armored stallion.

“Steeljack, get Patch out of here. Take Dry Rot with you. We'll try and barricade these doors from here,” I said. Steeljack nodded, hooking back up to the tiny cart. Patch gave me a look, but nodded in understanding. I knew deep down that she knew the score.

“Hop on, Doc!” The green mare called out. The grizzled old unicorn ghoul grimaced, but jumped on anyways as Steeljack tore out of the lobby to safety. Rasping and sucking sounds from the hall beyond indicated that we were about to have a whole lot of party guests, and I didn't have any cake.

“Sunshine, see what you can do about these doors,” I said. The pink mare nodded, her horn igniting brilliantly as a mess of vines appeared, slithering up the doors and covering them completely. She panted as she let the spell drop.

“That should --” She started to say, before the ghouls on the other side of our barricade crashed into it. Limbs and snarls found their way through the cracks of the vines, but nothing managed to get through.

“That isn't going to hold them for very long,” Lilith said. “They are royally pissed at us, and they won't stop for nothing.”

“The collars,” Silmetra said. “They're going haywire. Without a signal from Red Death's remote control device, they're causing the ferals pain. There's gotta be some sort of failsafe shutdown.” I glanced down at the body of Red Death, sighing.

“Alright, so what do we need to do then?” I said. Silmetra plopped down next to Red's body, searching through the bags and clothes he had been wearing. Nothing other than the damaged remote control that Dry Rot had found.

“Well, unless there's some sort of backup remote control or a failsafe device... we're pretty fucked,” he said. A groan came from the room as we realized that Ichor Sludge was starting to wake up. The former mayor glared daggers up at me and the others. Silmetra stood, trotting over to him. “Ichor. When you captured Red, was there any other devices that he had in his office? Something that could have been used to reset the collars?”

“Fuck you,” Ichor spat. “You took away everything. You wanted that... that monster to finish building his army? You're all fucking crazy!”

“Ichor, listen to him,” I said. “The failsafe device. Where is it? When you killed Red, the feral ghouls started in a frenzy. We need to stop them.”

“Tough shit,” Ichor replied, laughing. “You all turned on me... so it only seems fair.” I sighed, looking over at Silmetra.

“Looks like we're not getting much out of him,” I said. “Any ideas.”

“Just one... I could... I could use my screech to disable the collars themselves,” the bat ghouled said. “By applying it directly to their collars, it would act as an E.M.P. pulse.” My eyes widened.

“But that would mean... You can't, Silmetra!” I cried. The bat ghouled's bright blue eyes flared.

“It's our only option. We have to protect the town,” he said. “You hold the fort here. I'll disable the collars. Hopefully, it will leave the ferals in a fresh state of ignorance. If we're lucky, they'll leave us alone.” The bat ghouled strode past me towards the vines blocking the doors. The ghouleds behind were still snapping and snarling, but no longer trying to force their way through. “Sunshine, give me an opening.” The pink mare looked up at me for guidance, and I reluctantly nodded. Sunshine's horn flared and the vines dissipated, revealing a very confused hallway of ghouleds. Silmetra yawned and grinned.

“Come on then,” he challenged as he flapped his wings and soared into the hallway. My hooves went to my ears immediately as the bat ghouled landed next to his first target, screeching wildly. The collar around the feral's neck began to blink faster before going dark and falling off to the ground. The feral fell back into the crowd, where it was ripped apart by its own army. I blinked, my mind making the connections that were playing out in front of me.

“Silmetra! They're only attacking targets that don't emit the signal from the collars!” I shouted. The bat ghouled nodded, turning to screech loudly at two more ghouleds. The force of the screech tore the collars from their necks as the other ghouleds tore into them. Silmetra grimaced as he ducked underneath a slash from a nearby feral.

“There's too many!” He shouted back. “I'm going to have to lead them away from the town! Even if I manage to hit them all, they'll still attack you!” I stomped a hoof angrily.

"You dummy! I can't let you do that!" I called. Silmetra grinned.

"Don't worry. I can handle myself," he said. "Just seal up the doorway. I'll be right back." I sighed, nodding at Sunshine again. The pink mare's horn lit up again and the vines began to cover the doorway. I shook my head, groaning.

"Dammit... I'm gonna regret this," I muttered as I looked up and charged past the vines before the others could say a thing. The closing vines licked at my tail, but I made it past them and continued forward into the fray. Silmetra's eyes widened.

"Star, what are you...?" He started to say. I waved a hoof.

"No time. Fly!" I cried out as I spread my wings, taking off like a rocket past the bat ghoul. Silmetra leaped into the air and followed suit, the feral ghouls following behind us like a train. We twisted and turned through the hospitals dead halls, the rasping and sucking sounds getting louder and louder. I grimaced. We couldn't keep this up for very long. The ghouls would eventually get tired of us and go towards easier prey. An idea flittered through my mind. I tucked in, landing on my hooves and screeching to a halt. Silmetra stopped next to me and perked his ears.

"I'd say we got their attention," he said. "Now what?"

"We need to get them all into one place. The courtyard," I said, pointing out the window nearest to us. The courtyard I'd spent all morning in was clearly visible through the dirty smudges of the glass.

"What are you planning?" Silmetra said. I grinned widely.

"What goes up, must come down," I said, nudging at the window. It refused to open, so I used my lockpick. The window, frame, and a large chunk of wall fell outside. "Hurry, you go. I'll get them to follow me." The bat ghoul grimaced, but nodded and dove down towards the courtyard, which in reality was only a floor below us. The ghouls rounded the corner, filling every available amount of space in the tiny hallway. I waved my hooves and jumped up and down. "Hey uglies! Come and get me!" I leaped out through the window, hoping the ruse would work. Sure enough, moments after I spread my wings and glided down to meet Silmetra, the first feral jumped out of the window after me, hitting the ground with a sickening ***splat***. More ghouls poured forth from the opening, hissing and snarling as they each hit the ground.

"What goes up, must come down, eh?" Silmetra said, rolling his eyes. "You come up with that all by yourself?" I giggled a bit.

"I thought it was kind of funny," I said, narrowing my gaze at the bat ghoul. "I'm... I'm sorry that this had to happen though. I wish they could have been saved, like Red wanted."

"Unfortunately, without his research or a way to control them, we had no choice, Star," Silmetra replied. "Believe me... I bear no ill will in this decision." The last of the ghouls dropped out of the window, growling until it hit the ground hard, its brains spilling out onto the pavement. I sighed.

"Let's get back to the others," I said. "We have some cleaning up to do."

The aftermath of the ghoul attack had left many of the residents of the town scared. Silmetra had done his best to calm the populace, but was meeting resistance from a few very vocal ghouls who believed that Ichor Sludge was right and should be set free. Times were going to be rough for the small town, but I believed that with Doctor Rot at his side, the bat ghoul could make it work and they would survive. Sunshine gave the two some names of ponies to talk to at Tenpony, to see if the Tower would be interested in trade of medicine and the like, while Patch provided Doctor Rot with some contacts in the NCR to help provide protection to the city if they so desired it.

After spending one more evening with the ghouls of Duskhoof, it was time to say good bye. We all knew it was time to leave, and so on the morning after we collected our things and made our way to the entrance of the hospital, escorted by Dry Rot and Silmetra.

"I regret what happened here, Ministry Mare," Dry Rot said. The old unicorn ghoul had escorted us along with Silmetra to Duskhoof's entrance. "Ichor Sludge will rot for the damage his actions have caused."

"I do too," I said softly, looking away for a moment. "I do too." Dry Rot cracked a grin, his rotted teeth showing through his mottled skin.

"Chin up there," he said. "You got no need to cry for old ghouls like me."

"You're right about that, I suppose," I said. "Still... for what it's worth, I'm sorry about what happened to Red."

"Thank you," the old ghoul replied. He stepped up to Steeljack and Patch, who were standing just to my side. "Little lady, you take care of those foals now. And take care of yourself. Eat right, and take that medicine I gave you, and you should be right as rain."

"I will... thank you again, Doctor," Patch said. Steeljack nodded silently, causing Dry Rot to chuckle a bit. The ghoul placed his hoof on Steeljack's shoulder.

"And you... take good care of her, and make sure she does all the things I told her to do. I'm counting on you," he said. Steeljack smiled.

"Sure," he said. I glanced over at Silmetra. The bat ghoul nodded slightly.

"Thank you, again... Ministry Mare," he said. "Without your assistance, we wouldn't have Doctor Rot back."

"You're welcome, Silmetra," I said. "You stay safe, alright?"

"Trying times are ahead of us all," Silmetra replied softly. "The supporters of Ichor Sludge's decision have quieted down for now, but I do not think they will stay that way. They will try something rash."

"Well... take a page out of my book, then. Do something rash right back," I said, grinning.

"Seriously... you will be fine, 'Mayor'." The bat ghoul smiled and I looked at the others. "On that note, I think it's time we got going. We have someplace we need to be."

“Fair winds and safe travels then, to all of you,” the bat ghouel said. I smiled as we started back into the Manehattan Wasteland. The dreary gray landscape greeted us like old friends as we moved along at a brisk pace. Sunshine took point, the pink mare keeping a close eye on our surroundings as I picked up the rear. Steeljack pulled Patch's wagon forward while Lilith flew overhead.

Within several hours, the spire of Tenpony Tower came into view, without any issues to show for the journey. A mere hour later, we had made our way up onto the Luna line. We trotted down the line, waving to the bored looking guards. They grumbled as they motioned for us to pass. I chuckled.

We entered the guard station, checking our weaponry with the even more bored looking guards there and trotted into Tenpony Tower proper. The main lobby was filled with the normal hustle and bustle of the hoity toity Wasteland elite, but new and different was the presence of off duty NCR soldiers. I smiled softly, scanning the crowd for the only mare that I truly cared about. A flash of green caught my eye and I grinned widely as I focused on Violet. She was at the far end of the main lobby, her horn alit. I noticed she was in the makeshift hospital that the NCR had set up. I trotted along, finding my way to her side. I tapped her slightly on the side.

“Hey beautiful,” I said. Violet turned, her eyes widening. Her horn's glow dissipated, dropping the case she had been holding with her magic. My horn flared in an instant, grabbing a hold of it and setting it gently onto the ground. “Don't go dropping stuff on my account.”

“Star!!!” My love cried out, jumping at me and wrapping her forelegs around my neck. I leaned into her embrace, smiling softly.

“I missed you,” I said. Violet pulled back, tears formed in her eyes.

“I missed you too,” she said. “Is... is Patch alright?” I grinned.

“See for yourself,” I replied, motioning to the ponies behind me. Violet's gaze went past me, latching onto the other green mare, who waved.

“Patch!!!” Violet shouted, pushing me to the side and rushing over to the wagon-ridden earth pony. I grumbled, but turned and smiled nonetheless. “You're alright!!” Patch grinned sheepishly.

“Yeah, I'm doing good,” she said. “Clean bill of health, actually.” Violet cocked her head.

“What about... you know... the foal?” She asked. Patch grinned.

“*Foals*,” the green mare said. “I'm gonna have two foals, Violet.” Violet's eyes widened as she reached out and grabbed the mare into a spine crushing hug.

“That's... that's amazing!” She exclaimed. Patch smiled in return and patted her friend on her back. Violet broke the embrace and looked back at me.

“See, I told you that I'd see that she was okay,” I said. I glanced about the entrance to the makeshift hospital. “So... what have you been up to since we left?”

“Nixis and I have been helping out wherever we can. The hospital needed some extra help, and since I know some healing spells, I figured it would be the best place for me,” Violet said. I nodded, feeling

nothing but proud of my marefriend. I cringed at the fact that I was going to have to tell her about the memory orb, but I was resolved to be honest with her about it. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a little orange pony told me I was doing good.

“Where is Nixis, anyways? I'd have figured he'd be with you,” Steeljack said.

“I've been watching, and waiting,” a lumbering voice said from behind us. Nixis appeared out of nowhere, grinning toothily. His yellow eyes flashed in the light. “It is good to see you all again, and I am pleased to see you well, Patch.”

“Thanks, Nixis. It's good to be here,” Patch replied. “But... we're not here for long, right?” All eyes turned onto me. I chuckled hesitantly.

“Patch is correct. We have a date with a certain alicorn,” I said. “We may have averted disaster here, but if we don't stop Spark, then we'll have bigger problems on our hooves.”

“If I may, Star... I may be able to offer assistance there. We shouldn't be traveling into Everfree unprepared,” Nixis said. “We should make for my home town, Ponyville. The hellhounds there can provide us with supplies to be able to make the journey.”

“Are you certain that we would be welcome there?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“While most hellhounds are still hesitant to interact with ponies, there are more of my kind that feel the only way we are to survive is to coexist,” Nixis replied. “While I am with you, I will promise you that no harm will come to you.”

“It's decided then,” I said, nodding. “We will stay in Tenpony one more evening, and then make our way towards Ponyville in the morning.” Violet raised a hoof. “Yes, dear?”

“I know this is... somewhat insensitive to ask, but what about Patch?” She said, looking over the green mare. “No offense, but you should be staying off your hooves.” Before I could say anything, Patch nodded.

“And you'd probably be right. But I can't let you guys do this on your own. I'll be fine. I'm only pregnant after all, and despite what Dry Rot said I should be more than a few months off,” she said. “So long as I eat well and take my medication, I should be able to pull my own.” Violet nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “I just wanted to make sure. It's not like we're going to be surrounded by doctors in the middle of the Everfree Forest.” I smiled.

“Well, if it's all the same to you all, I'd like to get some rest,” I said. “The rest of you, take the night off. We've got a long journey ahead of us.” I turned, heading towards the elevator, feeling the familiar comfort of my lover bounding after me. We made our way to our room, finding it just as dirty and decrepit as we had left it. Plopping down upon the bedroll, I took a deep breath as I set my bags off to the side. Violet rested next to me. I sighed, glancing over at her. I had to tell her, now rather than later.

“Violet?” I said softly. My love glanced up at me. I bit my lip. “I have something that I need to tell you...”

“What is it, sweetie?” Violet asked, looking very concerned.

“I...” I started to say. I considered delaying, trying to push it off like it was nothing, but I knew that I couldn't do that. I had to own up to my mistakes. To do better. “I messed up, Violet. I made a stupid, stupid mistake...”

“Whatever you did, honey, it's alright,” my love replied softly. I closed my eyes.

“I watched the memory orb, Violet. I... I broke my promise,” I said. I kept my eyes closed, not daring to open them for one second. I heard Violet shift next to me. I was scared, scared that I had really messed thing up, but elated to have finally gotten it off my chest. Violet was silent, deathly silent. I wished, I prayed for something to end the silence.

Then I suddenly felt a pair of legs wrap themselves around my neck. My eyes flew open, and I looked down to see Violet, eyes closed and nuzzling my neck. Tears flowed freely from her eyes.

“V-V-V-Violet?” I stuttered.

“Star...” Violet choked out. “It's okay, sweetheart. It's okay...”

“But... But I...” I tried to say. Violet tightened her embrace, before pulling back and looking me in the eyes. Her brilliant green eyes were tinged with red from her tears. She smiled at me softly.

“Sweetheart... it's alright. Did you really think I'd be mad at you?” She said. I nodded mutely. Violet chuckled. “Star, you're so silly. I kind of expected you to view it while you were away.”

“You... you did?” I said.

“Star... addiction is a difficult thing to deal with. I'm not expecting you to get over it immediately,” my love said. “And to be honest... most addictions are to chems, not things like memory orbs. I honestly have no idea how to treat this.”

“I... I don't know what to say, Violet. I'm so messed up, I don't know what to do with myself,” I said. “But I think I know how to start. I have to stop blaming myself for everything, Violet.”

“Wise choice,” Violet said, resting her head against my neck. “Star... you know I love you very much. And I will always, always be there for you.”

“I... I know. And I love you so, so much,” I said softly. “I've gotta make things right again, and I'm going to do my best to keep this under control. But... I can't promise that I won't fall back into the same habits.” Violet smiled, kissing me on the neck.

“Sweetie, you won't be alone in this. We're all here for you. And we'll all be there for you,” Violet said. “Everything will be alright.”

“Once we find Spark... I'm moving to someplace warm and sunny, and never leaving,” I deadpanned, sighing. “But thank you, Violet.”

“You're welcome, sweetie. Now get some sleep. Like you said, we have a long journey ahead of us,”

Violet said. I nodded, lowering my head next to hers. Sleep came easy, and soon I drifted off to dream land.

I looked up and groaned. It was the library, yet again. I didn't want to be here, not right now. Deciding that I didn't really have much of a choice but to go in, I stood and pushed open the door. Trotting inside, I noticed that the library was fairly bare. Empty shelves stood thick with dust, and books lay under fluffy pillows of age. Standing at the far end of the library's main floor was Twilight. She was looking out the window, her wings bristling with anticipation. She turned, her gaze boring into my very soul.

"Hello Star," she said curtly. "Why don't you take a seat?" She motioned at the floor. I looked down, seeing the image of a very familiar cutie mark burned into the wood. I slipped down to my haunches, while Twilight stood above me.

"So... what is it now, Twilight? Here to tell me about some grand scheme that you messed up? Or about how I'm not doing my job to find Spark?" I said, snorting. Twilight said nothing. I glanced up at her, her gaze not leaving me as she paced back and forth. "What? What did I do?"

"What did *you* do? You did something incredibly stupid, Star. That little stunt you pulled with Dusk Blue? Do you remember that?" She said. I blinked, my mind running back to what I had done to trick the lunatic unicorn. I narrowed my gaze at Twilight.

"I do remember that," I said. "Why?"

"Do you remember what you felt at the end of your little 'trick'?" Twilight snarled. I grimaced, nodding. I remembered the feeling of being watched. Of something waking up. "Good. Because now that you've woken them up, you're going to have to put them back to sleep."

"Wait... who am I putting back to sleep?" I said. "What exactly happened?"

"You used a magic that is very raw and unbridled, and you used it as a carnival trick," Twilight said. "You used *Friendship*, Star. Your little stunt may have cost us everything. Waking up the other Elements was the last thing I wanted to have happen." I blinked.

"I woke up the other Elements? How the hell did I do that?" I asked. Twilight grimaced.

"Your connection to Spark. To me. It's what called them. So when you used your connection to your friends to create some splashy display, it woke them. That's the magic they respond to. And thanks to the imprint that Spark left on you, it was like ringing a dinner bell in their ears," the lavender alicorn said. "This changes everything."

"So... what do we do now? I mean... we're going to be heading to find Spark. Discord hid your shard, so we have time," I said. Twilight growled under her breath.

"That... monster hid the one weapon that would seal Spark away for good. That shard is necessary, you will need it before you face her," Twilight said. "You already have one half of it."

"I do...?" I said, blinking and feeling more and more confused by the second.

"The memory orb that was with the others from Tenpony Tower. The one where we first met, or rather when you first met the other me," she said. I shook my head.

"I don't remember that, and what do you mean 'other me'?" I said. "Speak Equestrian, filly!" Twilight's gaze narrowed at me.

"Of course, I'd have set a memory wipe spell on that. Do you remember when you first met Pride?" The mare said. I nodded. "It was at that time we first met. The Twilight you met was a facet of my connection to you, another me so to speak. The shard is embedded in the memory orb, you see. That's why it was able to break Spark when she took over your body."

"I see," I said simply. "Go on." Twilight nodded.

"Finding the other half of the shard is imperative," she said. "Without it, we won't be able to seal Spark away."

"But how the heck am I supposed to find it? Discord hid it, remember? He isn't going to tell me where it is," I said. Twilight grinned.

"Discord will have most likely hid the shard in plain sight right in the Everfree Forest, where Spark could not find it, but would be easy for us to find if we looked hard enough. Thankfully, I have just the means to provide the tools to find it," she said. "I can enchant the existing half to seek out the other. It will grow warm and blink in proximity to the shard. Once you've joined the two together then you can seal Spark with it."

"What about the other Elements? You said that they changed things," I said. Twilight grimaced again.

"In the physical realm, the other Elements will try to stop you. Spark will seek to reunite with them. But without the shard, Spark will not be able to transcend her form and put her plans into play, even with the additional strength of the other Elements," she said. "In short, we remove Spark from the equation and it will send the other Elements back to sleep like they should be."

"Do you mean to say that the Elements... they'll have mortal forms?" I said, blinking. Twilight nodded.

"They're not perfect, but they will have physical bodies. They're more or less golems filled with the minds and memories of their avatars," the mare said. "I would expect them to be dangerous and powerful." I blinked again. Golems filled with the powers of the Elements of Harmony? Did that make Lucky the golem with the power of Magic? If that was the case... what did that make me? I raised an eyebrow, looking up at Twilight.

"Twilight?" I said. The mare glanced back at me, a soft smile emerging on her face. "There's... there's something I want to ask if you know."

"Go on," Twilight said. I took a deep breath.

"Twilight... you were part of *her*. The Goddess. I have... I have to know," I said, trying to organize my thoughts to ask this question. "What was I? Before her. Before Unity. What was I like? I don't

remember... This connection, it's eclipsed any memories I thought I had. I just... I need to know.”

“I... I see,” Twilight said shakily, taking a few moments to think before she replied. “I'm sorry, Star. I wish I had an answer for you, but I just don't know the answer to that.” She smirked curiously. I narrowed my gaze at her. *She knows something*, I thought. *Otherwise why would she be so hesitant to answer? It doesn't make any sense.*

“Oh... I just assumed, you know...” I said. “Sorry. Again. For the Elements.” Twilight smiled again, nodding.

“Don't worry Star. This will all be over soon. Once Spark is dealt with, this can end,” she said, smiling widely.

“So let me get this straight,” Lilith said as we trotted down the Luna line. “The spirits of the other Elements of Harmony have awoken from their centuries old slumber, taken physical form, and are going to try and kill us? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?”

“I do,” I replied. “But I also know that if Twilight is right, and she has been so far, then they pose a very real threat.”

We passed by the two bored looking guards down at the station, smiling at them. They snapped to attention, making me chuckle slightly. After putting our affairs in order with Tenpony Tower, we had left the hoity toity elite of the Wasteland and the Twilight Society for what I hoped was the last time. I certainly didn't desire to return here, not after what the Society had put us all through in the past week.

“I agree,” Violet said. “We need to be prepared for anything to happen.” I smiled softly at my marefriend, nodding. The night before had been mentally exhausting for me, laying all my fears at Violet's hooves. I felt better than I ever had before, though. I felt... ready to move forward. I was better, and I was going to be a better mare in the long run for it. Deep in the back of my mind, however, my question to Twilight still tugged at me. Was I just another golem, filled with the spirit of the Element of Magic? If that was the case, how did I ever have my own mind, my own thoughts, my own feelings? I didn't know. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

After what felt like ages, we finally reached the edge of Manehattan. I glanced back and grimaced. So much had happened while we were there, and yet it felt like we had gained much more than we had expected. Sunshine had joined our motley crew of Wastelanders, Discord had been freed to work his madness upon the world, and the NCR and Twilight Society were making steps toward a stronger future together.

“Star? You coming?” I heard Violet say. I nodded, trotting after the others and smiling. Steeljack was still pulling Patch with that cart they had found. I grimaced every time I looked at, remembering my own failed attempts at building such a device to carry our friend. Still, they looked happy. Patch was busy regaling Nixis with tales of her examinations from Dry Rot. Nixis loped along with rapt attention to the green mare, chuckling at the jokes the old unicorn ghoul had told her. Lilith flew overhead, keeping an eye on the skies above and the landscape before us, while Sunshine and Violet trotted on either side of the cart, remaining vigilant against any possible threats. The rolling gray hills of the Equestrian Wasteland seemed to go on forever, making for a very boring march across them.

We broke later that night for camp, making our final stop in an abandoned way station. My PipBuck indicated that we still had two to three days to go until we were close to Ponyville. I sighed, sitting up against the back wall of the station's main office while the others set up a fire to cook with. Deciding to get some fresh air, I stood and made my way to the roof of the tiny one room shack. The moon had just begun to roll up into the sky, making for a rather peaceful night, if one could call any night in the Wasteland peaceful.

With the moon in sight, I closed my eyes, imagining that I could see still its wonder in my mind's eye. I took a deep breath, attempting to reconnect with the skills that Envy had tried to teach me. I had fallen out of practice in the last week, thanks to the mental state I was in, and I honestly didn't expect to get anywhere with my meditation. I had failed in my efforts to reach any sort of enlightened state before, and I wasn't sure I would ever be able to do so. Still, it gave me something to think about, something to focus on.

I struggled to clear my mind, but every time I managed to get rid of any mental baggage about Spark, about Twilight, about myself, kept creeping up. How did Envy do this? Life was tough, and I had no idea how anypony could let go of their thoughts so easily. I sighed as I sat there for what felt like hours. A quick peek at my PipBuck revealed it had only been five minutes. I groaned loudly.

"I'm never going to get this," I said aloud.

"Never going to get what?" I heard a voice from behind me. I turned my head, seeing Patch standing there. I smiled, motioning for her to join me. The green mare trotted up and sat next to me.

"Meditating," I said. "I'm terrible at it. I've tried hard to learn, but it seems like every time I sit down to do it, I can't." Patch nodded. "What are you doing up here?"

"I wanted to look at the moon," she said softly. "It's a beautiful night out. Sometimes I think we just don't take enough time to realize that there is still beauty in this world."

"Yeah..." I said, looking up with her at the silvery orb in the sky. "Even after two hundred years without being tended to by an immortal princess, the night sky still tends to be pretty amazing."

"Star?" Patch said. I glanced over at her, smiling.

"Yes, Patch?" I replied. The green mare sighed and began to speak.

"I wanted to ask you something..." She started to say. "Will... will you be the godmother of my foals?" I blinked, my eyes wide.

"You... you want me to be their... what...?" I said.

"Godmother," Patch said. "You'd be like their Auntie. It's just... I've been thinking a lot about this since we found out from Dry Rot... and there's nopony else that I'd rather have than you. You've done so much for Steeljack and I, after all." I looked down at my hooves and took a deep breath.

"Whoo boy," I said, panting before putting on a smile for my friend. "I... I think I would like that, Patch. I would be honored to accept that role." Patch lit up, jumping up and grabbing me in a fierce

hug.

“Oh thank you thank you thank you!” She said. “I just know that they'll love you to death. I have a very good feeling about it.”

“Do you now?” I said, smirking. Patch nodded.

“Doctor Rot said that I might feel some... things from the unicorn. Something to do with magic,” she said before going deathly quiet. When she spoke next it was in a whisper. “Don't say anything to Steely, but I'm still a little scared about all of this. I've never been a mom before. I don't know the first thing to do, but I know that I won't let them grow up in this world alone. They're going to need friends, and who better than the friends I already have, right?”

“A wise statement indeed, Patch,” I said, closing my eyes. “I think perhaps though, an even wiser statement is to 'get some rest', as it were.” Patch giggled.

“Yeah, you're right. Sleep sounds pretty good,” she said, standing. “You coming?”

“In a minute or two. I want to try again,” I said. “Meditation, remember?” Patch grinned.

“Alright, alright. See you inside then,” she said, disappearing from view. I turned back to the moon, thinking about what had just happened. Patch wanted me to be her foal's godmother! I smiled softly and closed my eyes. Instead of trying to empty my mind, I instead filled it with the images and thoughts of my friends. Images of Violet, of Steeljack and Patch, of Lilith, Nixis, and even Sunshine flowed through me. I sighed, breathing deeply and drinking of my friends and the love I held for each and every one of them.

My mind filled to the brim, overflowing with every memory I ever had of the ones closest to me, and I realized that this... this was what I needed most. I realized that Envy was wrong. Zebras connected to the natural forces of the universe, but ponies... ponies connected to *each other*. The underlying force of the universe wasn't nature, but friendship. It made sense to me now... why I couldn't meditate like a zebra. It wasn't natural for me. I almost mourned the fact that I'd never be good at it, but I realized I didn't care. I smiled amidst my meditation, feeling... happy. I had friends, friends who cared for me and would do anything to help me.

I opened my eyes and stood, gazing at the moon once more. It shone in the sky like a diamond, gleaming in a virtual sea of blue. I turned back to the stairs heading down into the station and trotted down, rejoining my friends. I smiled brightly, letting their words heal me, letting their emotions fill me. I flopped down next to Violet and fell asleep easier that night, easier than I ever had in my entire life.

The next morning we got back out onto the road, the Wasteland greeting our hoof steps like we were old friends. The rolling hills grew even more monotonous than before, and soon I found myself wishing for something, anything to change. I decided that rather than continue to be bored, I'd flick on my radio and catch some news or maybe some music. The soft, lovely tones of Velvet Remedy echoed across our tiny group, giving us the drive to keep moving forward.

After Velvet's song finished, the radio cut to the brusque voice of DJ-PON3.

“Helloooo Wasteland kiddies! This is your master of ceremonies, DJ-PON3! It's time for some news!

I've got reports of raider activity on the roads up north of New Appaloosa. Remember kiddies, when the raiders come calling, there ain't no shame in locking up your doors and hiding under your covers. Raiders don't want nothin' to do with negotiations, they just wanna rip your fucking heads off and use them for sick decorative schemes. No lies, my little ponies!

I've also got good news from Manehattan. After a good long week of negotiations the NCR and the Twilight Society are working together. Tenpony's doors are open to off duty NCR soldiers looking for a good time, but they're still not open to the ghoulies.

Speaking of the ghoulies, I've also got reports that the town of Duskhoof has had a change in management after a friendly little visit from our good old friend the Ministry Mare. Apparently the mayor there was a real dunderhead. Did the Ministry Mare take him out? No! The Mare tried to help the small town with a problem related to the feral ghouls, and the mayor made it worse. The new mayor, a bat pony of all the things, told one of our correspondents all about it.

Good for you, Ministry Mare! Fighting the good fight and helping ponies everywhere!

And now, back to our music kiddies. So here's some Sweetie Belle, an old standby two hundred years in the making!”

I snorted as the DJ's voice disappeared, replaced by the soft dulcet tones of Sweetie's song. Violet raised an eyebrow.

“Something wrong?” She said. I shrugged.

“I just think its hilarious,” I said. “Every time she mentions my name, I get more and more praise that I really didn't deserve. I didn't really do anything at Duskhoof!”

“You found Dry Rot,” Patch said. “That counts for something.”

“Yeah, but they don't even mention you guys ever,” I said. “Kind of feels like you all get cast off to the side.”

“Ponies need heroes, Star,” Nixis said as he loped past. “A name to hold onto is like a candle in darkness. It gives light to those who need it. Rest assured, we know how much you appreciate our contributions.” I smiled softly.

“Thanks,” I said, glancing down at my PipBuck. I groaned. “Jeez, just how far is Ponyville anyways?”

“It's fairly out of the way,” the hellhound replied. “From Manehattan at least. We'll know we are close when we make our way into the valley proper.”

“I see... tell me about, Nixis? What was your home like?” I said, looking over at the canine. Nixis chuckled.

“My home was... decrepit when we first came to it. But over time, the sins of the place's past ownership were washed away, replaced by the care of my kind. We've never truly had a home to call our own since the end of the Great War,” Nixis explained. “But we cared for it just the same.”

“Ponyville was where the Ministry Mares were from,” I said blankly. “That and its proximity to the Everfree Forest... makes me wonder what kind of dark and terrible secrets are still held under its exterior.” Nixis nodded again, and silence fell over us again as we continued forward. My mind took hold of one particular Ministry Mare. Canterlot may have been where Twilight Sparkle had been born, but Ponyville was her home. It was where she met the other Elements of Harmony, where once the only real disaster was worrying about who got an extra ticket to the Grand Galloping Gala.

How I longed for such a day to come, where my only worries were small and insignificant. As long as Spark and Twilight fought for dominance, there were no small worries. I knew that I needed to see this through to the very end.

Hours upon hours passed, and we finally made our first break over the main ridge that looked down into the valley that Ponyville rested in. The sun blazed brilliantly over our heads, but its brilliance could not touch the wild and untamed lands that lay before us. The Everfree Forest loomed in the distance, looking larger and more threatening with every passing hoof step. The path gently began to slope downwards the more we walked forward. Eventually, the road was so rough and rocky that I had to float the cart carrying Patch until we could set it back down on an even surface.

“Nixis?” I said, getting the hellhound's attention. “Have you ever been there?” I pointed at the Everfree in the distance.

“I have not, but many of my kind have ventured into the wild forest for food and supplies,” he said. “The stories however... there are things in that forest that have... festered unchecked over the course of centuries.” I grimaced. *And somewhere out there... is Spark and Lucky. Is Lucky alright? I certainly hope so*, I thought as I trudged forward.

Within the hour, we found ourselves stepping off the final sloping hill and onto somewhat level ground. The soil had turned to muck, and we were surrounded by bubbling pools of brownish water. I looked up at the sky, seeing that it was being partially obscured by the dying willow trees that sprouted up all around us. It was like we'd passed into another world.

“Anypony else finding this place just a bit creepy?” Patch said, pulling Para Bellum out and holding it close to her chest. We still couldn't lower the cart for fear of it sinking on us.

“You and me both, sister,” Lilith said as she landed next to us. “Too much foliage to fly. I hate these kinds of places.” I chuckled nervously.

“Give me a second, guys,” Sunshine said, kneeling next to one of the trees. “I'm going to see if I can figure out a way out of this place.” Her horn lit, connecting a line of green energy at the tree. After several minutes of silence, she gasped softly and broke the connection.

“What is it, Sunshine?” I said, stepping up next to her.

“This place... it's a lot bigger than it looks,” she said. “And it's hungry... If we keep moving forward... we should get out, but everypony needs to stick together. It's too easy to get lost, or worse.”

“Alright, you heard her folks,” I said. “Pair up with somepony who has a PipBuck. If we get separated, use the tagging feature to lock onto another group.” The others nodded, moving into pairs. As expected, Steeljack stayed close to Patch, while Lilith formed up next to me. Violet moved over to Sunshine, leaving only Nixis. I grimaced, but the hellhound lifted a paw and waved it off.

“Even in this environment, I can smell all of you quite clearly,” he said. “Do not worry for me.” I sighed, nodding.

“Alright then, let's keep moving. I don't think we'd want to be here after dark,” I said, my eyes moving to the sky above and trying to keep in mind where the sun was. I couldn't quite tell with the haze that seemed to permeate this entire place. Regardless, we moved forward, keeping an eye on our surroundings as we made our way deeper into the swampy area. The buzz of tiny insects filled the very air, and more than once or twice I thought I saw something shadowy zip in and out of the dead trees. It got darker and darker the further we journeyed, making me wonder if we would end up out here at night after all.

Something roared in the distance, jolting me out of my thoughts. Not only was this place dark and possibly dangerous, but something was out there. I shifted, lifting Stargazer out of its harness.

“You hear that too?” Lilith said quietly from next to me. I nodded. “What do you think it is?”

“I don't know, but I don't like it,” I said, turning back to look at Violet. When I did... she was gone. Violet and the others, they were gone! Lilith grimaced. “Violet? Steeljack? Nixis?! Where are they?”

“They... they were just here a second ago,” the black mare said. “They wouldn't have let us wander off by ourselves, right?”

“Violet wouldn't have, neither would Steeljack,” I said, circling around. I looked in all directions, seeing nothing but swampland and dead willow trees. “Violet!!” I called into the darkness. I got a roar in the void as a reply.

“Might want to keep it down, Star,” Lilith said. “Remember, the tagging feature on your PipBuck? Let's toss Violet's tag in and see where she's at!” I nodded, lifting my leg to look at my PipBuck. The screen was fuzzy and blinking in and out.

“Umm... that's odd,” I said. “These things are supposed to be built to last. Why's it going on the fritz?” I checked my E.F.S., which appeared to be working normally, other than the fact that it showed a very large red dot directly behind us. A rumbling sound started underneath our hooves. My eyes widened. “Run. Run!” My feet started to move as Lilith galloped next to me, her expression frantic.

“What are we running from?” She asked. I didn't get a chance to answer before the rumbling sound got close enough that it became the sound of trees cracking and falling over. I chanced a glance back, seeing a massive indistinct form charging through the bog. Several sets of green eyes hovered above the form.

“That!” I shouted as the form broke through the final line of trees that allowed us to finally see what was chasing us. The creature was large and scaled with two powerfully built hind legs and a spiked tail that whipped back and forth in a frenzy. It had no arms, but it didn't need them, as it's entire body

turned into five very long necks, each one topped with a scaled draconic head. Each head bore a set of green eyes that glowed unnaturally in the dim light of the bog, and each one's mouth frothed with green radioactive sludge.

“Shit, what the hell is that thing?!” Lilith cried out as we made a mad turn to the right to try and throw off the scaled beast. I racked my brain, trying to remember what it was. I knew I had seen it somewhere in one of the books at Fort Knowledge. The beast roared again, spitting some of its frothing sludge our way. It struck the ground behind us, sizzling as it sank into the muddy ground. I realized just what this beast was as it got closer and closer to catching up with us.

“It's a hydra!” I called back to my pegasus friend. “We need to lose it somehow!”

“What if we separate?!” Lilith shouted. I grimaced as my hooves continued to carry me forward. One of the hydra's heads reached down and snapped, nearly catching my tail in its jaws.

“Too risky!” I exclaimed. “We must have walked right into its territory! If we can tire it out, then it'll stop chasing us!” I sort of hoped that I was right about that last part. The book I remember seeing the hydra in was a little vague, and didn't really have any pointers on fighting this thing.

“Uhh, Star? I don't think that's going to help us!” Lilith said. I could feel the hot breath of the creature already. Lilith snarled, flaring her wings and taking to the sky. Two of the hydra's heads shot up immediately to snap at her, a slash of the mare's wicked wingblades leaving them with bloody snouts for their efforts. Despite the injury, however, they simply roared in response. The body began to slow down, its attentions split between the target in the sky and the one on the ground. I found that I was gaining ground as Lilith soared in between the trees to escape the attacks from the monster.

I finally stopped and turned about, lifting Stargazer up and aiming it at one of the remaining three heads. I accessed E.S.A.T.S., the spell firing up and then dropping almost like it wasn't working either. I grimaced as I leaped back to avoid more sludge that came out of the monster's mouths.

“Lilith! I can't use my targeting spell!” I called up to the airborne mare. “I'm gonna try something else. You keep it occupied if you can!” Lilith saluted and zoomed straight at one of the heads of the beast. She extended her wing blades, slashing at its neck fiercely. Green blood spurted from where she struck, but again her attack didn't seem to slow down the creature. I roared, flaring my horn and accessing my magic to cast a shield spell around myself right as another of the heads slammed into it.

The hydra shook the head, blinking. I lifted Stargazer and pulled the trigger manually, unleashing a spurt of fire directly into the dazed head. The bullets pummeled the head into a bloody pulp, causing it to shriek in pain. It recoiled, lifting the head away as I finished firing. The head that I had shot waved about limply, causing the other four heads to glare directly at me.

“Umm... shit,” I said as all four heads lunged down at my location. I leaped back, spraying away wildly with Stargazer. Only a few shots managed to land, forcing the heads to recoil. The hydra's heads collectively growled as the head that I had blown to bits fell forward, striking the ground with a momentous ***crash***. I cheered loudly. “That's right! Lilith, hit it!”

“On it!” Lilith shouted, circling about as the Bitch unwound itself from her power armor. The missile launcher whined loudly as a missile cycled into its launcher bay. The powerful projectile surged forth, seeking along until it slammed home right into the monster's back. It exploded, showering the

immediate area with gore and pieces of hydra. The beast lay, unmoving. I groaned, using my magic to peel a bit of what I thought might have been intestine off my head.

"That was... gross," I said as Lilith landed next to me.

"You alright?" She said. I nodded.

"A little... soaked, but otherwise I'm okay," I said. "I only hope the others haven't run into anything similar out there." I glanced at my PipBuck again. It was still flickering in and out. "And with this thing still acting up, I'm not sure where the hell we're going."

"I'll try and fly up and see if I can see anything," Lilith said. I put up a hoof, stopping her.

"No. If we get separated too, we'll be in greater danger," I said. "No... we need to keep moving forward." I looked about all around us. "Whichever way that is..." Lilith grimaced.

"You know... that seemed a little too easy," she said. "That thing, the hydra or whatever you called it."

"Yeah... you're right about that," I replied. "I mean... from what I read on them, hydras are pretty tough beasts to kill. They have a tough set of scales, and many of them show extreme regenerative properties." I blinked at the last statement, my eyes drifting back to the form of the creature behind us. A crackling green energy arced across the body of the monster, its blood creeping back into the creature as one of the heads that we'd destroyed started to twitch.

"Umm... so... regenerative properties?" Lilith said. I gulped loudly.

"Run," I said. "Run!" We started galloping away from the monster as one of its heads awoke. It glanced over at us and roared loudly. Its body, however, was still trying to manage the other four heads which hadn't reanimated yet. Within several moments we managed to lose sight of the monster, charging through the bog like mad ponies on a mission. We found ourselves in a small clearing, an open space in the center of a mucky empire. We heard the hydra roar in the distance, but it was far off. Either we'd managed to outrun it, or it had decided that coming after us again wasn't worth the effort. I sighed.

"I think we lost it," I said, glancing about the clearing. "Where are we? It seems like this bog just goes on forever."

"It looks like some sort of break in the trees... but in the middle of the swamp? It doesn't make any sense," Lilith said, grimacing. She started to move forward, but stopped cold in her tracks. Her ears perked up.

"What is it?" I asked quietly.

"Something... something's not right," she said. "Something's --" She never got a chance to finish. A blur shot across the clearing, catching Lilith and slamming hard into her. Lilith shot back into the treeline, disappearing into nothingness. I blinked.

"Lilith!!!" I shouted.

"She isn't going to interfere with us now," a voice said. I turned towards the center of the clearing. Standing there was an alicorn, but it wasn't like any other alicorn I'd ever seen. The mare had a fierce yellow coat with a bright pink flowing mane and tail. Her body looked unnatural, smooth and glossy like a child's toy. A bright pink gem sat in her chest. Her wings spread out aggressively as she regarded me with flat pink eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked. "And what did you do with Lilith?" The alicorn closed her eyes for a moment. The sound of crashing and roaring sounded from behind her. My eyes widened as the hydra came rushing out into the clearing. It stomped towards the alicorn, snarling and snapping. The alicorn lifted a hoof, turning about and stopping the hydra cold in its tracks. The alicorn said nothing, her horn glowing. The hydra's body imploded, spraying gore all over the clearing. A sharp grin covered the yellow alicorn's face as gore rolled off of her, leaving no trace on her shiny surface.

"I am the Element of Kindness," she said. My eyes went wide. *An Element?* I thought. "Although you may call me by my true name... Cruelty." Her grin turned into a frown. "As for your friend... I merely sent her to join the rest of your little troupe. I'm not sure how she escaped me the first time, but I remedied that mistake."

"Where are they?" I said. Cruelty chuckled.

"They are beyond this clearing, outside of the pocket dimension I created for us," she said, glancing back at the ruined body of the hydra. "I had so hoped that my little pet would have been able to kill you, but you are just too crafty aren't you?"

"You sent the hydra?" I said, glaring at the alicorn. "What do you want with me?"

"You woke us up, Radiant Star. The Elements," Cruelty said. "Spark knew that you did it. She sought us out after the Chaos Spirit hid her shard. We belong to her now. We follow her will."

"So... what, you want to kill me? Is that it?" I challenged. "Sorry, sister. I've got a date with Magic, and I'm a bit late as it stands. So, how's about you turn away and leave before I give you a reason to?" Cruelty grinned widely, her soulless eyes trained on me.

"I see now why Spark wanted your body so badly. You are a spirited host," she said. "You know... I once opposed her. Her scheme to be immortal, but now I can see that she was right. Ponies... they created this... this filthy wasteland. They made a grave for everyone, pony and zebra alike. Spark's plans for a new world order will stop all of it. Kindness will rule the world again. For that, I will gladly be cruel. So yes... Radiant Star... I am here to kill you."

I grimaced. I knew that this mare had a strength beyond any concept of normal. I had just watched her kill a hydra without any remorse and with a mere burst of her horn. How in the hell was I expected to beat such a powerful being? I thought back to what Twilight had said about the Elements. In retrospect, I probably should have trained my magic a little better on the road.

"I'm not planning on just laying down and dying," I said, igniting my horn and lifting Stargazer out of its harness. "You'll find I'm very hard to kill."

"We shall see," Cruelty said calmly, flaring her wings. Magic flowed from her horn, seeping into the ground around us. Vines sprouted from the mucky earth, complete with spiny protrusions covering

them. They waved in the air as Cruelty grinned evilly. “If I were you, I’d run.” One of the vines turned about in the air and flew at me, intent on piercing me with its thorns. I yelped, leaping to the side as the appendage struck the ground, leaving a gaping hole the size of my leg in the earth.

“Shit!” I shouted frantically, jumping back as another vine lashed out. I threw up my alicorn shield, hoping that it would hold. The vine smacked into it fiercely, enough that it actually forced me back more. I grimaced. Cruelty merely stood there, unmoving. *She doesn't need to move*, I thought. *She's got her own little army of vines. There's no opening. How in the hell do I beat somepony who doesn't have an opening?* I needed my friends, but based on what the corrupt Element had said, she had managed to separate all of us. I sighed, making my decision. I needed to run. I flared my wings, turning tail and heading towards the edge of the clearing.

“Oh, finally going to run? That won't do you any good,” Cruelty scoffed. Her horn flared, teleporting her across the clearing in front of me. I roared, ready to use Stargazer as a bludgeon to beat the ever-living snot out of her before I stopped dead. Cruelty lifted her head and widened her eyes, those soulless eyes, and *stared* at me. I realized that my hooves, my wings, my neck... they all wouldn't move. Stargazer fell out of the air and hit the ground, landing hard next to me. My magic wouldn't function. I could do nothing but stare back into the mare's dead eyes.

“What... what did you...?” I tried to say, before my mouth clammed up too. Cruelty grinned, keeping her stare trained on me.

“Tsk, ts. Such a poor defenseless little pony. She has no friends, no pony... no pony who truly loves her. She's nothing more than a shell, a shell that will house the Element of Magic,” she said calmly, stepping towards me. *What in the hell is she talking about?! I thought. I thought she wanted to kill me!* As if she had read my mind, Cruelty gave a little smirk. “Oh... I am going to kill you, Radiant Star. I am going to rend your very soul from your body. You will not even exist when I am done with you... if you ever existed in the first place.”

I couldn't move, could barely breathe through my nose. My eyes would not move from her stony gaze. Cruelty stepped closer and closer. I couldn't do a single thing to stop her.

Then a black blur appeared out of nowhere, slamming hard into Cruelty's body and sending her reeling across the clearing. I blinked, finding myself able to move again. I quickly picked up Stargazer and spun about. Lilith appeared on the other side of the fallen alicorn, huffing and panting. The vines hung limply, almost as if they had no life without their mistress controlling them.

“You messed with the wrong bitch, **BITCH!!!**” She roared, opening her wings and flaring her blades. Cruelty pushed herself off the ground. I noticed that she was oozing some sort of viscous liquid from her neck where Lilith had struck.

“I thought I was rid of you,” the alicorn said calmly. “I shall have to work harder this time.” Her horn glowed fiercely, the magic in the air turning its attention to her wounds. Within mere seconds they sealed up.

“Lilith!” I shouted. “Don't look into her eyes! She can paralyze you with them!” Lilith grimaced, lowering the visor on her power armor. She charged forward, using her wings to propel herself at amazing speeds. Cruelty merely grinned, lifting a hoof. My eyes widened. “No!!!” Cruelty looked over at me and smirked as she let her horn loose, sending a bolt of yellow magic at my pegasus friend.

It struck, sending Lilith crumpling to the ground. The black mare groaned loudly as she tried to get up.

"It is inevitable," the yellow alicorn said. "I am the master of pain. You shall feel pain like you have never felt before for interfering."

"No!" I shouted, speeding across the clearing as I brought Stargazer across the mare's face, knocking her back. "You will not harm her!" Cruelty stared as I dropped my eyes to her hooves.

"Ah, you are learning," she said. "Yes... look at my hooves, pathetic wretch that you are. I am a Goddess of Harmony, and you will learn your place." I growled under my breath.

"You're not a Goddess," I snarled. Cruelty's ears perked.

"What was that?" She asked.

"I said... you're not a Goddess," I retorted, lifting my eyes and meeting her gaze. I felt the stare take hold again, but not for long. I muscled through it with images of my friends, of Nixis and Steeljack playing chess, of Patch smiling radiantly under a glowing moon, with Violet's lovely eyes. Cruelty's paralyzing stare crumbled under the force of friendship. I had to, for Lilith. "You're nothing but an idea! You're Kindness, for Luna's sake! Your powers lie in being kind to ponies, not cruel. Don't you see that!"

"Ah... but ponies are not kind, Radiant Star. They are cruel, vicious little beasts who must be tended as such," Cruelty replied. "They will serve us. They will all serve us. We will rebuild this world in our glorious image, and the ponies of the Wasteland will know the true peace of servitude."

"No... I won't let you," I struggled to say. "I will stop you. I will stop Spark and I will show you how good ponykind can be."

"You? You jest," Cruelty said, grinning viciously. "You will die, and your body will be repurposed for a new role. The role of queen, of empress, of Goddess." My attention turned to Stargazer, and I smiled, sending a beautiful jolt of magic towards it.

"No," I said simply. "I will not." I aimed Stargazer and brought up Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple barrier encased me, and only me. I needed to hope that I was correct in my assumption. I accessed E.S.A.T.S. as soon as the shield went up, sending time spiraling to a crawl. Queueing up as many shots as I could, I aimed not for the mare's body or head, but for the gem sitting on her chest. When E.S.A.T.S. fell, I felt Stargazer whip around and begin firing, every bullet striking its target with unerring accuracy.

Cruelty fell back under the blow of the blast of gunfire, the gem sparking and arcing with energy with each new bullet that hit it. Finally, the shard could no longer handle the force and exploded, sending both myself and Cruelty flying away from each other. I landed with a ***thud*** on the mucky ground, groaning as I pushed myself up. A sharp pain lanced through my back leg. I glanced back, seeing a bit of bone sticking out.

"Fuck," I said, trying to stand. It was hard on three legs, but I managed. Floating out a healing potion, I quickly downed it and trudged over to where Lilith was laying. The pegasus had sat up on her own, her power armor helmet retracting.

“What the hell was that?” She said. I looked past her to where Cruelty had been blasted. Her body was gone, completely. Nothing remained in its place except for a pink gem shard. After a few moments, the shard turned from pink to purple and something in my satchel began to get really hot. I pulled it open, revealing a brightly shining memory orb. Twilight's orb from the original six was blazing, a line of energy arcing out from it to connect to the shard on the ground. The shard floated in the air before speeding across the clearing and reuniting with the other. The Twilight orb went dark and cool immediately. I blinked.

“I... I have no idea,” I said. “But I'm guessing that shard was... powering her body, somehow.”

“If that's the case... where is she? Where's her body?” Lilith said. I shrugged.

“I don't know, but I have a feeling that she isn't done with me yet,” I said. A rustling in the leaves caught our attention. I turned about on my bad leg and grimaced with pain as I brought up Stargazer. At the end of the clearing appeared several ponies and a hellhound, ponies I thought I'd never see again. They were down one cart, with Patch walking next to Steeljack.

“They're over here!” I heard Violet shout. “Lilith! Star!” My love galloped full force up to us, her eyes catching my back leg. “Star, you're hurt! Sit down right this instant!” I gulped, complying with my marefriend-turned nurse. Within moments she was casting her healing spell, using it to try and ease my pain. She began to work figurative magic along with her literal magic, using a combination of her spell and bandages to wrap the break. She jabbed my rump with a syringe of Med-X, dulling the pain instantly.

“Are you guys alright?” Patch said as she sat down with us. I nodded silently.

“What happened to you guys?” Lilith said. “We got separated somehow.”

“We got separated from the others, too,” Patch said. “And then my stupid cart got stuck in the mud, and we couldn't move it.”

“We couldn't even use our PipBucks to communicate or tag,” Steeljack said. “We were lucky enough that Nixis ended up with us.”

“It didn't help that I couldn't smell any of the others,” Nixis chimed in.

“We're still not sure how, but our PipBucks wouldn't work at all until just a few moments ago,” Violet said.

“It was Cruelty,” I said softly. Violet cocked her head.

“Cruelty?” She said. I nodded.

“The corrupted Element of Kindness,” I explained. I told the others about the hydra, about meeting the alicorn who had attacked us, and how we managed to defeat her. Violet looked dazed when I was done.

“Star... that's... that's insane,” she said. “I don't even know what to say.”

"If the corrupted Elements are this strong, we should seek to avoid them at all costs," Nixis said as he returned to the circle. "Thankfully, just outside of this clearing is the path we seek. We have a few hours to go to make it to Ponyville."

"Oh, no. We're camping right here until the morning," Violet said firmly. "Star's in no condition to move right now, and we're all pretty tired. Besides, this is an open clearing. We can set up some defenses in case anything comes in the night, and we'll each take a watch."

"I'm with Violet," I said, wincing as I shuffled to lay down. "This still hurts like a mother."

"I'll take first watch," Steeljack said. I groaned, resting my head against Violet while the others made some semblance of a camp. Steeljack sat by himself off to the side, keeping an eye on the bog.

"Oh, you big baby," she said, chuckling. "It's not that bad. I gave you some Med-X."

"But it really hurts!" I whined, batting my eyes at my marefriend. She gave me a dead stare. I winked, giving her a little smile. "Okay, I lied. It's not that bad. I should be right as rain by tomorrow."

"Good," she replied, giving me a kiss on my muzzle. "Cuz you're not getting anything fun, not tonight. We're too dirty."

"Ooh, I know you're dirty," I quipped before breaking out into chuckles. "Sorry, that was bad."

"It's alright. I think the Med-X is making you a little loopy, is all," Violet said. "But we really are pretty dirty. It's muddy out here." I glanced down at my coat. It was icky, muddy, and matted against my skin. I sighed.

"Yeah... alright. I could really use a shower... or a hosing off," I said. "I guess we should get some sleep."

"Good night, Star."

I awoke feeling better than I had the previous night, pushing myself up to four sound hooves. The first thing I noticed was that Violet was already up, having taken her watch last. I looked back at my leg, noting that it looked a gazillion times better. Everypony else was working on packing up camp. I latched up Stargazer to its harness and pulled on my bags.

"Ready to go?" Violet said. I nodded.

"Let's go," I said. "I don't wanna spend anymore time in this place than I have to." Violet grinned widely.

We started back into the bog, passing out of the clearing and forward. Nixis was right about one thing. Within a half hour we exited out of the bog and back into the valley proper. A gentle fog had settled into the valley, drifting off from the swamplands behind us. Another twenty minutes passed, and we found ourselves on a ridge overlooking the hamlet of Ponyville.

“Home,” Nixis said as he looked down the ridge at the tiny town. The hellhound smiled toothily. I trotted up next to him and placed a hoof on his shoulder.

“Are you ready for this?” I said. Nixis nodded. I smiled softly. “Good. Let's go, then.” I moved to turn around, hearing a series of snarls surrounding us. Several large hulking forms appeared in the trees, yellow eyes piercing the forest. One of them jumped out, growling. It was another hellhound. I grimaced, lifting out Stargazer as the beast lunged forward. It stopped short of me, brandishing its deadly claws. Three more hellhounds appeared on the ridge, snapping and howling. Violet huddled next to me, while Steeljack sat next to Patch protectively. Lilith flared her wings, getting ready to fight while Sunshine's horn started to glow.

“Stop!!!” Nixis shouted. The other hellhounds stopped cold in their tracks. One of them grunted, his yellow eyes scanning the other canine. He sniffed the air, grinning widely.

“Nixis?” The hellhound said. “Is that you?”

“Spot,” Nixis said softly. “You're looking well.”

“We... we thought you were dead,” the burly canine replied. Nixis grinned.

“I had a little help,” he said, motioning to me and the others. “Spot, these are my friends.”

“Ponies,” Spot said. “You're friends with ponies. Hellhounds don't make friends with ponies. Ponies attack hellhounds.”

“I've never attacked a hellhound,” I said. Spot snarled, cutting me off. He returned his attention to Nixis.

“Spot, they are friends. Trust me,” Nixis said. “Star here helped me escape from some very nasty minotaur slavers.” Spot glared at me.

“This is true?” He snorted. I nodded. “Pony saved Nixis?”

“I did. Nixis has been a good friend of ours,” I said softly. “Believe me, we mean you no harm. We're only looking for a place to stay and some supplies and then we'll be out of your hair.” Spot looked back at his hellhounds and grunted a few words to them I couldn't understand. They turned back and nodded in unison.

“If Nixis says that pony is good, then pony is good. Nixis is smart hound, knows many things,” Spot said. “Spot warns you, pony. Village not so nice to pony. We take you to see Elder.” I smiled, nodding. Spot lifted a paw and motioned for us to follow him and his entourage. We started down the ridge, coming ever closer to the town of Ponyville.

As we passed across the bridge into the tiny hamlet, I noticed that there was no lack of life in this corner of the Wasteland. The hellhounds had turned Ponyville into their own village, the canine creatures milling about like a pony might on a good day. There were several guards posted on the outer reaches of the town, letting us through with a snarl. The shops lining the main square had been turned mostly into places of weapon-making and smithing. Hellhounds worked grimly at carved anvils and forges, piecing together and maintaining various armaments. They gave our group dirty looks as we

walked by, followed by surprise at seeing Nixis.

“Lovely place you got here,” I said quietly as we passed by what looked like the old Ponyville school. A few young hellhounds played on the playground outside of it, watched over by an elderly female canine. She glared at us.

“It is home,” Nixis said. “A home I have not seen in a very long time.”

“Home is not the same since you left,” Spot said. “Ponies not trusted. Ponies attack us. Bad ponies.”

“Bad ponies?” I asked. “What kind of bad ponies?”

“Ponies with guns, numbers. Think they own town,” Spot replied. Nixis grunted a few words in a language I’d never heard him speak before. Spot responded in the same guttural, choppy tongue. Nixis looked to me and sighed.

“Raiders,” he said. “They’ve been attacking the village recently. It has not left the others with any trust in ponykind.” I grimaced.

“I wish we could help, Spot, I truly do,” I said. “But we’re not going to be staying here long enough. We just need some supplies and then we’ll be gone.” We found ourselves on a path leading towards a very familiar place, at least to me. The Books and Branches Library towered over the rest of the town, despite the fact that it was mostly dead and burnt. Many of the treehouse’s branches were broken off or otherwise shriveled and black. I gasped softly.

“Elder inside,” Spot said. “She will see you, pony. Only big pony with pointy horn. Others stay.” I glanced over at the hellhound.

“Only me?” I asked. Spot nodded. I looked at Nixis. He merely nodded as well, motioning for me to go up to the old library. I trotted up to the door, like I had so many times in my visits to Twilight’s place. I was amazed at how eerily similar the two were. I pushed open the door and entered. The inside of the Books and Branches was no better than the outside. Burnt ash and dried blood stained the hardwood flooring in the center of the building. Bookshelves that had once stood proudly in rows leaned against each other, the books they held now all gone.

“Hello?” I called out. There was nopony... nobody around. I looked down at the bookshelves, grimacing. There had once been a place of knowledge here. Now... nothing. A scratching noise caught my attention, and my ears perked up. Standing at the top of the stairs was an old, white female hellhound. She narrowed her yellow eyes at me before smiling toothily.

“Well, what do we have here?” She said softly. “A pony. Not every day one of your kind is allowed in our village.” She loped down the stairs, stopping in front of me. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, pony?”

“My name is Radiant Star,” I said. “My friends and I... we’re on a journey and passing through. We could use some supplies and some directions, if you would be so kind.”

“So eloquent you are, pony,” the old hellhound said. “So much more eloquent than those swine that have attacked us recently.”

“Thank you, I owe that to a mutual friend of ours,” I said. The female raised an eyebrow.

“Mutual friend?” She said. I smiled softly.

“Yes... a hellhound by the name of Nixis,” I replied. The female hellhound's eyes widened,

“Nixis is here?” She said. I nodded. “That's... that's incredible news. I had feared he was long dead. I am Avira, the new mayor of this town. Nixis was a close friend of mine. Wherever did you find him?”

“Chicacolt,” I said. “He was a slave to a group called the Cult of Iron Will. He is a close friend of mine as well. He has helped me through numerous hard times.”

“You... you saved him then. That makes you a friend to the hounds, Miss Star,” Avira said. “You said you needed supplies, yes? And a place to stay, directions? Where do you plan on going?” I narrowed my gaze at the elderly hellhound, glancing past her out the window at the place beyond. The forest loomed over all of Ponyville, an unnatural darkness covering every inch of the damned place. I grimaced, meeting Avira's eyes once more.

“The Everfree Forest.”

Footnotes:

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Level Up!

Patch: Level Up!

Steeljack: Level Up!

Lilith: Level Up!

Chapter 31: The Forest of Death

I'm heading to the Everfree Forest to Zecora's to get some of my favorite tea.

Deception. Dishonesty. Lies. I feel as though my whole life has been one fantastic lie piled atop another. Every waking moment is painful, my thoughts filled with a life that is not my own. The closer I come to finding Spark, the closer I come to losing myself, to becoming one with Twilight's memories.

I often wonder about the lies Twilight told to her friends, her family, and the world to get what she wanted. Twilight hid the existence of Spark, believing that she alone could handle her. In the end, all Twilight succeeded in doing was sealing Spark away. She refused to believe in the one thing that could have helped her save Spark. Friendship.

I see now, the virtues that represent true harmony. Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, Loyalty, and Laughter. The virtues that gave the Ministry Mares their power now bolster my confidence, my strength. I must move forward. I must keep to the task ahead. For if I falter, life as we know it... will end.

"The Everfree Forest?" Spot said, raising an eyebrow. Avira sat off to the side, several old books placed out on the table. Nixis stood next to me, staring down at the other hellhound, but occasionally sending glances at the female canine. I nodded.

"Yes. We're going into the Everfree," I said. "We would appreciate any supplies you can provide." Spot grimaced, his teeth showing. Avira had called Nixis and the other hellhound into the library after our initial talk. Our other friends had been shown to someplace where they could rest until we left for the forest.

"This madness, pony. Hounds don't go into that place that often. Bad things in Everfree, pony," Spot snarled. "Even Nixis smart enough to know this." I narrowed my gaze at him.

"Regardless... we're going. I have something that needs to be done there," I said. "Now... are you going to help us or not?"

"Spot," Avira said, glancing between the two male hellhounds. "We owe this mare a debt. She brought Nixis back safe, after all." Spot barked at her, making me jump just a tad. Avira didn't budge a single inch, apparently used to this kind of behavior.

"This still crazy, Elder!" He snapped before sighing loudly. He looked back at me. "Fine. We give food, some medicine. Dogs will take you down safe path leading to forest." I smiled softly.

"Thank you, Spot, Avira. We will pay you of course," I said, floating out a jingling bag of caps. Avira shook her head.

"No payment can we accept from you, friend," she said. "Spot. See to it that the supplies are made

ready for our new friends when they are ready to leave.” Spot grunted, brushing past Nixis to leave the library. Avira stood, causing Nixis to tear his gaze away from the door to her.

“Uh... Avira?” My friend said. “It's good to see you again.” The female canine smiled toothily.

“Hello, Nixis,” she said. “It is good to see you, too. I see that you are doing well.” Nixis grinned and placed a paw on the back of his head. My eyes widened. *Wait... is he... he's flirting!* I thought. I nearly smiled at the thought. *So, Avira... you old dog you, Nixis!*

“I am. I see they made you the leader of the town after I left,” he replied. Avira nodded.

“It has been quite a long time since then,” she said. “I feared that you would never return to us.”

“I feared the same,” Nixis said. I blinked. It was like watching two awkward teenagers work up the courage to admit their true feelings. I decided that maybe I should step out of the equation for now, and let the two catch up.

“I'm going to go check on the others,” I interjected, smiling softly before turning to Avira. “Again, thank you for your help.” I bowed slightly to the female hellhound and trotted out the door to the library, leaving Nixis alone with Avira. As I did, I noticed the two become a little more relaxed. Everyone deserved a chance at a little happiness, and by Luna I was going to make sure that Nixis got a shot.

With nothing better to do, I opted to head over to where they had put the others up. Carousel Boutique, despite the ages of time and a long history of raider occupation, still stood at the far edge of the town. I trotted up to the old building, admiring just how much work the Ministry Mare of Image had put into her livelihood. Pushing open the door, I found the others inside in the main room. The hellhounds of Ponyville hadn't really been using the boutique for anything and had allowed us to stay there until we were ready to leave. Violet looked up as I entered and smiled.

“Hey. We're just getting everything set up to camp,” she said. “How'd things go with Avira?”

“Good. They're going to give us some food and medicine to start, and a few dogs to take us down the path into the forest,” I said. Violet nodded. I looked over at Patch, who was resting against the counter at the end of the room. Steeljack towered next to her, keeping an ever vigilant watch over his pregnant mare. Lilith and Sunshine lay nearby, snoozing quietly.

My eyes nearly bulged out of my skull, however, when I realized just how pregnant Patch was. Despite the fact that it only been a day or two since leaving Manehattan, my friend's belly appeared much larger than it had been before. Violet caught my stare and dragged me down to eye level.

“I know what you're thinking,” she said quietly. “She's getting bigger, and fast. Star... I don't think she should go into that forest.” I grimaced.

“You're right. She shouldn't. But do you think that's going to stop her?” I said. “She'll come after us anyways if we just leave her here. She's determined to prove herself.”

“All she's going to prove is getting her foals killed. What the hell is going on, Star?” Violet hissed.. “Why is she like this already? I thought she was only supposed to be a few months along?”

“Doctor Rot said that the radiation may have accelerated the process overall,” I said, casting another glance at the pregnant mare. “But he never said it would be this... fast.” I sighed. “We’re going to have to tell Steeljack.”

“Forget him, we’re going to have to tell Patch,” Violet replied. I nodded.

“Yes... but if Steeljack agrees to leave her here, then she’ll stay,” I said. I motioned a hoof, catching Steeljack’s attention. The stallion nodded, making his way over to where Violet and I were sitting.

“Star,” he said softly. I motioned for him to sit.

“Steeljack,” I began. “We’ve got a problem.”

“It’s Patch, isn’t it?” The earth pony said, narrowing his blue eyes at me. I nodded. “I figured this would come up sooner or later. You think she should stay here.”

“We do,” I said. “For her own safety as well as the foals. This is unnatural, Steeljack. She shouldn’t be this pregnant, but if Doctor Rot is right and the radiation accelerated it, then there’s no telling what’s next. How long before she can’t even walk?” Steeljack looked over at his sleeping marefriend, sighing.

“You’re right,” he said finally. “She’s been getting bigger since we left Manehattan. She’d be a sitting duck out there in the Everfree. I don’t want that.” I nodded.

“How do we want to do this?” I asked. “We need to be up front with her, let her know what’s really at stake here if she comes.” Steeljack grimaced, but shook his head.

“I’ll tell her. Alone,” he said. “It needs to come from me. She may not like me for it, but she’ll understand.”

“Then I will speak to Avira,” I said. “See if she can proffer any assistance in taking care of her until we return from the Everfree.”

“If we return,” Steeljack said, his face stony and serious. I offered a small smile.

“We will return,” I said. “And you will get to see your foals, my friend.” Steeljack nodded, walking over to where Patch was resting. I watched as he gently prodded her, smiling softly as she awoke. He spoke a few words and they got up, leaving the building. I sat back on my haunches, feeling Violet nuzzle against me.

“It’ll be alright,” she said. “Patch is smart. She’ll understand.”

“YOU WANT ME TO WHAT?!” A voice roared from outside of the boutique. Violet grimaced.

“Or not,” she said. The door slammed open, revealing the green earth mare herself. She stormed in, Steeljack hot on her hooves. Lilith and Sunshine immediately woke at the sound of Patch’s hoof-falls.

“Star, this isn’t fair!” She protested. “You can’t just leave me here! Not after all we’ve been through!”

“What in the Sorrel Hells is going on here?” Lilith said, wiping the sleep from her eyes with a fetlock. “Who's leaving what where?”

“Steeljack thinks I should stay behind,” Patch spat venomously.

“Patch, please...” Steeljack said. “You have to listen.”

“Wait, what?” Lilith said, glancing up at me. “Why?” I grimaced and sighed, motioning at them to listen while I addressed Patch.

“Look, Patch. You have to see that your body has changed greatly in just the past two days. Even if there isn't anything wrong with your pregnancy, Doctor Rot was right about one thing. Whatever happened has accelerated it unnaturally,” I said. “Who knows what you'll be like in the next two days, or the next four days, or the next week.” Patch glared at me angrily.

“You don't think I know that?” She said. “But I made a promise, Star. I promised I'd help you through to the end. I aim to keep that promise.” Lilith placed a hoof on her friend's shoulder.

“Sweetie. You've done more than enough,” she said, her expression pained. “Star's right. We don't even know how long we're going to be in Everfree in the first place. What if... what if you have the foals? You don't want to have them in the middle of a place like that. They wouldn't be able to survive.” Patch snarled under her breath.

“You don't understand! I'm not invalid! I can still fight, I can still shoot, I can --” The mare began to rant before Lilith grabbed her and brought her into a spine crushing hug. Patch stopped and began to blubber, tears spilling forth.

“Patch...” Lilith said. “We're just looking out for you, and for the foals.” She cooed softly, using her hoof to rub the mare's back and shoulders. “You're a fighter, Patch. But right now... you need to fight for the two little ones growing inside you. They need you now, more than anything.” I smiled.

“You see, it's not that we don't want you here, or that we think any less of you, Patch,” I said as Lilith pulled out of the hug, leaving a very tear-stricken Patch in her place. “We appreciate everything you've done for all of us. But your safety and the safety of your foals is number one on the list, and we need for you to understand that.” Patch stared at the ground, her tears dripping down from her cheek to the floor below. She nodded.

“I know,” she said. “I'm... I'm sorry you guys. I'm just... It's hard, you know?”

“It is,” I said. “But you have to be strong, not just for us, but for them.” Patch nodded, turning to bury herself in Steeljack's embrace. The stallion hugged her close.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” she murmured. Steeljack nodded and spoke softly.

“It's alright,” he said. “Everything will be okay.” Patch pulled back, her one eye red and puffy.

“Promise me,” she said. “Promise me that you're coming back.”

“Patch, I --” Steeljack started to say, but a glare from his love cut him off.

“Promise,” she said simply. Steeljack gulped, but nodded all the same.

“I promise,” he said. Patch pulled him into her space and hugged him fiercely. The green mare sighed and looked over at me. I smiled.

“We should all rest. In the morning, we will be leaving Ponyville, and making our way into the Everfree,” I said. “I will go speak with Avira about accommodating Patch, as well as securing the rest of our supplies.”

“I’ll come with you,” Violet said. I nodded.

“If you don’t mind,” Patch said. “I’d like some time, you know... alone with Steely.” I smiled brightly.

“Of course, I would expect no less. The back room should be clear,” I said. Patch grabbed onto her stallion and led him towards the room. I had to smile again, because I knew just what they would be up to on their last night together for a while. A stray thought caught me as Violet and I made our way out of the boutique. Nixis and Avira, Steeljack and Patch, myself and Violet? Lilith... Sunshine... everypony deserved a bit of happiness. Everypony deserved that chance, because for good or for ill, as of the next day... we wouldn’t have that chance. We wouldn’t have that luxury.

Discord may have been many things, but he was not wrong on one simple, fascinating point. Everfree was a dangerous place, perhaps the most dangerous place in all of the Equestrian Wasteland. And we were about to head right into the heart of the beast.

“Are you sure about this?”

I glanced down at Avira. The female hellhound stood on the path across from us. Everyone was loaded with supplies and ready to begin our journey into the forest. I nodded.

“I’m sure,” I said. “This is something that we need to do. If we don’t stop Spark... the consequences could be disastrous. Not just for me, but for everyone.”

“Then I wish you good hunting in the wilds of Everfree,” Avira said. She looked down at Patch, who was standing away from her. “I will do my best to look after this one. Friends to Nixis are friends to the Ponyville tribe.”

“Thank you, Avira,” I said, bowing my head as a sign of respect. The female canine nodded and moved to say her goodbyes to Nixis while I walked over to the others. Lilith stood off to the side with Steeljack and Patch. The black mare grinned as she pulled her friend close into a hug.

“Don’t you go having those kids without me now,” she said. “I don’t wanna have to come running out of there to see them.” Patch giggled.

“I’ll try,” she said, her expression turning gravely serious. “You be careful out there, alright Lilith?”

“Pssh, you know me, greenie,” Lilith said simply, a bright smile appearing on her face. “I’ll be alright. I can handle myself.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” I said, wrapping a wing over Patch. “We will all be fine. Once we find Spark and end this, then we will come right back here and then we can all go home.” I glanced over at Violet and Sunshine. The two mares were giggling at something. “And what are you two on about?” Violet grinned.

“That,” she said, pointing over at Nixis and Avira. The two hellhounds were speaking quietly, but it was clear that it was still rather awkward between the two. Their body language told me just enough to know that they hadn’t yet managed to really open up.

“It’s like watching ‘Equestria’s Most Awkward First Dates,’” Sunshine said, chuckling. I raised an eyebrow. “What? I may have been born in Tenpony, but my mom had a penchant for old Equestrian programming.” I chuckled.

“Well, I think I know how to solve this little problem,” I said, trotting past to the two. I stalked silently, waiting for the right moment to pounce. Grinning, I popped up next to the hellhounds. “Hey Nixis, are you gonna get it over with and just kiss her already?” Nixis’ eyes went wider than most balloons and his face was as red as a tomato. Avira snickered.

“I... I...” He stammered. I winked at Avira.

“He’s all yours,” I said. The female canine grinned toothily, grabbing a hold on my friend for a kiss. Pulling back, Nixis gazed on dreamily.

“I will miss you,” Avira said, smiling. Nixis nodded. “And I love you. Be safe, Nixis. And good hunting.”

“I... I... I love you, too,” Nixis replied. I coughed loudly, catching his attention.

“I believe we are all ready to go, then?” I said. The male hellhound nodded. I turned to where Spot and his three dogs were standing. “Spot, lead the way.” Spot grunted, and started down the path leading into the forest. I followed behind him, Violet sticking closely to me. Steeljack and Sunshine walked behind them, with Lilith, Nixis, and the other three dogs taking up the rear. The woods around us teemed with the tiny noises of insects and wildlife. It was a place that felt more alive than any other part of Equestria I’d ever been to.

“So... Spot,” I said, catching the attention of the the hellhound. “You said that your hounds don’t come in here that often.”

“Yes,” Spot rumbled. “Forest dangerous. Deadly... things live here.”

“I see,” I said. “But this path is somewhat safe?” Spot grunted.

“This path lead to old shaman dwelling,” he said. “It is as safe as rest of forest. We still be careful. We leave when we reach shaman place.” I grimaced, but nodded as I continued to walk next to the hellhound.

The trees soared above us, the canopy completely blotting out the sun. It was as if we had been transported into a different world altogether. The dirt beneath our hooves was rough and rocky, the crude path extending deep into the woods. As we walked, my thoughts turned to the land around us. Everfree was a land untouched by the megaspells, its wild magic infused into everything around it. The entire land *evolved* completely unchecked. This fact alone became very clear as we continued our trek forward. Beyond the din of regular insect noises, loud crashing and roars could be heard in the far distance, giving us pause as we waited to see if the noises were getting any closer. More than once, I also thought I'd seen movement in the jungle-like trees, but after closer inspection there was nothing.

After what felt like hours, but was really only half an hour according to my PipBuck, we found ourselves in a small open clearing. In the center of it was an old wooden shack built into a tree that looked like it had seen far better days. The thing leaned horribly, and one of the walls had caved in on itself. Spot grunted and the other dogs stopped in their tracks.

"This as far as hounds go," he said. "From here, you on your own." I nodded.

"Thank you again for bringing us this far," I said, bowing my head. Spot grunted again, turning to leave. The other hounds turned away as well as the rest of my friends moved into the clearing.

"Jeez this place is creepy," Lilith said to herself as she trotted forward to inspect the shack. "Looks like nopony's been here in --" Her words died on her lips as a guttural roar sounded from the shack. Spot stopped, turning on a dime, his eyes widening.

"Pony! Away!" He shouted. Lilith moved, but not quickly enough. A pair of green eyes snapped open from the side of the ruined shack and a claw arced out, catching the black mare and knocking her into a nearby tree with a loud ***crack***. I snarled, pulling out Stargazer, ready to fire, but unsure what I was exactly seeing. The shack groaned under the force of something large, and an eerie green glow surrounded pieces of the wood that had broken off from it. They fell together, standing from a pile to form a vaguely canine shaped monster. Its body was made of the branches from the trees and the wood from the shack served as its skeleton. It looked... sickly and diseased. Its head reared up and I suddenly realized that the thing was far larger than I originally had thought. Its eyes blazed with evil green fire.

"Timber wolf!!" Spot roared, leaping at the monster with reckless abandon, followed by his fellow dogs. He slashed wildly at the wooden beast. The timber wolf leaped back, grabbing onto Spot's arm with its vicious maw. I growled under my breath, trying to move to get a good shot in while the dogs fought with the creature. A yelp came from behind me, followed by another growl. I glanced back, seeing Violet and Sunshine contending with a second beast that had popped up from the tree line.

This is a trap, I thought. We need to get out of here. We're sitting ducks for these things. I glanced about, looking for an exit. A path into the trees behind where the shack had been looked to be the most promising, until another of the monsters appeared in front of it. The one fighting Spot snarled loudly as it clamped onto the hellhound's right arm once more and bit down hard. Spot howled in pain as the beast ripped away the appendage, tossing it aside like it was nothing.

"Spot!!!" I shouted, lifting Stargazer again and dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I targeted the beast's limbs, releasing the spell. The torrent of fire shot across the clearing, tearing through the timber wolf's forelegs and breaking them in half. The monster fell to the ground, roaring and snapping. It managed to catch one of the dogs, biting him across his midsection into two clean and very dead halves. Spot

stumbled back as one of his other dogs loped up and started pulling him to safety. I grimaced. The second of the monsters was currently trying to bite its way through a vine wall summoned by Sunshine Sky, as well as dodging silver flame from Thunder Flash. Steeljack and Nixis stood side-by-side in front of a third timber wolf, the earth pony sending bullet after bullet into the wooden creature's head. It roared loudly, charging forward at them. I flared my horn, casting a teleport spell over the two, bringing them closer to me as the beast slammed into the ground.

"We've gotta get out of here!" Steeljack called. I nodded as a black blur shot out from the treeline. Lilith snarled along with the Bitch before a missile shot at the timber wolf that had knocked her back. The thing's head exploded in a mess of kindling and fire. Spot lay several feet away, clutching at the stump of his arm while the two remaining dogs formed over him for protection.

"See if you can delay the last one," I said to Lilith and Steeljack. The two nodded, bounding off into the chaos. "Nixis, you and I will go help Violet and Sunshine so she can go look at Spot." The hellhound leaped forward towards where the two mares were running from the wooden beast. Nixis roared, jumping into the air over them and landed on the monster's head. He began to slash and tear at it, keeping it distracted while I dropped back into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up several shots at the monster's midsection and let loose, the bullets tearing through the air and piercing through its body like a hot butter knife. The monster howled, tossing Nixis free from its head as it slumped to the ground. Another explosion from behind me indicated that the last timber wolf had been finally defeated.

I scowled, surveying the damage. One dead dog, and one more missing an arm. Violet was already next to him, her horn ablaze as she tried to stem the bleeding.

"This isn't good," she muttered, pulling out a healing potion out of her pack. Spot grunted as I made my way over to the group.

"No. Ponies must go, must get away, must..." he started to say frantically, pushing away the potion. The other two dogs grunted as well as Spot howled in pain.

"Go, we take care of Spot," one of them snarled. "Must leave this place, now!"

"I'm not letting him die!!" Violet growled angrily. "I'm not..." She looked down at the hellhound. He was no longer clutching his bleeding stump. His eyes had closed and there was no life left in his form. The other dogs grunted as Violet reached down and checked his pulse. "He's... he's gone." I laid a hoof on her shoulder.

"There's nothing you could have done," I said. The first dog growled under his breath.

"Ponies must go, must get away," he repeated with a snarl. "Dogs take care of Spot." I glared at him and started to speak before being cut off by Nixis.

"He is correct, Star. We must make haste out of this clearing," he said. "Timber wolves are creatures of magic, empowered by the wild forces of Everfree. They do not stay 'dead' for very long."

"Wait... you mean..." Lilith said as we all looked back at the broken forms of the timber wolves. A soft green glow surrounded each one as bits and pieces of each body began to soar through the air, floating in place. Each piece joined together with another, glowing brightly. A guttural roar silenced the clearing as two massive green eyes snapped open. I blinked. The freaking huge timber wolf that had

just formed stomped a ridiculously large paw down on the wooden carcasses of the others. It still had the same sickly look, its branches dead and brittle.

“Run,” I said. “Run!!” I pointed at the far end of the clearing. We galloped forward, the dogs next to Spot latching onto their fallen comrade. They started off in the opposite direction, dragging the body along as the timber wolf leaped into action. It completely ignored us as we charged past, heading towards the hellhounds. I didn't even have to hear the screams and crunching noises to know that the dogs hadn't been fast enough. We passed through the treeline, the branches and plants crunching beneath our frantic hooves. A roar echoed behind us.

“Which way?!” Violet shouted. I looked about as I ran, the forest stretching out in all directions. There was no rhyme or reason to the layout. Absolutely everything looked the same. I grimaced, pointing forward.

“Keep moving forward!” I shouted. “Let's see if we can lose it in the forest!” The trees behind us snapped into pieces as the timber wolf shrugged through the treeline like it wasn't even there. My hooves carried me forward, not even truly paying attention where I was going. I flared my horn, firing a blast of telekinesis at the brush ahead, blowing it into several pieces. Violet was right next to me every step of the way, while the others thundered along behind us. The timber wolf continued to roar as it broke through another line of trees. It was getting closer.

“It's gaining on us!” Sunshine shouted. I grimaced. There was no way we were going to outrun this thing. It was far too fast. I needed to give it a distraction. I veered away from the others, stopping in my tracks.

“You guys keep moving! I'm going to try and put up a shield!” I roared.

“Star, you can't!” Violet called back. I lifted a hoof, the roar of the timber wolf cutting off what I was going to say. It crashed through the final treeline, revealing itself in full. I snarled under my breath, flaring my horn and reaching into my mind for Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple barrier flared into existence just as the timber wolf struck it. The shield held for a moment before shattering under the force of the blow.

“Keep running!” I roared to the others. Thankfully, they listened and continued forward into the brush. The timber wolf snarled, pawing at the ground beneath it. I grinned. “Hey ugly! Come and get me!” I threw up another shield spell and turned tail, charging through the tree line after my friends. My horn flared, sending up spell after spell to try and halt the beast's movement. Nothing I tried slowed it. I growled, frantically charging as the others came into sight. They were ahead of me, still moving. The forest didn't even seem to change as I pelted through the trees.

Finally as if by some inexplicable miracle or will of the forest itself, the tree line broke. Unfortunately for us, it broke into a cliff that veered sharply downward. I saw my friends fall as I hit the cliff myself, unable to stop from joining them. I grunted as I tumbled, bouncing and landing on my sides, shooting pain throughout my body. I heard the timber wolf howl as it launched itself down the cliff after us. I hit the ground sharply, rolling across the forest floor. I landed on my back, gazing up in horror at the wooden monster about to devour us. I ignited my horn, firing a blast of telekinesis at the only place I could think of. The base of the mountain exploded with rocks and debris, blocking the timber wolf's attack.

The timber wolf halted for a mere second before powering through the wall of debris. I grunted loudly as I felt myself yanked backwards. Before I knew it I was being drawn into a cave entrance, the snapping jaws of the wolf nearly catching my tail. The beast pounded at the walls outside the cave, the bulk of the monster not allowing it to enter.

“Keep going!” Violet called out, her green form appearing in my vision. She lifted Thunder Flash in her magic, firing a blast of silver fire at the head of the wooden monster. It pulled back briefly before trying to fit into the mouth of the cave again. A rumbling noise sounded from above as several tons of rock began to pour down into the entrance of the cave, slamming onto the timber wolf’s massive head.

I groaned, my vision hazy from the pain. My horn seared from the overuse of my shield spells. My eyes lolled into the back of my head and I lost consciousness.

“Star...? Star... wake up,” a voice said in the darkness. My eyes fluttered open, trying to adjust to the low level of light around me.

“What happened...?” I said. A soft green glow illuminated the area around me. It was a small cavern, dimly lit by glowing flowers dangling from a mesh of vines. The others were huddled around, nursing their own scrapes and bruises. Violet was hovering over me, a roll of bandages held in her magic.

“We escaped the timber wolf,” Violet said softly. “At the bottom of the cliff was a cave. We think there’s another way out, because the entrance is collapsed.” She pointed at the far end of the clearing, where a bunch of rocks blocked the entrance.

“I’ve tried my best to dig through, but the rock won’t respond to me at all,” Nixis said. “There’s a tunnel that extends deep into the mountain.”

“I thought hellhounds could slash through anything?” Lilith said. Nixis grinned toothily.

“While our claws are sharp, they do not grant our kind the ability to dig as well as we can,” he said. “We have... an innate magic, much like how earth ponies can grow crops or pegasi can handle weather. We speak to the rock, and it speaks to us in return. And this particular rock... it isn’t talking back.”

“Is everyone alright?” I asked, pushing myself up into a sitting position. “That cliff was a pretty big tumble.”

“Mostly bruises and scrapes, but otherwise we’re alright,” Steeljack said. Sunshine grunted.

“Speak for yourself, I’ve got scrapes in places I didn’t even know you could get them in,” she said. Lilith chuckled softly.

“You’re all lucky I can fly,” she said. “Managed to get to the bottom of the cliffside intact.” I grimaced.

“We need to keep moving then,” I said. “Find a way out of here.”

“Star, we don’t even know where ‘here’ is,” Violet said. “We’re lost in this place. We don’t even know

where we're going.”

“We'll figure that out after we get the hell out of these tunnels,” I said. “The longer we wait, the more time Spark and the Elements have.”

“I agree with Star,” Nixis said. “We should keep moving.” Violet sighed.

“Alright, alright,” she said. “But once we get back into the forest, we're making camp and figuring out a plan of attack.” I nodded, reaching into my saddlebags and pulling out the memory orb that belonged to Twilight.

“This will help us with that,” I said, earning myself a glare from Violet. “It's not what you think. Twilight is supposed to have enchanted this orb to act as a sort of... tracking beacon for the other half of the shard. We find the shard, we can face Spark.” Violet nodded. She looked ragged, and I realized that Spot's death had weighed pretty heavily on her. I placed the orb back into my bags, pushing myself back off the ground into a standing position. I nearly bumped my head on the roof of the cave. I turned to my love, smiling softly. “Violet... I know you're thinking about what happened...”

“Not right now, Star,” she hissed under her breath. I sighed.

“Sweetheart...” I said. Violet glared at me again. I dropped the rest of what I was going to say. Violet would talk to me in time. She would have to.

“We'd better get going then,” Violet said curtly, flaring her horn and casting a light spell. I nodded, doing the same. The cave walls lit up with a mixture of green and purple light, bathing them in a sickly looking color. Regardless, it was light. The tunnel at the end of the cave extended deep beyond the range of our combined magic. I moved forward, walking down the tunnel cautiously. After the experience with the timber wolf, I wasn't taking any chances. The tunnel was cramped, and I had to duck my head several times to keep from bumping my horn against the ceiling. It continued on for what felt like forever, but was really about thirty minutes according to my PipBuck.

The tunnel finally broke, opening up into a large underground cavern. Massive crystals embedded in the rock above us gave off a soft light that covered the entire area. The cavern was tiered in nature, with platforms leading all the way up to the top of the ceiling. A glinting and gleaming waterfall poured out from the rock at the far end, spilling down into a serene looking pool below.

“Wow...” Lilith said.

“You said it,” Sunshine said, whistling under her breath. “What the hell is this place?”

“I don't know,” I said. “But we need to move forward. The tunnels up near the top of the cavern should be our first priority. Let's be cautious and find a way up there.” I pointed up at the ledges leading up towards an exit out of the area. Several other tunnels dotted the sides of the walls, leading only Celestia knew where. We started moving, my eyes drifting back and forth from the holes in the walls and the pool of water. The waterfall provided a gentle rhythm to the area that was highly soothing. We were all aching, and a dip into the water sounded quite good.

My curiosity getting the better of me, I started over towards the water's edge. A curious structure caught my eye sitting next to the pool. The others were moving along, looking for a way to climb up to

the next level. Lilith soared overhead, stretching her wings and keeping an eye out. The structure grew closer in size as I neared, and I realized that it was a shack made out of rocks and wood. I cocked my head to the side in confusion.

“Hey, you guys, look at this,” I called out, pointing at the little shack. “Looks like somepony was living here.” Nixis loped over along with Steeljack, while Sunshine and Violet appeared to be fashioning some sort of climbing rope out of Sunshine's vine spell. Lilith stood at the top of the next platform as they threw it up to her. I stepped over to the entrance of the tiny shack, the doorway much too small for me to even fit through. I flared my horn, lighting up the interior. It was a single room shack, with two tiny beds and a shelf. Laying in the center of it was a small skeleton, it's hooves clutching a book. I grimaced, using my magic to lift out the book.

“Skeleton looks a bit small to be full grown,” Steeljack said. I looked over at him, nodding as I showed him the book. Crudely carved onto the front of it were the words:

Property of Chipper Tune

DO NOT TOUCH

THAT MEANS YOU, SUNBRIGHT!

“It's a diary,” I said. “This poor little pony... he was down here all by himself.” I turned it over, flipping it open to one of the more recent entries in the diary. My eyes scanned the words on the page. They were difficult to read, as if they were written by mouth instead of by magic.

Dear Diary...

You wouldn't believe the week I've had! Sunbright and I got lost in the woods, and found this awesome tunnel going down underground near the old silver mine! We're gonna turn it into our secret clubhouse! We're right next to a really cool looking old waterfall, and the water is pure and radiation free!

We built ourselves a little place to hold our secret clubhouse meetings at, too. It's way cool. Anyways, I have to go, I'm pretty sure Mom and Dad are looking for me...

I blinked. The entry mentioned another pony, a Sunbright. My thoughts on the subject were torn away by Violet and Sunshine's call.

“Star!” Violet shouted. I looked up, seeing my love and the other unicorn. I flipped close the book, tucking it into my saddlebags for future perusal. Glancing down at the skeleton one more time, I sighed and made my way over to the others. Violet and Sunshine were standing next to the platform, grinning widely.

“What's up” I asked.

“Well, there's no way to climb all the way up there, unfortunately,” Sunshine said. “And Lilith and you can't rightly carry all of us, so we've gotta improvise.” She turned her attention to the green mess of vines laying at their hooves.

“What is it?” I said.

“A net. We're gonna carry everyone up two at a time. You and Lilith will hold the ends and lift, and I'll provide the magical energy to lighten the load,” Sunshine explained. “We'll get up there in no time.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “I have to wonder... if this place was so hard to get to, how did the little pony in the shack get here?”

“Little pony?” Violet asked. I nodded, explaining about the diary and the skeleton. My marefriend grimaced at the mention of a younger pony having died down here.

“Maybe he came in from the tunnel we did,” Lilith said. “I mean, it's the only level tunnel we've seen and we didn't exactly get a good look at the surrounding area.”

“Makes some sort of sense,” Sunshine said. “Does the diary say anything else?” I pulled out the book and flipped to a later entry.

Dear Diary...

Sunbright got caught going into the forest by her parents. They found out about our secret clubhouse. My parents say its too dangerous to go into the forest. I'm not even allowed to see her anymore! It's not fair! How do they know it's too dangerous?! I hate them. I'm going to run away, and never come back.

I grimaced, turning the page to the next entry.

Dear Diary...

I did it! I ran away to my secret clubhouse! I tried to get Sunbright to come with me, but she couldn't get away from her parents. Her loss, really. I'm writing in you from my awesome little shack down by the water. Wait, what was that noise? It sounded like clacking. I'm going to investigate...

My eyes widened as I turned to the final entry, the text appeared to be even more haphazard than the rest of the journal. A dried bloodstain appeared on the last page, darkening the paper to a reddish brown. It left the entry barely legible, but I did my best.

Every night they come and every night I hide inside the shack. I can hear them clacking loudly... It's scary. I want to go home, I want to see Mommy and Daddy again, but I can't. If I leave they'll get me... If anypony finds this, stay away from the water. I think that's where they come from. Oh... I can hear them again, they're banging on my door! Celestia help...

I glanced over at the pool of water next to the old shack and then back at Violet, my eyes frantic with fear.

“We need to get up there, now!” I shouted, closing the book and stuffing it into my saddlebags. I unhitched Stargazer as something large broke the surface of the water. It was then that I heard it. The clacking sounds. The sounds of the waterfall had very nearly drowned them out. “Lilith, Sunshine! You start taking the others up! I'll hold them off!”

“Hold what...” Sunshine started to say. The words died on her lips as the water churned, revealing the shapes of the creatures climbing out of it. Two giant crab claws served as their hands, their bodies encased in a hard chitinous shell. They walked on two legs, their red eyes glowing in the darkness. My E.F.S. lit up with so many red dots that I couldn't even believe that there were that many of these things. “Holy jumping Luna fish, mirelurks!” I was about to ask what a mirelurk was when the first of the crab-like monsters appeared in front of me. It dove at me with its claws, seeking to impale me. I snarled, holding up Stargazer to block, the force of the impact driving me back.

“Everypony get up and go, now!” I roared. Sunshine nodded, her horn flaring as the vines came to life. Instead of making a net, she built a solid bridge that led up to the next platform. Steeljack clambered up first, taking aim at the mirelurks emerging from the pool. With a sharp series of retorts, Tempest's rifle caught three of them in their legs, temporarily disabling them but not killing them. Nixis leaped next to me, slashing wildly at the one attacking me. While his claws did damage, it wasn't enough to kill the beast.

Lilith soared into the air, the whine of the Bitch drowning out the clacking sound of the approaching mirelurks. She let loose, the errant missile hitting a group that was too close to Chipper Tune's old shack. I winced as the shack blew to bits, but knew that it was better than what had happened to the younger pony.

Violet galloped up the vines next, followed by Sunshine. Violet ripped Thunder Flash into her magic, unleashing blast after blast of silver fire into the crowd of monsters. Sunshine's horn flared, sending several vines out to ensnare the beasts. I regarded the one in front of me. It appeared that the armor surrounding the mirelurk was damn near impenetrable, as evidenced by Nixis' failed attempts to slash it open. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots when I noticed that one of the target areas provided was the facial area that was unprotected by the beast's armor. The chance to hit it was tiny, but worth the risk as I sent the rest of my shots into that weakness.

Time dropped back into being, and Stargazer took aim, sending its hot molten payload of starmetal into the mirelurk's face. Green blood spurted from the beast, dropping it to the ground instantly. It didn't get back up. I grinned.

“The face!” I shouted. “Aim for the face. It's not armored!” Violet nodded, taking aim and freezing for a moment as she used S.A.T.S. to guide her shots. A flare of silver fire soared through the air, slamming into the mirelurk she'd aimed at. The aquatic beast lit up and dissolved into a pile of silvery goop on the ground. I made my way up the vine, followed by Nixis and nodded at Sunshine. The mare accessed her unique magic, dissipating the vine entirely and cutting off the mirelurks from gaining access to us. I took a step back, sending a burst of fire at the closest group, pushing them back.

“Shit, these things are everywhere!” Violet said. “It's a good thing they can't ---” Her voice trailed off as the mirelurks swarmed the wall leading up to the platform and began to scale it as if it weren't even there. “...climb.”

“Everypony fall back! Next platform up!” I shouted, dropping back into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up as many shots as I could at the mirelurks climbing over the top of the platform. Time fell back into place and those same beasts went soaring off the side, spewing forth their green lifeblood. Sunshine made her way up to the next platform, her horn igniting and sending up another set of vines. Lilith hovered in the air, sending missile after missile into the crowd of monsters. Nixis and Steeljack charged up the vines after Sunshine while Violet and I made our way after them. The mirelurks found new ground on

the platform, their numbers teeming. *Just how many of these things are there?!* I thought, grimacing. Even if we made it to the tunnel, the mirelurks would follow, and then we'd be sitting ducks for them.

I growled, sending another spray of bullets into an approaching mirelurk, knocking it back into its fellow monsters. We needed an out, and we needed one fast. We were only halfway to the ceiling, but I could see the platform leading to the tunnel out of this cavern quite clearly. I grinned.

"I've got an idea!" I called out. "Lilith! You get ready to fire at the ceiling. We're gonna bring the house down on these bastards!" Lilith saluted. "The rest of us, I'm gonna teleport us up to that platform."

"Oh no," Violet said. "Not this aga--" I flared my horn, going through the motions of casting a teleportation spell. A flash of purple echoed across the platform, enveloping myself and my friends as we disappeared and reappeared on the upper platform. I motioned to Lilith.

"Now!!!!" I shouted. Lilith grinned, tearing down into a dive. She spun about in midair, firing two missiles from the Bitch upwards, striking the ceiling of the cave. The gems embedded there began to drop, smashing into the crowd of mirelurks below. Lilith flew through the falling debris, weaving and bobbing until she landed on the platform next to us. Roars and clacking sounds could be heard from below as the mirelurks scattered to avoid getting turned into paste. We didn't wait around long enough to see what would happen next. We charged down the next tunnel with wild abandon, panting hard as we found ourselves in another set of caverns. A loud ***crash*** echoed from behind us.

"That oughta keep those things busy," I said. Violet grimaced.

"I thought we talked about the whole 'mass teleport' thing," she said. I grinned widely and gave her a wink, turning my attention to the new cavern. I blinked. Where the previous chamber was made mostly of gemstone and rock, this chamber had... grass and plants in it. The air here was nearly tropical and there was an overabundance of flowers and colorful trees. It brought to light one very big question.

"Celestia's plot, how big is this place?!" I exclaimed. At the very least the light was brighter here. I looked up, seeing the reason why. Bulbs of pulsing light dotted the cave's ceiling like hanging fruits. I realized that they were plants too, like everything else here.

"It's pretty," Violet said. "But like everything else in this place, I'm sure there's something dangerous here." I nodded, flipping my E.F.S. back on. There was a smattering of red dots in the area. I relayed this information to the others.

"We should move quickly and cautiously," I said. "There's got to be an exit out of here that leads up. If we keep moving up, we'll break out of the underground for sure." We started walking, surrounded by a miniature forest inside a cave inside a forest. It was surreal. I wasn't quite sure how the plant life had even survived down here, but it thrived like nothing else I'd ever seen. The flora around us appeared to have adapted to cave dwelling, their stalks lined with thorny protrusions meant to fend off creatures that would eat them. I had to wonder what would attack such beautiful flowers.

We made it halfway through the jungle, taking care to keep an eye on the red dots on E.F.S. I couldn't tell where they were, which made it infinitely more difficult to remain vigilant against any threats. Were they hiding in the foliage, making ready to ambush us? A few times I thought I saw movement,

but it was just plants moving. I looked to Sunshine.

“Sunshine?” I said. The pink mare glanced at me inquisitively. “Can you see about, you know... whatever it is you do with the plants.”

“My earth magic?” Sunshine said. I nodded. A smart pony I was not sometimes. The unicorn knelt for a moment next to a plant, her horn glowing softly as she cast her earth spell. Her eyes widened as she cut off the spell. “We’ve gotta move, big problem.”

“What is it?” I said. Sunshine stood, starting forward.

“The plants here... they’re...” she started to say, stopping cold in her tracks as one of the flowery plant stalks turned about, revealing a fleshy bulb. The head of the plant opened, displaying a row of shiny jagged teeth. “Alive.” The monstrous plant reeled back, ejecting a glob of green goo from its maw that barely missed us. It hit the ground with a sizzling sound that made me cringe. I unhitched Stargazer, blasting away at the stalk. The bullets tore away at the plant, causing it to hiss and howl as it fell away. A growling sound alerted me to a strange looking green monster that loped on four legs that had appeared out of the foliage. It charged at us, its moss-covered claws reaching for me.

Sunshine's horn flared, bringing up a group of vines that wrapped around the monster's arm, twisting it back and breaking it in half. The creature grunted as it fell to the ground, snarling and snapping. I responded with a swift forekick to its head, splattering green blood all over. Three more of the creatures popped out, swarming around us. Steeljack twirled, firing off blast after blast from Tempest's rifle, tearing through one of the monster's torsos while Violet floated Thunder Flash up. My love snarled with steel in her eyes, sending a steady stream of silvery fire at another. Nixis and Lilith took point on the third, the pegasus sending the thing into the hellhound's sharp claws with a well placed buck.

“We need to keep moving!” I called out, knowing full well that forward was the only viable path. The cavern behind us was still teeming with mirelurks, if any had survived at all. It was also pretty well collapsed. As much as I hated to admit it, we had to go deeper into this little forest in order to escape. I just hoped there was an escape. A dead end was not what I wanted to see at this juncture. My hooves moved before my brain did, carrying me along beside the others. We had pissed off this place something fierce, and it was doing its very best to take its revenge.

The underground jungle wasn't just a jungle. It was a self-contained environment that had bred creatures tailor made to defend it. It did what Everfree did best. It adapted to change without fail. More of the spitter plants popped up as we ran, firing their acidic payload our way. The ground heaved behind us, another one of the green spore monsters popping out of the soil. It snarled and gave chase until a wall of vines appeared, blocking it. Sunshine panted hard, her horn glowing. I grimaced, recognizing that look. Magical burnout. She'd been susceptible to it before. Still, she shrugged it off and kept running, her eyes glancing about frantically.

“To the left!” She shouted, indicating a fork in the underground jungle path. We followed her, trusting in her earth based magic to tell us where to go. We struck hard rock, reaching a part of the clearing that held very little foliage other than a giant bulb in the center of it. My eyes lit up, seeing a tunnel leading up at the far end of the clearing.

“There!” I exclaimed. I started forward, stopping cold as I felt the ground beneath me begin to shake

and turn. A gigantic red blip appeared on my E.F.S., and I jumped out of the way just in time before a massive vine-like head broke through the rock. Its body was much like a snake's, long and slender with a large snapping head at the end of it. The monstrous thing roared loudly, searching about for prey. I noticed briefly that it had no eyes, sort of like a worm. Its teeth, however, were razor sharp and gleaming with murderous intent. I looked up at the beast and shuddered.

"Well... now I've seen everything this place has to offer," Lilith said bluntly from behind me. "Can we go home now?"

"I'm all for home," Sunshine said. "And I like plants!" I grimaced. The giant worm-like beast turned its attention towards us, its jaws flinging drool as it snapped at us. My horn flared, bringing forth Shining Armor's shield spell. The monster's mouth wrapped around the shield like a bubble, squeezing hard. Despite the force, it held. I called forth more magic from my horn, expanding the shield quickly, forcing the plant creature to pull away. It roared loudly. I knew I had to come up with something, anything. A plan formed in my mind.

"Everypony, make your way to the tunnel. Lilith, you and I are going to keep our new friend a little busy," I said, flapping my wings and lifting into the air. The black mare nodded and followed suit. The giant worm thing began tracking me instantly. I wondered how it knew where I was without any eyes, but didn't have time to think about it as it lunged at me. I dodged to the side, barely missing being snapped in two. The monster reeled back for another strike. I gratefully acknowledged that the others hadn't argued and were making their way across the cave towards the tunnel. This thing was far too big to get through the entrance, and I doubted that we could kill it. Distracting it was the only viable play.

"Hey ugly!" Lilith shouted, catching the attention of the monster. "Betcha can't catch me!" The worm beast roared, spinning around to try and attack the lithe pegasus, who merely spun into a loop around the thing's head every time it came near. The ground beneath us rumbled, and I realized this wasn't going to be as easy of a plan as it sounded in my head. Several of the green spore creatures detached from the main bulb of the worm beast, heading towards my friends. Nixis met them head on, his razor sharp claws slicing limbs off the plant-based things. Steeljack was right beside him, using a combination of straight up earth pony bucking and Tempest's rifle to take down any opposition. Violet and Sunshine galloped behind them, the silvery blasts of Thunder Flash working in tandem with Sunshine's earth magic.

"They'll be alright," I muttered to myself, more for my own worries than anything. I still had a job to do. The worm monster was still focused on Lilith, the black mare leading it on a wild goose chase that it simply just couldn't win. Still, eventually she was going to get tired, and I needed to help pick up the slack. I grinned, unlatching Stargazer and sending a stream of bullets along the body of the beast. Plant matter blew out from the holes it made, sending the creature into a frenzy as it stopped attacking Lilith and began coming after me again.

I flapped my wings, sending myself up near the ceiling as the worm attacked. My horn glowed and I teleported to the other side of the room next to Lilith as the beast struck the ceiling. One of the light pods that had been hanging exploded in a ball of fiery gas, causing the monster to reel back in what sounded like a cry of pain. I glanced over at Lilith.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?" I said, grinning. Lilith nodded, her face hidden behind its visor. She pointed up at the other pods on the ceiling. "Keep him busy while I work." The black mare took off like a rocket, hitting the long body of the worm with a slash of her wing blades. The recovering beast

snapped like a fly trap, reaching about to attack. I soared above the battle, keeping a close eye on Lilith as she weaved in and out of the monster's lunges. I aimed Stargazer, sending out a spray of fire that cut as many light pods away from the ceiling as I could. They fell down, hitting the unsuspecting worm beast like lead balls. The monster roared as the pods exploded, splattering the surrounding area with green goop.

I flew down, the worm creature whipping about erratically as Lilith soared away from it. I glanced down at where the others were, noting that they had made it to the tunnel entrance and were now defending it against a veritable wave of spore creatures. I landed, bringing my forehooves down on one of the one of the things, smashing its head into a puddle of goo. Lilith landed next to me.

"Let's get moving while that thing is busy," she said. The giant worm monster was still thrashing about, its throes now clearing away any approaching spore creatures as it slammed into them. I spun about, yanking out Stargazer again and firing a burst into a few that had made it through. They fell to the ground instantly. I turned back and followed the others as we made our way through the tunnel. I took up the rear, backing up as I kept Stargazer trained down the tiny area. Thankfully no more spore creatures followed. I suspected that once we'd moved beyond their area that they would give up. I didn't exactly know how I knew that, but it helped me breathe easier.

The tunnel took a sharp incline up, and a gentle breeze told us we were getting closer to the exit. Finally, after several agonizing minutes we broke out of the side of the mountain, finding ourselves in a beautiful glade under a starry sky. The night sky was gorgeous, filled with thousands of stars. Not only that, the glade looked calm. Nothing could be heard other than the sounds of insects. I sighed, slumping to my haunches.

"We need to rest," Violet proclaimed. "This looks about as safe as anywhere can be considered in this place. We'll each take a watch." She dug into her saddlebags, pulling out a few healing potions, distributing them to the others. I took one and drank in deeply, feeling far better. I was sore from all the flying, my wing still not feeling like it was up to the strenuous activities I'd been putting it through. I slumped next to where Sunshine sat, noting that she was holding her hoof to her horn. Violet sat on the other side of her, administering some Med-X and working her over with her minor healing spell.

"Are you alright?" I said. Sunshine nodded, wincing.

"It happens from time to time," she said. "Burnout in my family... it's a pretty common thing actually."

"You need to be more careful," Violet said. "Overuse of magic can damage your horn, not to mention your nervous system." Sunshine smiled.

"Thanks," she said. "I guess I didn't realize how much trouble you guys get into." I chuckled.

"Yeah... trouble always seems to follow us," I replied.

"More like follows you," Violet said, rolling her eyes. "Still, you should be okay. You just need to rest. We all do." I nodded, turning over and laying my head on the ground. I looked up at the stars briefly before sleep took me.

I sighed, my eyes drifting up to the library before me. For once, I was relieved that Twilight had brought me here. I had some questions for her that she needed to answer. I stood, trotting up to the library door, pushing it open. The library was much the same as it always was, except now there was smoke coming from cutie mark burned into the floor. Twilight stood on the other side of it, her eyes closed. I stepped in, closing the door behind me.

“Twilight,” I said softly. The lavender mare's eyes snapped open, and she regarded me curiously.

“Star? What are you doing here?” She said. I grimaced. Twilight hadn't brought me here? Then why was I in the library? I decided that maybe I had wanted to speak to the mare so badly that my subconscious desires brought me there. I plopped onto my haunches.

“I've got some questions for you,” I said. “We're in the Everfree, but the memory orb isn't working. Where is the shard?” Twilight smiled coyly.

“The shard is in the forest, I am sure of this,” she said. Her horn glowed briefly and then dissipated. “I've strengthened the spell on the other half. It's the best that I can do for right now.” An image of the orb appeared in the air, pulsing softly. “There are ruins scattered all around the Everfree. Remnants of a past we try so hard to forget.”

“The war?” I asked. Twilight nodded.

“During the war, it was thought that the natural resources of the Everfree could be used to power the war effort. The Ministries could never get a very good foothold there, for some strange reason,” Twilight explained. “Only Stable-Tec had the resources and the determination to be able to build there successfully. All of my Ministry's projects there just went to Tartarus.”

“Stable 101,” I said. My history lessons kicked in, reminding me that Stable 101 was the place where Red Eye had come from.

“Spark will most likely be there. It was the site of the old castle that once belonged to the Royal Sisters,” Twilight said. “But for you to go there, with the Elements still around... will be disastrous.” I sighed.

“I know... I've met one of the Elements already. Kindness,” I said. “Do you know just how difficult she was to fight? I've never seen power like that.”

“The physical bodies of the Elements are nothing more than shells, holding their will,” Twilight said, sitting across from me. “By defeating Kindness' mortal form, you have merely delayed the inevitable.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “I destroyed her. She's gone.”

“Far from it,” Twilight replied, snorting. “Kindness' physical body may be gone, but her spirit remains. It is awake, and nothing will stop her from forging a new golem to inhabit. The same goes for the others, as well.” I blinked.

“What the fuck? You mean to tell me that I can't defeat them?” I said angrily. Twilight grimaced.

“They are the Elements of Harmony. The greatest of ponykind's virtues made whole,” she said. “Do

you really think that you can beat them?" I nodded. "Then you are a fool, who will only get herself killed." I snarled under my breath.

"So what do I do? Just stop? I have to defeat Spark," I said. "You know that." Twilight grinned.

"Lucky for you then, I have an ace up my sleeves," the lavender alicorn said. "You see, there exists a very special school of magic that you already know a little bit of. Memory spells."

"Memory spells?" I said. "How are they going to help me get past the Elements?"

"By diving into their mortal forms' minds," Twilight replied. "You should be able to use that opportunity to confront the Elements and disperse their physical bodies." The mare's horn glowed, sending a spark of magic soaring through the air at my horn. I closed my eyes, allowing the details of the spell to wash over me. It was a very simple spell, related closely to the mind dive that I had once used on Spark, but a little more aggressive than that spell had been. I opened my eyes once more, meeting Twilight's gaze once more. I paused for a brief moment before speaking again.

"Thank you," I said. "I had... one other question though. Something Cruelty said. She mentioned that they wanted to join Spark in her crusade to create a perfect world. I thought the Elements tried to stop Spark. What happened to them?" Twilight grimaced.

"I do not know the answer to that question, Star," she said. "This is very disturbing news indeed. If Spark has convinced the other Elements to help her, then we will need to move even quicker towards finishing this." She glanced away, a smirk developing on her face. "It is time for you to wake up, Star. Finish this. And don't come back to me until it's done."

My eyes fluttered open, groaning as I pushed myself up from the hard ground. I let my gaze drift upward, noticing that it was still night out. The others were all asleep. I frowned. Wasn't somepony supposed to be switching watch? Furthermore, I hadn't been woken up for my own turn, which made me concerned. I glanced down at my PipBuck. It was the next morning! I looked back up at the sky, noticing the stars still there.

"That's... that's odd," I said softly. Violet grunted in her sleep next to me. Sunshine and Lilith lay nearby, along with Steeljack. I returned my gaze to the stars above. They were... cold. There was none of the life that the stars usually held. I wondered if this had something to do with this particular glade of the Everfree. It wouldn't surprise me. This place was already outside of what was considered the natural order.

As I was pondering this, my eyes did a double take. Something flashed before me.

"Did that...?" I said, blinking. The stars stood in the sky, much like they always did... but stars didn't... didn't...

Stars *didn't move!*

"Violet..." I said softly, using my magic to push her and the others until they woke up. "We need to move, now. We need to go --"

****ROOOOOAAAAAAARRR****

A massive roar cut through what I was going to say next, the stars above shifting drastically as the monster above began to move. This was one beast I was very familiar with from my sharing of Twilight's memories. A star spawn, an ursa. And this was a big one. The others shot up instantly as the stars gave way to the light of day. Two fierce yellow eyes appeared in the star field, accompanied by a massive mouth of silvery teeth.

“Run!” I shouted, spinning about to face the others. I charged forward, their hoof beats matching mine as we fled the glade. The monstrous beast roared even louder, a gigantic paw made of stars slamming down on a patch of trees behind us. I didn't even look back as I jumped over a fallen log. Growling and crunching filled the glade, the star spawn giving chase. I growled under my breath. We couldn't keep doing this. Too much senseless running meant that we could fall into another trap like before. I stopped dead, turning on a dime and pulling up Stargazer.

“Lilith, take to the air and lay down some cover fire!” I called out. “Steeljack, you and I are going to hold the line here while Violet and Sunshine try to snare this thing! Nixis, you know how to fire a weapon?” Lilith nodded, spreading her wings and flying straight up, the Bitch unwinding from its holder. The trees weren't as thick, giving the pegasus room to stay out of range of the star spawn.

“Are you crazy?!” Violet said. “Have you seen the size of that thing?!” The treeline crashed down, revealing a giant star field claw. The star spawn was deadly close.

“I know, but we can't keep doing this,” I growled. “We need to get to the shard. If we keep running away all hiblydy-biblydy, we'll never get to Spark!” I flung Stargazer up, squeezing off a burst of shots even as I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. to queue up a more aimed attack at the star spawn's face. Time fell back into place and Stargazer continued to howl, sending a barrage of fire into the monster. It roared in reply, rearing back to slam its claws down on us. The field of stars was dizzying, confusing. I couldn't tell where the thing's legs connected to its body or how large its head was.

A shrieking whine added its note to the confusion as the Bitch's payload went right into the amorphous blob of a beast. The missile exploded, causing the star spawn to falter for a brief moment before it went to bring down its claws. My horn flared, casting Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple barrier flickered to life as the star spawn landed on it. The shield held, but the strength required to keep it up was draining me fast. I grunted under the force of the monster's weight as Lilith peppered the great beast with missile after missile. The star spawn howled and shifted, falling away from my shield. I moaned in pain as I immediately dropped the spell. Steeljack moved into action, bringing up Tempest's rifle and unloading it into the ursa. It shrank back for a moment, roaring loudly.

“Shit... are we even hurting it?” Violet said as she lifted Thunder Flash into the air. Its unique silver fire shot across the clearing, impacting with little effect on the starry skin of the monster. Sunshine's horn lit up, sending shoots of vines up around what I assumed were supposed to be the star spawn's legs. The constellation beast growled, snapping and pulling back as it broke the vines. Another set of missiles struck the star spawn, drawing its attention to Lilith. With a quick swipe of its claws, the black pegasus went tumbling to the ground.

“Lilith!” I shouted, sending an unaimed burst of fire in the general direction of the monster while Violet made her way over to the armor clad mare. Lilith stood shakily, her left wing hanging limply from its

side. I grimaced. The star spawn roared again, picking up a tree in its amorphous blob and tossing it at us. I spat out several shots, severing the tree into two pieces while Sunshine grabbed them with her magic. She was panting hard, sweat pouring from her brow as she focused on the wood with her horn. She snarled, spinning the trees around and around until they became implements of death. They glowed green with earth magic.

“Take... this!” Sunshine grunted, sending the spinning trees right back at the ura. They struck with deadly force, tearing at the very essence of the star spawn. It snarled and howled in pain as the pink mare's horn glowed brighter, pouring more and more magic into the makeshift throwing weapons. The pieces of wood were now spinning so fast that I couldn't see them anymore, just starry blood leaking onto the ground below us.

POP

The magic cut off instantly, Sunshine's horn flaring once more before sputtering and finally dying. The pink unicorn passed out, hitting the ground with a resounding ***thud***. My eyes widened.

“Sunshine!” I shouted, jumping over next to her. Nixis appeared next to me.

“Let me take her,” he said. “Worry about the star spawn.” I nodded, allowing the hellhound to pick up the unconscious mare. Her horn was blackened, the smell of burning filling the air around us while an unequine howl echoed throughout the entire clearing. I looked up at what was left of the monster.

The star spawn was on *fire*.

The monstrous beast writhed and flailed, trying to escape the fire that had started consuming its body. The surrounding trees were beginning to catch as well, the wild blaze consuming the tiny glade. *Shit shit shit shit!* My brain spasmed in panic, and all I could think about was getting the others out safely. I looked over at Violet. She was helping Lilith limp along, their eyes wide and terrified in the flickering firelight.

“We need to move, now!” I called out. I reached into my saddlebags and yanked out Twilight's memory orb, the purple sphere pulsing with energy. Taking care to not focus my magic on the device, but instead on the air around it, I lifted it up to eye level. The pulsing of the orb began to speed up slightly when I pointed it northeast, according to my PipBuck. Thankfully... that was away from the flaming star bear that was dying behind us. I pointed off in the direction. “That way. Violet, help me get Lilith up on my back.”

“I can walk fine,” Lilith said groggily. I grimaced, shaking my head.

“No time,” I said forcefully, grabbing a hold of the pegasus with my telekinesis and depositing her on my back. Lilith grumbled, but ultimately stayed there as I began to move. The wall of flame was spreading out behind us, perpetuated by the escaping star spawn. The monster was trying to get away from the fires, inadvertently setting more of the forest ablaze while it moved. It howled loudly, a deathly howl of rage and pain. I almost would have felt bad for it if it hadn't tried to eat us.

We continued moving forward in the direction that Twilight's memory orb was pulling us towards. I glanced about, worried that the howling and flailing that the star beast was doing would attract even more unwanted attention, but nothing showed up on my E.F.S. to indicate anything hostile. Eventually

we made it out of the range of the fire. We slowed to a stop, coming to rest along the underbrush. I set Lilith down and allowed Violet to go to work, her healing spell wrapping the black mare's wing in the soft glow of her magic. While she tended to Lilith, I had Nixis lay Sunshine down on the earthy floor.

"She's still unconscious," the hellhound said. I grimaced, my gaze drawn up to the mare's burnt horn.

"She put out a lot of magic back there," I said, placing a hoof to her brow. She was *hot*. "She's burning up." I lifted out a healing potion to Sunshine's lips, using my magic to hold open her mouth in order to force the liquid down.

"Is she going to be alright?" Nixis said. I shrugged. I truly didn't know. I looked over at Violet, who was finishing up with Lilith's wing. She trotted over once she was done.

"Lilith is alright, but she's not going to be doing much flying for a while," she said. "That thing ripped out a few of her flight feathers... well... the feathers that aren't metal at least. Some of those are damaged or bent."

"Don't you guys worry about me," Lilith piped up, grinning as she downed a restoration potion. The hellhounds had been rather kind to us when it came to medical supplies, but even then every ounce of potion was necessary. Violet's horn took over my work, going over Sunshine's body and horn while I looked through our bags for the rest of our supplies. My eyes bulged out of my head when I noticed a rather sizable hole in one of my bags. All the medical supplies I'd been carrying were *gone*.

"Shit," I said, showing the bag to Violet, who looked up and sighed.

"Well... counting what we just spent, we're down to less than half of what we started out with," she said. Her horn flared again, scanning over the unconscious Sunshine. "And I have no idea why she won't wake up. Her body seems to be in normal condition, and she's breathing, but it's like she's... just not there. What if she burnt herself out too bad?" Her eyes met mine. I knew that look. Violet's protective mother look. She wasn't ready to count Sunshine out of the game, not yet. I looked down at the other unicorn. She had willingly pushed herself past her own limits to stop the star spawn, and had sacrificed her own magic to do so. I wasn't ready to give up on her yet, either. A fleeting thought shot through my mind.

"I... I have an idea," I said. "It's... it's not exactly a good one, but it might get Sunshine back to us." Violet cocked an eyebrow.

"What is it?" She said. I sighed.

"A more advanced memory dive spell that Twilight gave to me," I said. "It's sort of like what I did when I was forced out of my body by Spark. I'd be able to dive into Sunshine's mind and see if I can contact her. Twilight told me I'm supposed to use it on the Elements, if they show up, but I don't see why it wouldn't help us out here." Violet grimaced, glowering at me. I knew she would.

"Not happening. With both of you out of commission and Lilith unable to fly, what if something came along? We'd be sitting ducks, Star, and you know it," she said. I nodded.

"I'm not disagreeing with you, Violet," I said. "But we owe it to Sunshine. She's been a good friend to us. We're not leaving her behind. She'd be as good as dead." I glanced around to check my E.F.S.

again. There was still nothing. “Look, it's clear right now. I'll pop in and back out in a jiffy.” Violet sighed, clearly mulling over our options.

“Alright, alright, but let's move off this path first,” she said. “I'd rather be concealed than in plain sight while you do this.” I nodded, reaching out with my magic and gently lifting Sunshine in it. We retreated into the underbrush while Steeljack and Nixis stood guard. Violet helped Lilith lay down next to Sunshine.

“I don't know exactly how this works,” I admitted as I moved to touch horns with Sunshine. “I just hope that it does work.” My horn glowed softly, a line of magic extending to Sunshine's horn. The light between us grew in size, enveloping both of us. My mind fell away into nothingness, fully absorbed into the mind of the mare in front of me.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I blinked. I was witness to another pony's memories, just like before when I'd used the mind dive on Lilith and Spark. Sunshine was trotting through the public areas of Tenpony Tower, smiling and waving at the others in the main hallway. The hoity toity elite paid little attention to her, but the shop owners waved back. Sunshine stopped at the end of the hallway, glancing back and forth before trotting into a nearby elevator. She pressed a button with her magic, the elevator humming softly. I followed closely behind.

The door opened and Sunshine exited into a cold, dark hall that led to a large open chamber. Sunshine stood in the middle of the chamber, a stylized cutie mark that belonged to Twilight Sparkle emblazoned on the floor. She looked up into the darkness.

“Hello?” She called out.

“Sunshine Sky,” a voice replied. “You have been summoned before the council of the Twilight Society.”

“My will is the Council's,” Sunshine said. “What is it that you wish of me?”

“The alicorn,” another voice said. “Radiant Star. The Ministry Mare. You are to perform a task for us.”

“What sort of task?” Sunshine said pensively.

“You are to befriend the mare,” the first voice said. My mind went blank. *What...?!* I thought as the voice continued to speak. “Join her in her cause. You are expected to provide regular reports on her progress.”

“What exactly am I supposed to be reporting on?” Sunshine asked.

“The Ministry Mare is a possible threat to the Twilight Society, and to the Wasteland as a whole. If she becomes compromised, we expect you to act accordingly,” the second voice said. Sunshine narrowed her gaze at the darkness.

“I'm assuming you expect me to remove her,” she said.

“Take that however you wish,” the first voice said. “But this task can only be completed by you. The death of Dusk Blue, the traitor who sought to overthrow us, has made the rest of the Society more... cautious. You are the only one close enough to the Ministry Mare.”

“What should I do then?” Sunshine said.

“Go to her. Offer to travel with her,” the second voice said. “And watch.” Sunshine sighed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Sunshine was spying on *me*! I just... I wanted out of this memory so badly. I didn't even know how I was supposed to help her. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to help her.

“Alright, I'll do it,” Sunshine said. I was fuming angry. We were in the most hostile environment I'd ever been in and I was taking a major risk to save her. I was risking Violet! I growled, realizing that my spirit was disconnected from the scene unfolding before me. I blinked. The Sunshine in front of me dissipated into nothingness as the memory changed. Sunshine was sitting in Duskhoof, watching me as I interacted with the ghouls there. A soft smile was written all over her face. The scene accelerated, showing post Duskhoof as we were leaving, Tenpony Tower, Ponyville, Everfree. And then finally... blackness.

“So... you've seen the truth of the matter,” a voice in the void said from behind me. I spun around, seeing another version of Sunshine, the true version, standing there. She had a pained expression on her face.

“Sunshine,” I snapped. “What is all of this? Why are you spying on me?” Sunshine looked down at her hooves, shuffling them idly.

“I... I wanted to tell you,” she said softly. “But I was scared... the Society wanted me to watch you because they thought you would threaten them... There was nothing I could do.”

“You could have refused,” I hissed. “You could have told me. I would have understood if you were frightened. You lied to me, Sunshine.”

“I know, I know!” Sunshine cried. I could see tears forming in her eyes. “And I'm so sorry about it! At first... I thought that if I did this, if I did well, it would secure me a place in the Society among the council. I tried to disconnect myself from you. But then...”

“Then, what?” I said. Sunshine looked away for a moment and then back. Her eyes glistened in the inky blackness of the void.

“But then I wanted to be your friend,” she said. “For real, not because somepony asked me to. You saved my life, and I never can repay you that fact.” My eyes widened. “I should have told you, and not like this. Something's wrong with me, Star... I'm a bad pony, a bad friend... and I'm being punished for it.” I looked down at my own hooves, my anger seeping away as I returned the pink mare's gaze. I stepped forward, wrapping a wing around the crying unicorn. I couldn't rightfully be angry at her. She was sincere in her apology, and her honest heart spoke out through her soul. I believed her.

“It's alright,” I said softly. “You can make it through this, Sunshine. But we need you to wake up in order to do that. You're unconscious.”

“How... how are you here then?” Sunshine sputtered.

“Mind dive spell, very complicated stuff. Maybe... maybe after you wake up, I'll teach it to you,” I said. “But you have to wake up for us. We're running out of time, and we're going to need your help.” Sunshine looked up, sighing.

“You really promise you'll teach me that spell?” She said. I giggled softly.

“Of course I will. But after this is over, and you wake up... no more secrets. You're my friend, Sunshine. I want to believe that. So no more lying, alright?” I said. Sunshine nodded.

“What... what happened to me, anyway?” She asked. I grimaced.

“Magical burnout. You really packed a wallop on that star spawn though. Set him on fire, actually,” I said. “You passed out during that part.”

“Then how do I wake up?” Sunshine said, looking out into the black void stretching out in all directions.

“That's easy,” I said. “Just think of your friends. Think about me, about Violet... Steeljack, Lilith, Patch, Nixis. Think about them all, and find your way home. You can do this, Sunshine.”

“Star...?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for believing me, I'm... I'm really sorry.”

“Let's deal with that once you're awake, alright?”

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GASP

Sunshine's eyes forced open with a loud gasp that turned into a sputtering cough. My own eyes fluttered opened, noting the presence of Violet right next to us. We were thankfully, still in the underbrush. Nixis and Steeljack stood off to the side, while Lilith still lay nursing her wing. I wondered how long I'd been in there. Violet went immediately into herd mother mode, helping Sunshine sit up and down another healing potion. I grimaced at that, given the status of our medical supplies, but I wasn't about to argue with Violet. Instead, I sat up myself and stared at Sunshine.

“Before we move any further,” I said finally. “No more secrets. Tell them.” Sunshine meeped, hiding her head for a brief second before finally nodding.

“Tell us what?” Violet said. Sunshine raised a hoof, stopping her.

“I was... I sent to keep tabs on Star by the Twilight Society,” she said. Both Steeljack and Nixis had entered the underbrush, gawking at the pink unicorn.

“You were *WHAT?!*” Lilith said. I placed a hoof to her mouth.

“Shhh,” I said. “You’ll call attention to ourselves.” Lilith nodded and I removed the hoof. The black mare and Violet were now glaring at Sunshine.

“Why were you spying on us? What does the Twilight Society want with Star?” Violet said. “They can’t have her.”

“They didn’t want her physically,” Sunshine said. “They only wanted to know if she would become a threat to them. It doesn’t matter... I’m done with the mission. I can’t do that... to a friend.”

“A friend?” Lilith said forcefully. “What makes you think --” I raised a hoof, shushing all of them.

“Sunshine is trying to make amends here, you two,” I said. “The Twilight Society put her in a bad position, and she came clean. She’s not at fault here. She spoke truthfully.” Violet glanced over at Sunshine, sighing. She lifted her hoof to her.

“If Star is okay with this, then I am too. I trust her judgment,” she said. Sunshine took the hoof, shaking it. Lilith snorted, but lifted her own hoof as well.

“Despite the sneaky spy stuff, you have been pretty cool,” the black mare said. “But if you so much as lay a bad hoof on Star, I will kill you. Formalities and all.” Sunshine giggled.

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Lilith,” she said, looking up at Steeljack and Nixis. “And what about you two?”

“The Ministry Mare is wise,” Nixis said, smiling toothily. “I trust her.”

“The Twilight Society messed up, they should have sent a mare who was less brave,” Steeljack added. Sunshine blushed, and I grinned as I pushed myself off the underbrush.

“How is your magic feeling?” Violet said, her own horn glowing as she scanned the pink mare. Sunshine squinted, trying to access her magic, but nothing happened.

“Seems like I’m burnt out for a little while,” Sunshine said.

“Well, don’t try and force it, or you’ll just end up hurting yourself worse,” Violet replied. She floated out a pistol with a holster out of one of her bags. “Take this. It’s not much, but it’s all I’ve got. Not like we have an extra battle saddle or anything like that.”

“Thanks,” Sunshine said, allowing Violet to levitate the holster around her neck.

“You... do know how to fire a mouth grip, right?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow. Sunshine rolled her eyes at me.

“Of course I do. Just point the barrel at what you want to kill and tongue the trigger, right?” She said. I facehoofed. It would have to do, though.

“Right then, we’ve got a shard to find then, shall we? I don’t think we should be spending too much

more time here than what we have already,” I said, levitating up my bags, including my holey one. I was already considering how lucky I was to have placed Twilight's memory orb into my side pocket, otherwise it could have become lost as well. I briefly wondered what else was missing from that pack, but knew that whatever it was was long gone. I slipped Stargazer into its harness.

“Can you stand?” Violet asked Sunshine. The pink mare pushed herself up onto four hooves, nodding. “Good. Star? You know which way to go?” I yanked Twilight's memory orb out of my pocket. It was pulsing strongly. I lifted it and gauged the directions it pulsed in. It was still pulsing faster in the northeast. I pointed.

“That way,” I said, starting to move. The others followed behind me, the sounds of the forest returning while we walked along. Lilith's wing was still bandaged up, but she kept up on the ground just fine. I trotted in front, holding aloft the memory orb that was our guide. I pulled up my automap on my PipBuck, not surprised that we were dead lost in the middle of the Everfree. There were no landmarks nearby that gave us any clue which way we had entered the forest. Just more forest. It was as if the entire place had become bigger on the inside.

My mind ran thick with thoughts as we walked. The Twilight Society thought I was enough of a threat to send Sunshine to spy on me. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't fault them for being cautious. They were only looking out for themselves, and by proxy the ponies they protected. Discord had thought that I would bring about the end of the world. What was I going to do? I was going to try and stop Spark by saving her... was that the wrong thing? I couldn't grasp how I could be the reason for chaos and destruction. They had to be wrong.

Because you're the Ministry Mare, I thought. You're the one who's supposedly going to become a Goddess. I grimaced at the thought of it. I wasn't a Goddess. I didn't want to be one. I just wanted my old life back. To spend time with Violet, settle down... none of this insanity that life seemed pretty bent on putting me through. Still... I couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to happen. I just didn't know what.

After about several hours of walking, which surprisingly equaled out to several miles per my PipBuck, we had to stop and take a breather. We found ourselves in a thinner portion of the forest, near a few rocky cliffs that went up into more forest. Looking up, my eyes widened.

“Hey... check it out,” I said. The rocky outcroppings turned into a small flat building that sat right on top of the cliff. A set of metal stairs went from the valley floor up to it. Several large pylons extended from the top of the building. Power lines snaked from pylon to pylon, now covered in green moss that hung everywhere.

“It's an old power station,” Violet said. “What's it doing all the way out here?”

“Twilight said that they built stations and buildings like this during the war, hoping to harness the power of the Everfree Forest's natural energies,” I said. “I don't think it worked out too well for them.”

“Is the shard... is it there?” Lilith said. I pulled out the memory orb and it pulsed brightly. I grimaced, nodding.

“Looks like we're heading up,” I said, testing a hoof on the ancient metal stairway. It creaked loudly, but it held as I put my full weight onto it. The stairs took the opportunity to prove once again that they

were the most villainous creature in the entire Wasteland by groaning with every step, taunting me about my weight. I stepped out from the top of the stairs onto the metal platform in front of the building. The area in front of power station was a complete mess. Several sky wagons lay about, the skeletons of ponies hanging out of their windows. Debris cluttered the entrance, the door hanging off of its hinges.

My E.F.S. indicated several close blips, fast moving against the sea of red as I trotted up to the door. I used my telekinesis to clear away the debris. I ripped the door off of the hinges fully, setting it carefully aside. I flared my horn, sending a soft light down the dark tunnel inside. Nothing.

"We move in carefully," I said. "Could just be radroaches, but I don't want to be caught off guard." I stepped inside, the foul stench of hundreds of years assaulting my senses. Skeletons lined the hallways. There had been ponies here when the bombs fell, I realized. But the Everfree Forest wasn't hit by the bombs directly. There was no radiation here. Not even taint. So where had the sky wagons come from? I grimaced. The tunnel before us led to a still locked door.

"This place is kind of creepy," Lilith said. "Why would the shard be here?"

"Because Discord would probably find this funny, sending us on a wild goose chase to find it," I said, glaring at the door. More red blips had appeared on my E.F.S. I focused on the door with my magic, picking the lock my own way. A few seconds later the door fell inwards, landing on the metal floor. Thankfully I was able to catch it and set it down softly before it made a lot of noise. I stepped into the room, nearly falling over at the smell.

The room was not even close to what a power station main room would look like. It was a large square area with a set of stairs going down in the corner. Two large metal doors sat on each side of the room, but it was what lay in the center that caught my attention. Two flat metal tables had been set up in the middle of the room, medical equipment hooked up at the head of each. The devices appeared to be off or broken, as they were dark. Laying on the first table was the body of an earth pony. It was flayed open, its entrails spilling out onto the table. The second table though... I had never seen a creature like it before. It was insectoid in nature, almost like a larger bloatsprite. The only difference between the two was the gigantic stinger it held on the end of its body. It too was ripped apart, but for some reason... it looked more precise.

"Oh... Luna," I heard Violet say as she entered the room beside me. "What the fuck is this...?"

"I don't know," I said softly. "I don't think this was a power station, though."

"More like a research center," Sunshine breathed. She stepped up next to the tables, shuddering. "Look, though... this thing was cut open. Like it was being studied. The pony though... wasn't." My mind ran through a short list of implications that ended with me deciding that the thing on the table had come out of the pony. I shuddered myself at the thought of it. I pulled out Twilight's memory orb, trying to get an idea of where to go, but the orb was now shining brilliantly instead of pulsing. It was only meant for general location, it seemed. If the shard was here, it was most likely hidden. I realized that Discord would have meant for it to be this way. The only one that could find the shard was me, because Discord wanted me to have it. He just didn't want to give it to me outright. He had to do *his* way.

"Let's just see if we can find the shard and get the hell out of this place," I said. A soft glow caught my

eye. One of the terminals sitting on a desk next to one of the metal doors was still on. "Let's split up into groups. Lilith, you and Nixis will take this door. Steeljack, you and Sunshine will take the second one. Violet and I will look around here and go downstairs once we're done." The others nodded, each team pulling open a door. "Be careful, and keep in touch. We'll meet back here in twenty minutes if we haven't found anything, alright?"

The others disappeared while I trotted over to the terminal. Violet walked up next to me while I hooked my PipBuck up to the device. I glanced over at her, noticing the pained expression on her face.

"Star?" She said.

"Violet," I replied. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... I'm concerned about Sunshine," she said. I blinked. "About this mission she was given."

"I thought you were alright with this," I said, idly paging through the list of possible passwords on the screen.

"I'm more concerned about why she was sent on this mission," Violet said. And there it was. I hadn't told anyone about Discord's prophecy concerning me, and neither Sunshine or myself exactly said what she was supposed to do if I was a threat. I grimaced. "I mean, what did the Twilight Society even want in the first place?"

"Alright... I'm going to tell you this, but only because I think you need to know," I said softly, turning to face her. "They sent her because they thought I would be a threat. Not just to them, but to others."

"Seriously? Why?" Violet asked.

"Because... Because they think there's a chance this is all going to end badly, Violet. And I think they could be right. I've never told you about this, but Discord... Discord told me he saw me causing a great storm of chaos in the world," I said. "That I would be the cause of something terrible. Something evil."

"I don't believe that," Violet said indignantly.

"I'm not sure I agree with that, Violet," I replied as I finally hit upon the right password. It turned out to be 'cazador'. *Huh, wonder what that means*, I thought. The terminal came up to its menu screen. "I've been running towards Spark, trying to figure out how I'm going to stop her, but I honestly don't know how I'm going to do that. What if... what if I'm just running right into her plan? Cruelty said she needs me, me of all ponies, to complete her plan for her perfect world." I looked over at Violet. "What if Lucky was just bait? A way to get me to drop my guard so Spark could take over again?" Violet placed a hoof on my shoulder. The coldness of it made me quickly realize it was her metal hoof.

"I will *not* let that happen," she said fiercely. "I will fight for you, Star. Not just because I love you, but because it is the right thing to do. I'll kill that bitch before I let her near you again." I smiled, nuzzling her close.

"Thanks," I said, turning my attention back to the terminal. "Now let's see what's --"

A scream cut me off from down the hall. I stood, disconnecting the PipBuck from the terminal and bolting towards where the sound had come from. It was where Sunshine and Steeljack had gone to. I charged past the door only to see the unicorn and earth pony round the corner. Steeljack pushed the pink mare past me as he stopped and spun, Tempest's rifle swinging out from its battle saddle.

“What the...?” I said, my eyes popped up to where he was aiming as something very large and red on my E.F.S. came buzzing around the corner. It was one of the insect creatures from the main lab room, and it was alive. Its red eyes gleamed in the darkness as it bumbled down the hall. Steeljack unloaded, sending several shots at the beast, but its erratic movements meant that only one or two actually hit.

I lifted Stargazer and dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time stood still as I studied the monstrous insect. The thing was huge! I growled under my breath, queuing up every shot I could. The spell dropped and Stargazer took aim, pumping hot starmetal bullets down the hallway. Some of the shots went wide, ricocheting down the hall, but the majority of them struck home. The insect creature shrieked in pain, but it continued forward. Steeljack and I kept firing, right up until the thing was on top of us.

“Shit!” I shouted, starting to go for my magic to move the thing back. Before I could get there though, the insect lashed out with its giant stinger, hitting Steeljack in the chest. The stallion fell to the ground instantly. “Steeljack!!” I roared, kicking Stargazer into high gear as I managed to hold the thing in the air with a burst of telekinesis. Bullet after bullet pounded the insect until it was a mess of bloody paste on the ground. Below me, Steeljack groaned as he tried to get up. “Violet, get him out of here! Sunshine, were there any more of them?!” Violet latched onto Steeljack with her own magic, dragging him into the main lab while I stood there for several tense seconds.

“That might have been the only one,” Sunshine replied. “It got the drop on us. Shit... Steeljack...”

“What happened?” I heard Lilith cry out, before she too saw the stallion. “Oh, fuck. Is he alright?”

“Everypony, clear back!” Violet shouted. I glanced down the hall, backing up slowly and closing the door. I turned back to where Violet was working over Steeljack with her magic, the chestpiece from Tempest still rocking in the corner where she had thrown it. The stout plate had a ragged hole clean through it.

“He's just unconscious, but still with us. Shit, this is a nasty wound,” she said, placing bandages over where the insect had stung him. “What the fuck was that thing?”

“I don't know,” I said, my eyes returning to the terminal. “But I bet that terminal might be able to tell us. Violet, keep an eye on him. I'm gonna find out just what the hell is going on here.” Violet nodded, returning to Steeljack's side. I trotted over to the terminal, flicking through the menus. The only piece of data that the terminal held were two audio logs. I downloaded them to my PipBuck and set the first one to play.

“Everfree Research Log, Ministry of Arcane Science

Head Researcher Sharpest Cut speaking.

What a week it's been. The new cultures are coming along nicely. This research is really on the cutting edge. The Everfree Forest has proven to be a rich grounds for genetics research, and we're making progress beyond belief.

In related news, one of the test subjects got loose and killed one of the workers. Idiot. He practically let it out. Wanted to give the damn thing a hug! Fucking moron, deserved what he got. It took several of our best telekinetics to put the thing back into its cage. Can't waste the test subjects after all. Every one of them is special, and necessary to the success of the project.

The insect specimens that we've managed to cultivate are highly aggressive creatures. Their venom is deadly, a direct strike causing death in small animals within hours, and intense pain and eventual death in normal size ponies over the course of several days. The best antidote we've been able to develop is out of plants cultured from the Everfree Forest itself. I've put a copy of the recipe in my desk for easy recreation, along with a single vial of the antidote.

Oh, I have to go. The scientists on the medical team are about to begin the autopsy on the dead worker. I have to oversee the whole thing. Signing off."

I blinked, glancing down at the desk. I yanked open the drawer, revealing an index card with several ingredients written on it. Next to it was a vial of a clear liquid. I floated it out and walked over to where Violet was still working over Steeljack.

"Violet," I said. "How is he?"

"He's burning up, Star. That thing... whatever it was..." She said. I levitated the vial in front of her.

"They're poisonous," I said. "It was something that the ponies here were working on. They fucking created these things." Violet looked up at me, cocking her eyebrows. "This is supposed to be an antidote to the poison." She nodded, taking the vial in her magic and levitating it over Steeljack's lips. She poured the antidote, forcing it down his throat as best as she could. Steeljack groaned, his eyes fluttering.

"That's all we can do for now," Violet said. "If this antidote works, we're going to have to wait it out until he's better." I grimaced. Steeljack needed to live! I wasn't going to let him die. I wouldn't be able to face Patch again. I handed Violet the recipe.

"Look over this too," I said. "It's supposed to be a recipe for the antidote."

"Alright," Violet replied, taking the recipe card. She started copying down the ingredients into her PipBuck.

"We should find the shard," I finally said. "Violet, you and Sunshine will stay here with Steeljack. The rest of us will go and clean house. If there's any more of those things here, we'll make sure they don't escape." Violet nodded. I already had an idea of where the shard might be. My eyes drifted to the stairs in the corner. I made my way over to them. The stairs went down a level, leading to a basement. Nixis and Lilith followed closely behind me as I walked down. Turning a corner, I found myself in front of a metal door with a glass window set in it. I glanced inside.

Shit, I thought. The room beyond the door was essentially a kennel. Except instead of being a kennel for dogs, it was a kennel for these... things. Three of the large insects buzzed around a mound that had been built in the center of the room, away from the busted cages the ponies here had been keeping them in. Several skeletons littered the room. My eyes drifted down to the mound. There, shining in the

center of it, was a purple crystal shard.

“Of fucking course,” I said, motioning to where the shard was. “Leave it up to Discord to put the shard in the most dangerous spot ever.”

“Shit,” Lilith said. “How in the hell are we going to get in there?”

“I think we're going to need to draw them out,” I said, sighing. “There's no other way. We need to get that shard.” I grimaced.

“I have an idea,” Nixis said. “Can you hold the things with your magic?”

“I can try... But what if one of us gets stung by those things? There was only one vial of the antidote. I'm not even sure we have all the ingredients for it,” I said. “You guys saw what they did to Steeljack.” Nixis lifted his paws, unsheathing his claws.

“Leave that to me,” he said, showing teeth. “You open the door, Miss Star. Lilith, you'll act as bait down the hall. Star, you'll hold the things in your magic and I'll jump down and attack.” I nodded as Nixis jumped up, grabbing onto the pipes running along the ceiling. Lilith trotted down to the other end of the hall, a pensive look on her face.

“Ready?” I asked. She nodded. “Remember, if something goes wrong...”

“I know, just do it,” she replied. I flared my horn, ripping open the door. The insect monsters took note almost immediately, heading towards the open door. They shrieked, flooding into the tiny hall. I reached out with my magic, enveloping the three monstrosities in a telekinetic grasp. I struggled, grunting loudly as I tried to keep the things under wraps.

Nixis roared, dropping down from above and slashing and ripping into the floating insects. Greenish blood spurted from the monsters. One of the insects fell to the ground, writhing and twitching. I grunted again as the remaining insects tried to break free of my telekinesis. Nixis turned his attention to them, snarling as he viciously struck. Within mere seconds the other two insects dropped. I sighed, dropping the spell, panting hard.

“Huh,” Nixis said. “These ones look smaller than the one you killed.” I blinked.

“What?” I said. The hellhound pointed down at the bodies. They were indeed smaller versions of the insect that had stung Steeljack. That meant...

SKREEEEE

A viciously loud shriek echoed from inside the kennel as a much larger version of the creatures appeared. Based on its location it had been sleeping in the pipes above the cages. I reached out with my magic, trying to pin it like the smaller ones. The monster broke through my spell almost immediately, buzzing straight at us. I growled, lifting Stargazer. I let out a burst of fire that seemed to slow the beast, but only for a second. It was getting closer fast. I hefted out my minigun, swinging it at the insect like a club. The force of the impact knocked the massive creature back, sending it bouncing off of the back wall of the kennel.

I stepped inside the small room, intent on getting the shard and getting out without getting stung. The insectoid creature lifted into the air again, one of its wings holding it aloft shakily as it buzzed at an odd angle. I realized that it had been broken. The insect's eyes stared at me impassively as I aimed Stargazer. The thing shrieked loudly, turning its attention instead to an open air duct above it. Before I could get a shot off the thing was inside, rattling it until was completely gone. I blinked.

“What the...?” I said.

“Where did it go?” Lilith said, stepping into the kennel behind me.

“It ran away,” I said. “It just... it flew off into the air ducts.” I was feeling very confused. I looked down at my PipBuck. The last audio log held there taunted me. I looked down at where the shard was. I trotted over to it, clicking on the audio log.

“Initiating omega threat level protocols! Initiating omega threat level protocols!”

Shit shit shit! Something's gone really wrong. The test subjects all got out of their kennels. I locked the kennels, but there were still workers inside. Oh Luna... the screams...

The worker from last week... one of those fucking things came out of his chest! We managed to subdue it, but not before it killed three ponies. And now we're getting omega threat level alerts. Shit! This shit really has gone ... to shit! Argh!

I just checked the kennels again. No sign of the test subjects. I was about to gas the whole chamber when I noticed one of the air ducts in the rear of the room. It was broken open.

Fuck me. Fucking Ministry is going to have my head for this shit. Those ducts lead to the outside! We just let out a deadly and dangerous creature into the Everfree. Fuck!

rattle rattle

What was that? I heard a rattling coming from the ducts! Shit... shit... I'm placing the facility on lockdown. Hopefully I can find the port leading outside and contain it.

This is Head Researcher Sharpest Cut signing –“

Static filled my ears as the recording cut off. I hung my head, closing my eyes. The audio log was genuinely disturbing, but explained why the creature had fled into the air ducts. They were using this place as a breeding area. The three we'd killed had been mere babies. My eyes widened.

“Shit, we've gotta warn Violet, those things are in the air ducts!!!” I shouted. Lilith saluted, spinning about and heading towards the upstairs. Nixis followed closely behind. I turned back to grab the shard. I had come far for this thing, I was not about to leave without it. I was about to float it out when a loud crash sounded. The wall opposite of me rumbled loudly, bricks showering forth and stopping me in my tracks. A massive hole had appeared in the wall, letting light in. This side of the research lab was sitting on the cliff edge, showing the Everfree Forest in all its glory.

Floating in the air on the other side of the pony sized hole was an alicorn with an orange coat and blonde mane and tail. Her eyes glowed a fierce dark orange, and a brightly glowing gem in the shape

of an apple sat on her chest.

“There you are. Now, come along before I have to get rowdy.”

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Maximum Level Reached!

Lilith: Maximum Level Reached!

Steeljack: Maximum Level Reached!

Patch: Unknown

Group Quest Perk: Everfree Marathon: Your romp through the Everfree Forest has strengthened your resolve, granting a +1 to your Endurance.

Chapter 32: Ever Free

I think you'd like Daring. She's a lot like you. Adventurous, fierce, and undeniably, unquestionably, unstoppable.

Evolution. The process of change, environmental pressure sharpening and molding life. In the short time that I spent in the Everfree Forest, I knew that evolution was both a terrifying and wondrous thing.

Despite ponykind's best efforts, the Everfree Forest had continued to evolve and grow, becoming a haven where survival of the fittest is the first rule of hoof. It is a threatening, dangerous environment filled with beasts, plants, and the relics of a forgotten past.

Ponies helped the evolution of the Everfree Forest along. There was no way the lab we had found was the only one. There could be dozens dotting the deadly forest. The creatures the prewar researchers had cultivated there were lethal, potential weapons that eventually turned on their creators.

I often wonder... what am I evolving into? Were both Discord and the Twilight Society right? Am I a threat to everything that ponies hold dear? Will I evolve into something deadly and evil that will ultimately destroy the Wasteland?

“There you are. Now, come along before I have to get rowdy.” The orange alicorn's eyes were ablaze as she stared across the broken walls at me. I gritted my teeth, bringing up Stargazer immediately. The other alicorn flapped her wings, moving to the side as I fired and missed. The mare golem spun around, landing a solid kick in the rubble that was the wall. The entire building *shook* with the force of the blow, large chunks of debris flying towards me. Instinctively I threw up my alicorn shield, the cinder blocks splashing against it in plumes of grit.

Shit! I thought as I looked down at where the shard was sitting. The rumbling had jarred it from the mound it was on. A loud shrieking noise filled the air as one of the insect beasts flew out from the air duct. It buzzed loudly, locking onto the target that wasn't shielded. The orange alicorn paid no attention to the insect, casually lifting a hoof and slapping it away. The creature exploded from the blow, chunks hitting the wall in a mess of blood and gore.

SHIT!!! I thought frantically. I really did not want to get hit by this mare. The orange alicorn grinned, reaching around and kicking another one of the support columns. It snapped like a twig, the entire building groaning loudly. I really really hoped that Violet and the others were outside safely.

“Star!” A voice shouted down the stairs. Violet's face poked around the door, instantly turning pale at the sight in front of her. I nearly facehoofed.

“Violet, you've gotta get everypony out of here!” I called back. “This whole place is going down!” My marefriend yelped, running back up the stairs to round up the others. I returned my attention to the orange alicorn, who was hovering in place smirking at me. She lowered a hoof on the rock, shattering it with a mere touch.

My eyes widened as I watched the floor and ceiling beginning to crack. I lashed out with my telekinesis, yanking the shard away from the mound before the ground below it fell away. The shard flew through the air, making it safely into my saddlebags. The ceiling crashed down, countless tons of debris showering down upon me. I called upon Shining Armor's shield spell and lifted into the air, punching through the cinderblocks and wood and out into open air. A brief glance down revealed that the others had indeed managed to get out of lab. Violet was floating Steeljack along. The stallion appeared to be unconscious still.

The orange alicorn lazily floated up to eye level as I hovered there. I glared at her. She had a bemused expression on her face, almost as if she didn't really care that I'd gotten the shard or that I'd escaped her little trap.

"So, which one are you?" I said angrily.

"They used to call me Honesty, but now they call me Deceit," the orange alicorn replied. "And you are coming with me, Radiant Star."

"I don't think so," I said, patting my saddlebag. "I've got the other half of the shard now. I'm going to stop Spark and put you all back where you belong!" To my surprise, the orange mare chuckled. "What's so funny?"

"Do you *honestly* think the spirit of Chaos would have hidden something so powerful in just *one* place?" She said. My eyes widened as I realized what she was implying – no not implying, outright telling me. "Yes, the piece you have is one of four. We already have one of them. The other three are out there, being hunted down by the others. I was assigned to hunt down you, after Cruelty failed to contain you."

"Well you can't have this one," I said, lifting Stargazer. "And I'm not going with you anywhere!"

"That's too bad. Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way," Deceit said, her eyes flaring an angry orange. I blinked. The mare disappeared, slamming into my still active shield with a fierce buck that sent the entire bubble, myself included, speeding towards the ground. I hit hard, shaken inside the shield as it dropped. Pain shot through my entire body as I bounced off the bottom of the shield. I let Shining Armor's spell drop as I crumpled to the ground, fighting to catch my breath.

"Star!" Violet shouted, galloping over to me. I pushed myself off the ground, coughing. Violet extended a hoof, helping me up. I glared up at the orange alicorn. She hovered there impassively. Violet followed my gaze. "Star... what's going on? Who is that?"

"Honesty," I said, gritting my teeth. "Violet, you take the others and get back. I need to deal with this, now."

"Are you sure?" Violet said, her eyes pleading with me. I nodded.

"No more running," I said. "I need to know more about the Elements. You guys need to be away from here." I grimaced, looking up at Deceit. Violet backed up, galloping over to the others. They started moving away from the destroyed research lab. I growled under my breath, taking to the sky. The research lab was in major disarray below, the pylons holding it to the side of the cliff in danger of falling to the valley. I matched Deceit's altitude, lifting Stargazer out.

"You're persistent," the orange alicorn said. "I'll give you that. But I'm stronger. And I will be taking you back to Spark."

"Why?" I snarled, challenging the other mare. "Why are you helping her? The memories of the Elements that I saw... You would have never helped Spark attempt something so insane!"

"Ponies change," Deceit stated simply. "War, it never changes, but ponies do. War makes ponies do horrific things. We grow tired of your pathetic world."

"Ponies want to be better, can't you see that? The Lightbringer showed everypony that," I snarled. I thought about the MMMM, the ponies there in Theater trying to give the city of Chicacolt what they needed with the promise of clean water, good food, and a place to stay. It wasn't glamorous or heroic. It was necessary. "They want to make the Wasteland a better place every day!"

"And yet, they continue to fail," Deceit replied. "Just like you don't actually believe in her as a 'Lightbringer'. You think of her as the Destroyer. That is the true nature of ponies. Now then... that's enough of that, don't you think? We were doing this the hard way, remember?" She grinned, flaring her wings. Mere seconds passed as the mare shot across the sky, slamming into me hard. Pain shot through my chest and shoulders as I fell to the ground. Deceit followed after me this time, landing on the ground as I hit. I hacked up blood, my insides feeling like they were on fire. The orange alicorn stomped hard, her horn flaring as several chunks of rock shot up through the earth. I went flying through the air, grunting.

I picked myself back up, quickly realizing that I didn't have Stargazer. The minigun had fallen to the ground away from where Deceit had originally knocked me down. I coughed again, more blood spraying onto the stones. I wiped myself with my fetlock. *Shit this is not good*, I thought. *This one is a lot faster than Cruelty. How in the hell am I supposed to cast Twilight's memory spell if I can't follow her attack!* Deceit stood at the far end of the underbrush, grinning.

Ignoring the pain, I charged forward, reaching out with my magic to grab Stargazer. As soon as my weapon was back in my grasp, I activated E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots at the orange alicorn. Time went back to normal and Stargazer spat its hot payload across the clearing. Deceit kicked down, sending a spray of rocks in front of her that ate the brunt of the shots.

"Cute. But we remember what you did to Cruelty," she said. "You will not so lucky get again." She kicked a forehoof, a short sharp motion that sent a wave of rocks in a line at me. I growled, leaping to the side and firing again with Stargazer. Deceit jumped away, the bullets going wide. She charged at me, her wings tucked in. I yelped, throwing up a shield spell. Deceit barreled into it, shattering it and sending me flying across the clearing. I tumbled along, finally landing in a heap.

"Shit," I grunted, coughing. I pushed myself up, standing shakily. Deceit stood there, her stance mocking my every movement. I growled, galloping forward as best as I could, floating along Stargazer. I sent a spray of fire at the other mare, forcing her to jump out of the way. I tracked her as she moved, sending another wave of bullets into her path. Deceit grinned, flaring her horn and creating a wall of rock that blocked them. The orange alicorn kicked out, sending a shower of debris at me. I raised my shield, the rubble impacting on the shimmering purple barrier.

Flinging the spell away, I opened my wings and leaped into the air, sending a telekinetic blast down at

Deceit. The other mare grinned, raising a shield of her own. My blast dispersed harmlessly over her shield. I scowled, reaching out and casting my gravity spell on the opposing mare's barrier. It shimmered briefly, but held its position.

“Oh, a gravity spell? How quaint,” Deceit said. “You sure are interesting... sugarcube.”

“Don't call me that,” I retorted. “Try this on for size!” My horn ignited, casting the gravity spell on the debris surrounding the alicorn. I grinned as the rocks zipped into the sky. I dismissed the spell, bringing the mass of debris down towards my opponent. I lifted Stargazer, firing wildly. Deceit dropped her shield spell, kicking down to create a rock wall that blocked the shots. It didn't block the ten tons of rock that slammed into her though. Dust billowed off the tomb I'd made for her. *If that doesn't hold her, then* – I started to think.

An orange hoof slammed out of the rock, spraying the rubble everywhere as Deceit emerged. She had a sharp grin on her face. She swept her forelegs through the pile as she climbed out, shooting several missiles of rock right at me. I grunted as I was knocked back, hitting the ground with a ***crash***. I groaned, standing immediately as Deceit started forward. I glared at her intensely.

“Your spells are no match for my strength,” Deceit said. “I am simply too strong for you.”

“And I'm Princess Celestia,” I said, gritting my teeth. “Doesn't mean a fucking thing to me. I'm still not coming with you.” I was running through everything I knew about this mare so far in the back of my mind. She was strong, almost ridiculously strong. I had yet to be hit by a direct blow, and I already knew that I didn't want to be. She was also incredibly fast. I couldn't even begin to keep up with her. Is this how all of the Elements' mortal forms were? And yet... it felt almost like she was holding back. I grimaced.

“Cute,” Deceit replied. “But flippant jokes will get you nowhere in this fight. Let me show you what true strength is.” The orange alicorn grunted, slamming her back hooves down into the ground. The earth itself quivered beneath her stomp, several large rocks popping up from below. Deceit's horn ignited, turning the rocks into a whirling barrier of death that surrounded her. She grinned, charging forward. The rock barrier turned into something akin to a machine gun as several rock shards ejected from the storm of debris. I yelped, lifting my alicorn shield, but the shards punched through like it was butter. One of the shards struck me on my shoulder, drawing blood and forcing me to the ground. Deceit stopped short of me, grinning as I pushed myself into a kneeling position. My vision was blurry. I wasn't going to last much longer. I needed to do something!

“Star!!” Violet shouted. I looked up to see my love raise Thunder Flash. She fired, the silvery bolt striking Deceit in the side. While it was enough to stagger her, the blast did little else. Lilith and Nixis stood by Star, ready to fight. Sunshine stood guard further up the ridge over Steeljack, who appeared to still be unconscious. Deceit snarled, kicking her front hooves down into the ground, sending a shock wave ripping across the forest. Violet flew backwards, hitting the earth hard, her beam rifle clattering next to her. Nixis and Lilith held their ground, the hellhound taking the opportunity to leap into the fray.

“Pitiful,” Deceit said. I shouted for them to leave, but they didn't listen. Violet pushed herself off the ground, picking Thunder Flash back up as Nixis closed on Deceit. The hellhound roared, launching into a flurry of strikes against the alicorn. Despite her stony exterior, Nixis' claws seemed to find purchase in the orange mare's skin. Blood seeped out from the shallow wounds that he left as Deceit

backpedaled, igniting her horn. She threw up a shield spell, pushing the hellhound away. Nixis went flying, hitting the ground with a grunt next to Lilith.

"I've already fought one of you," the black mare said. "And she was a pushover. I'm gonna have fun with this." She flared her wings and I grimaced as I pushed myself up. I had to do something. I had to help! I snarled loudly, firing a burst of shots with Stargazer. The orange mare turned and dodged, dropping her shield spell as she moved. Lilith was ready for her. With a flash, she was up in the air and had set the Bitch to work. The missile soared across the clearing, impacting the alicorn and setting her ablaze. I blinked through the flames and smoke.

"Did we do it?" Violet said as she made her way to my side. I narrowed my gaze at where Deceit had been standing. A black form appeared amidst the smokescreen, revealing the completely unblemished body of the alicorn. She grinned as she kicked down into the ground, sending a spray of rocks through the air. The debris knocked Lilith spinning, forcing the black mare to the ground in a heap.

"You're right," Deceit said. "That was fun. Now, step aside. My business is with Radiant Star. Not you."

"Never," Violet hissed. "I won't let you hurt her!" She lifted Thunder Flash, sending several goutts of silver towards the orange alicorn. Deceit moved lazily to the side, kicking into the ground. A line of rocks came shooting towards us. My eyes widened as I flared my own horn, picking Violet up and pushing her off to the side. I took the brunt of the blow, falling back to the ground. I was beyond the pain, feeling almost nothing but a tingle. Was that a bad thing? Should I be feeling something? I didn't have time to think about it before Deceit was on top of me, ready to kick down. And yet... she didn't. She stopped short, her expression stern.

"You are quite resilient, Radiant Star. I admit, I'm enjoying this," she said. "Now then, come along quietly. I do not wish to kill you. You are important."

"I'm not important," I snarled. *There it is, I thought. That's why she's holding back. She needs me. Spark needs me. She couldn't kill me even if she wanted to!* An idea formed in my mind. I needed to throw her off. My horn flared, ripping a very shard edged rock from a nearby pile of rubble. I held it to my neck, glaring at Deceit. "Leave us alone, or I will drive this into my neck. I'll be dead before you get close to me, bitch." Deceit's eyes widened.

"You wouldn't dare," she said. I could see that she was trying to resolve some sort of inner conflict as she grimaced. Finally, she looked up at me. "You're lying."

"Try me," I said, pressing the shard into my neck for a brief second. A trickle of blood oozed down the shard. Deceit's eyes widened again, and she charged forward to try and stop me. I grinned, holding the shard until she was right on top of me. She batted the shard away and met my gaze, her eyes showing the realization that I had caught her in my trap. My horn flared, forcing her head down with my telekinesis. As her horn touched mine, I released the memory spell and the world fell away into nothingness.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

"Y'all are fired."

I blinked as shouts from the room I was sitting in echoed all around me. I looked up at the source of the discontent. The Ministry Mare of Technology stood tall and proud at the head of the table. Several business ponies from Equestria's many major wartime industries sat lining the meeting room, all of them fired up and shouting at the orange earth pony. At each of her sides a Steel Ranger stood ready to fend off any attack. I sat in the middle of the table, watching the memory like a spectator.

“What do you mean, we're fired?!”

“You think you can order us around?!”

“What's your problem with us?”

Applejack sighed, lifting a hoof. She had a pained expression on her face.

“Look, y'all can either see yourselves out the door, or I can have these fine young soldier boys do it for ya,” she said forcefully. “Ah'm sick and tired of seeing what y'all are doing to Equestria, and that's the honest truth.” One of the stallions snarled.

“You get rid of our companies and you'll see your Ministry dragged down with us!” He spat. “You need us just as much as we need you.” Applejack smirked.

“Oh, I didn't say I was firin' yer companies,” she said. “Ah'm firin' y'all. And only y'all. I need ponies I can depend on, ponies who will work on the projects that I want to. We don't need guns that will kill our own soldiers. We don't need your direction.”

“That's preposterous,” another of the business stallions said. “We'll raise this issue to the Princess! You can't just fire us!”

“The Princess has already been informed, and she agrees. We're aimin' to end this war, gentlecolts. And that requires gumption I'm sad to say... y'all don't have,” Applejack replied. “I personally don't need a bunch of snake wearin leather business ponies who think they know better than me, sneakin' around mah back and tryin' to kill me. Or did y'all forget about that grenade?”

“That's a very deep accusation, Ministry Mare,” the stallion at the end of the table said. “We've always been loyal to you.”

“Loyal? You wouldn't know what loyalty was if it bit you on the ass,” Applejack retorted. “Now. Ah've got a meetin' in thirty minutes with y'all's replacements. Good, hard workin, honest ponies I can trust.” She glanced at the two Steel Rangers. “Boys. Show these gentlecolts the door, please. And try not to be too rough.” The two Steel Rangers started forward, pointing their battle saddles at the assembled business ponies, who grudgingly got up from their seats and exited the room. I was left alone as one of the Steel Rangers stayed behind. He looked back at the Ministry Mare.

“Applejack?”

“Yeah, Ah'm alright,” the orange earth pony replied. “Don't even need to ask, Applesnack. Look, think I could get a moment alone? I wanna pull myself together after dealin' with those ponies. Gotta be fresh for the next meetin' and all.”

“Absolutely. I’ll be right outside here if you need me,” the Steel Ranger said. He stepped out of the room and closed the door. I stood myself, watching as Applejack regarded me curiously.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said, her mouth slowing down and freezing as the brilliant form of Honesty appeared behind her. “You must leave. Now.”

“No,” I said. “I came here to end this, and I intend to do just that. It’s curious, how an Element such as yourself has a memory like this one. Why? I thought you were above normal ponies.”

“Applejack... Applejack was hardly a normal pony,” Honesty said. “She was an honest, loving mare. I miss her dearly.” I grimaced.

“So why help Spark then? You know as well as I do that the Applejacks of the future will be nothing underneath her rule,” I challenged.

“You know nothing,” Honesty said, looking down at the orange mare beneath her. “There will never be another Applejack.”

“There doesn’t need to be,” I said. “There may not be another Applejack, but there has to be somepony out there who embodies Honesty.” The orange alicorn grimaced.

“There is... there is one pony,” she said. “But Spark... she holds power over us. She has control. She is the binding force, the Element who holds the other five together. We cannot act against her while her mortal form still exists.”

“You did once before, what changed?” I asked. Honesty sighed, slumping to her haunches.

“We lost them,” she said, pointing at Applejack. “They were our strength, our rock. Pillars of unbridled hope in a hopeless world. We needed them just as much as they needed us.” I blinked.

“Wait, are you saying because you had a Bearer, that was why you were able to resist Spark?” I said. Honesty nodded. “You said there was a pony. A new Bearer?”

“A new Bearer for a new age,” Honesty said.

“Well then, why not just go to that pony?” I said. “Or call out to that pony for help? Surely they can help us.” Honesty shook her head.

“It’s not the right time,” she replied. “The others must be present. The spark must find all of the new bearers before we can be summoned that way.”

“But if... If Spark has her way... that won’t happen,” I said. “She’ll transcend being an Element and become a Goddess, preventing the Element Bearers from claiming their Element of Harmony.” Honesty nodded again.

“In order for Spark’s spirit to be correctly re-associated with a Bearer, she will need to be made dormant once more like we were before you woke us,” she said. “She will need to be sealed.” I narrowed my gaze at the orange mare.

"Sealed?" I said. In the back of my mind, I knew what she was referring to, and I didn't like it.

"Yes. Just like Twilight did to her," Honesty said. "The sealing spell that she performed forced Spark to become dormant, trapping her in the shards of energy you have found. That spell will need to be performed again."

"But..." I said, looking down at my wings. Twilight's spell, it required certain... sacrifices. Was I ready to make that decision? Could I even consider it? Eyes blazing, I looked back up at Honesty. "What if I don't want to do that? What if I decide there's another way?"

"Then you are a fool," Honesty said. "And that's the honest truth. You will fail if you do not seal Spark away. If she gets her way, all of creation suffers."

"Then a fool I shall be," I said. "But you are a fool too, for helping her." Honesty shifted, looking uncomfortable. I stomped my hoof. "There is another way, isn't there?"

"I... I don't know. Honestly, I don't. Spark... she's dangerous. If she gets her way..." She said, trailing off. "I can't help you. Not directly, at least."

"What do you mean?" I said, cocking my head.

"Myself and the others... we're tied to the mortal forms that we have created for ourselves," Honesty said. "If you can disperse our mortal forms, then you will have a chance at Spark. It's not much..."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"The gem in the chest of our mortal forms. Destroy the gem, and you will destroy our mortal form for a short time," Honesty said. I raised an eyebrow.

"But I did that already to Kindness," I said. "And I was told that she wasn't gone." Honesty grimaced.

"Kindness still maintained a link on her mortal form when you destroyed the gem. In order to disperse our mortal forms, you must convince the spirit of Harmony to sever that link," she explained. "As I will now do for you."

"Why would you do that if you want to help Spark succeed?" I said. Honesty shook her head.

"You misunderstand, Radiant Star. Spark controls us. We don't have a choice. I would much rather go back to sleep and wait for my next Bearer to call on my strength, but I can't. You woke us up, you alerted Spark to us. This is your problem to fix," the orange mare said, narrowing her gaze at me. "I can't help you directly, so this is the best I can do."

"I... I..." I said, catching a breath. "Thank you. What's going to happen then once this memory ends?"

"You'll be back in the waking world. Unfortunately, so will my mortal form. The form is corrupt, and it will not realize anything has happened. It will continue to try and capture you," Honesty said.

"Great," I said. "And here I thought this was going to be easy."

“Just being honest with you, Star. You are going to have to fight, and fight hard,” Honesty replied. “Destroy the gem, disperse my mortal form, and find Spark. Finish this once and for all.” I nodded.

“I will,” I said. The memory began to shift and shimmer, finally disappearing into nothingness.

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I grunted, my eyes forcing themselves awake on their own. Pushing myself up, I felt my sides flare up in pain. It was like liquid fire was pouring through my veins, but I had to push through it. I had to. Across the rubble from me was Deceit. The orange alicorn looked like she'd taken a real beating, scuffs and scrapes marring her formerly immaculate form. She stirred, her eyes opening in a flash. With a roar, she jumped to her hooves.

“What did you do to me?” She challenged. “Tell me, and I will make your death quick.” I grinned.

“You know... I don't think I want to tell you,” I replied, lashing out with my magic, sending a telekinetic blast at the other mare. Deceit snarled and jumped back, taking the brunt of the blow on a folded wing. She hissed as she pulled her wing back and kicked down, sending a spray of rubble at me. I lifted my alicorn shield, the rocks deflecting off the solid barrier. “Nice try. I think I felt something there.” Deceit growled.

“I will enjoy ripping you limb from limb, Radiant Star,” she said. “Spark didn't say that you needed to be alive, after all.” The mare sneered. “Let's test how strong your body really is, shall we?”

“Blah blah blah,” I said. “Less talking, more fighting, 'kay?” I jumped to the side, lifting Stargazer from where it had fallen. I sent a wave of bullets at the other alicorn, forcing her to dodge. I took stock of the situation, scanning as quickly as I could for where the others were. My E.F.S. was no help, of course. The entire forest was a sea of red, completely obscuring the yellow blips that were my friends. I growled as Deceit rushed forward, intent on a full frontal assault. Her front hooves came down in front of me, sending columns of rock straight into my chest. I grunted in pain, rolling in a tangle of limbs and wings across the clearing. I looked up to see Deceit flying into the air, intent on dive bombing me from above.

A blast of silver fire was my saving grace. Thunder Flash's shot tore through the air, catching the orange alicorn in the wing. She went soaring backwards, landing with a ***thud***. I pushed myself up to see Violet standing next to me, her eyes wide. Behind her stood Lilith, Sunshine, and... Steeljack?! The gray stallion was on his hooves, standing shakily, but standing nonetheless. Violet had replaced his chest plate, hole and all. I could still see the bandages through the hole. He smiled painfully, waving with his hoof. My mind raced as I wondered where Nixis had gone to. The hellhound appeared to be nowhere in site. I didn't have a moment to vocalize that concern before Violet pounced on me.

“Star! Are you alright?” Violet said as her horn lit up, examining me with her medical magic. “Shit... you look like hell...” I grunted. I was pretty sure that she was right. I *hurt* all over. The only possible way I'd hurt less was if I was dead, and that really wasn't an option.

“How long were we out?” I said. Violet grimaced.

“For at least an hour. There was a shield around both of you. We couldn't get through until you came out of it,” she said. I blinked. An *hour*?! I looked back over to where Deceit had fallen and thought

about what I'd seen in the memory with Honesty. I needed to end this, and I needed to end it now.

"There's a way to stop her," I said. "We need to destroy the gem in her chest. It won't... it won't stop them for good, but it will give us time. Time we need to find the rest of the shards and Spark."

"Rest of the shards?" Lilith questioned.

"Discord broke the shards up and hid them," I said, grimacing. "Seems like something he would do." Deceit began to stir once more, pushing herself into a standing position. She snarled.

"Well, it seems the gang is all back together," she said. "Step aside, and I promise I won't kill you. All I want is Radiant Star."

"Never," Violet challenged. "We won't leave her."

"Fine then, let it never be said that I didn't offer," Deceit replied nonchalantly. "Time to finish this."

"I agree," I said, narrowing my gaze at the orange alicorn. My eyes drifted down to the glowing gem in her chest. "Time to finish this for good." I lifted Stargazer. "Violet. I want you to cover me. Give me an opening."

"But Star..." Violet started to protest. I cut her off with a look.

"Just... trust me, alright?" I said. "The rest of you... hang back. Intervene if you have to." Lilith nodded, grabbing onto Steeljack and Sunshine and pulling them towards the nearby underbrush. Violet hefted Thunder Flash into the air with her magic. I charged forward, sending a set of bullets towards Deceit. The orange alicorn grunted and stomped a hoof, kicking up a wall of rock that absorbed most of my shots. A blast of silvery fire soared past her head as Violet's initial strike missed. Deceit sneered, kicking her other hoof into the ground. A stone spear shot out, flying at Violet. I growled, throwing up a shield spell that covered my marefriend, forcing the wayward projectile to the ground.

I flared my horn, sending a blast of telekinesis at the rock wall, shattering it into tiny pieces. Deceit kicked down again, but didn't make contact as I put a shield under the other alicorn's hoof. I pushed out with a wave of magic, sending the mare flying through the air. She grunted, spreading her wings to slow down. Violet pressed the attack, firing with Thunder Flash as fast as she could. Silver streams arced across the clearing, slamming into Deceit's forelegs. The orange mare howled and fell to the ground hard. She pushed herself up almost immediately, igniting her horn to block the bullet fire as I unleashed Stargazer's fury. The shield held, dispersing the fire. Deceit kicked down, sending several large shards of rock soaring at us.

"Duck!" I shouted, pressing to the ground. The rock shards flew over our heads, impacting the earth behind us. My insides felt like fire, painful and raw. I was going to lose it any moment, but not before I finished my task and stop Deceit. I pulled Violet and myself to our hooves, leveling a telekinetic blast at the alicorn's shield. Brute force wasn't working as well as it normally did. Deceit was freakishly strong, even without her connection to the spirit of Honesty. I had to be smarter than I normally was to defeat her. The blast dissipated, blinding the other mare for a brief second. I shot forward, charging through the debris. Deceit looked up, her eyes widening as I shot past her, drawing her attention. Her shield faltered as she turned curiously, her gae on my departing flank.

Violet took that opening and sent a blast of fire into the alicorn. Deceit roared as Thunder Flash's unique magical energy licked her flank. I spun around, flaring my horn and readying another blast of telekinesis. My eyes widened as I saw several sets of large green eyes open in the forest around us. Four timber wolves leaped out of the underbrush, surrounding us. Lilith and the others had been forced out of their hiding spot by the wooden beasts. Deceit snarled under her breath.

"Great..." I said softly. "Nothing is ever that simple isn't it?" I lifted a hoof to my side, breathing hard. The timber wolves snapped and slobbered, circling us like the dying prey we were. Deceit was the first to strike as she kicked down, sending a column of rock right through one of the wolves, shattering its body into multiple pieces. The remaining timber wolves took immediate notice, disregarding us for the new threat. They pounced as one on the orange alicorn, biting and howling. Deceit kicked out, sending the timber wolves flying into the trees surrounding us. More green eyes glowed to life in the forest. It was like we'd stumbled upon an entire nest of the things! I grimaced. There had to be some way to use this to my advantage, I just couldn't figure out how!

More timber wolves emerged from the underbrush, bearing down on Lilith and the others. Steeljack fired several times with Tempest's rifle, sharp retorts turning wooden wolf heads into splinters. Lilith kicked the Bitch into high gear, blowing holes in the ground and timber wolf legs. Violet stopped and turned, melting a wolf into silvery goop with a S.A.T.S. charged shot from Thunder Flash. Deceit charged at me, ignoring the chaos and the confusion of the fight to engage me once more. A timber wolf appeared in her path, snarling and snapping. Deceit didn't even slow, shattering the poor creature underhoof as she trampled towards me.

Shit! I thought as Deceit swung out at me. I ducked, but only barely. I felt the wind above me through her swing. If she had lost any power at all from having her connection severed from Honesty, she wasn't showing it. The only major difference was that she was getting more sluggish. My eyes widened. She was getting tired! I didn't know how it was possible, but it was. I just needed to put her in a place where I could strike. I began to pool a bit of magic into the base of my horn, readying a spell for when I'd need it.

I pushed myself out of her range, barely making it away from one of her powerful hoof strikes. I landed on the back side of a timber wolf, who roared loudly as I jumped into the air and spread my wings. A quick burst shot at the wolf put it down. I turned my attention back to Deceit, who had also taken to the sky. She shot forward, attempting to close the distance between us. I lifted Stargazer, sending a spread of bullets out before flaring my horn and casting the teleportation spell I'd been building up. I disappeared in a flash, appearing behind Deceit. The bullets I'd sent flying shot past the alicorn, coming right for me. I grinned, extending a sheath of telekinesis out. I turned them about, sending them flying back at Deceit, who had only just realized what was happening. The bullets struck her in the chest hard, her eyes widening.

"No... No!" Deceit shouted as she dropped like a stone towards the ground below. She landed on a timber wolf that was getting a little too close to Sunshine, flattening it and crumpling on the hard earth. Another wolf snarled, leaping after the pink unicorn. Sunshine squealed for help, and then something amazing happened. A massive form burst out of the rock below, slicing the timber wolf's head clean off. Nixis roared with unmatched ferocity as my friends turned the tide against the lupine beasts. I soared down, coming to rest as the battle ground to a finish. Violet and Lilith were using Thunder Flash and the Bitch to incinerate the leftover pieces of the wolves while I stepped towards where Deceit had fallen.

The orange alicorn had been cut and scraped all over, but to my amazement she was not bleeding. There was no blood at all actually. I blinked in confusion before remembering that Twilight had said the Elements' mortal forms were golems of some sort. A stray thought entered my mind. *Substantial magic given physical form. No need for sleep or for food. Supposedly an untiring body*, I thought. But Deceit had tired. Was that because her body had been severed from the spirit it was supposed to represent? Was all that was left the corruption? I didn't know, and I didn't quite care.

Deceit's head tried to move, tried to look up at me. She held a wicked grin on her face.

"You... you have no idea what you're up against, Radiant Star," she hissed, her breathing shallow. "The others... they will find you... and you will submit." I grimaced, my eyes drawn to the gem on her chest. It was sparking, a chip blown out of its otherwise flawless exterior. I brought my foreleg up and kicked down, shattering it into tiny pieces. Deceit spasmed a brief second before her body dissipated in an orange glow. I felt a pulse in my saddlebags as Twilight's memory orb popped out and absorbed the fragments of the gem into it. I blinked. It had done that when I'd fought Cruelty too. My mind could only focus on one persistent question: Why?

Of course, I didn't have much time to think about that before my eyes rolled up into the back of my head and I passed out.

"Star? Star... come on, wake up... Please wake up... Oh Celestia, please..." A voice from above me cried out. It was accompanied by soft tears pattering on my cheeks. My eyes fluttered open softly and I beheld a vision of incredible beauty. Sure... her mane was frazzled and her eyes were red and puffy, but Violet was my savior. Her eyes widened as she noticed I was awake.

"Violet...?" I croaked. My throat felt incredibly dry.

"Don't move around too much," she replied softly. "We're safe, for the moment." I blinked. I couldn't see to much beyond her.

"Where are we?" I asked. "And can I get a drink of water?" Violet nodded, pulling a canteen out of her saddlebags. She lifted it to my lips and gave me a few sips, relieving the agonizing dryness in my throat.

"Nixis found a cave not too far from the research lab," she said. "It appears to be uninhabited, thankfully."

"Is that why it's so dark?" I said. Violet nodded. Her horn lit up, sending up a ball of light around us. The cave around us came into view. It was a simple one room cave with no tunnels anywhere. *Thank Celestia*, I thought. I could see the others huddling along the cave wall. They were all nursing wounds of some sort. Steeljack lay resting while Nixis stood guard over him. "What about Steeljack? Is he...?"

"The antidote worked, at least as well as it could have. I'm not sure it's completely out of his system yet, but for the moment... he's up," Violet said. "We need to seriously consider pulling back to Ponyville for more medical supplies. I just used the last of the bandages on you, and we're down to very few healing potions." I sighed, grimacing as my eyes traced my sides. Bandages had been

applied to the worst of my many wounds. I had certainly been hurt the worst during the fight with Deceit. At the very least, I no longer felt like my insides were going to split open.

“If that's the case... you go. I'll continue on and get the next shard,” I said finally. Violet's eyes widened.

“Oh no... that's not an option, missy, and you know it,” she said. “If we go, we all go. End of story.”

“Violet... we don't have the time,” I said. “If we don't get those other pieces of the shard, we won't be able to stop Spark. I know this is what we have to do.” Violet sighed.

“There is another option then. Lilith could go,” she said, her expression pained. “I don't want to do that, because she's a heavy artillery user and she's been helpful in this environment...”

“Then we continue forward as a team,” I uttered softly. “Violet... we can do this. I know we can. I know how to fight these Elements now.”

“And you almost got yourself killed fighting one of them,” Violet protested. “At the very least let's find out what the others think. I think you should be able to stand.” I nodded, pushing myself off the cold cavern floor. It was shaky, but I was able to get there. The others smiled as I tottered into view.

“We need to make a decision,” I said. “Whether we keep moving forward, or pull back to Ponyville. I won't end this now. I'm going to stop Spark, whether she likes it or not. If you want to join me, you're more than welcome, but I will not begrudge you if you want to leave.”

“I'm stayin',” Steeljack wheezed, pushing himself up so I could see him. “If we don't stop Spark, all of this will be for nothing.”

“You should be resting!” Violet hissed. I smiled, placing a hoof on her shoulder. She silenced, letting the others speak. Lilith bristled her wings.

“You've got me til the very end, Star,” she said. “I wouldn't dream of ditching you now. Not after what we've been through together.” I nodded, my eyes gazing up to Nixis. The hellhound smiled toothily.

“I am with you as well,” he said, his gaze drifting over to Violet. “And I have an idea of how we can address our medical supply problem. There are many herbs with curative properties that can be gathered in the Everfree. It is the usual reason my kind venture into this dangerous terrain.”

“Do you know what these herbs look like?” Violet asked, her eyes alight. Nixis grimaced.

“Unfortunately, I'm more of a philosopher than a botanist, but I do know some of their names. With your PipBuck we may be able to identify them,” he said.

“Good. Let's make that a priority before we move on,” I said. “We'll do some gathering and see if we can't find some of these herbs.” I looked over at Sunshine. The pink mare was silent and shivering. She started when my gaze landed on her, then looked up and nodded softly.

“I'm here, too,” she said. “To make up for... you know... but also because I want to be.” I smiled and glanced back over at Steeljack, winking.

"I *do* agree with Violet, though. You should rest, Steeljack. We should all take a bit of a rest," I said, turning towards the entrance of the cave. It was getting dark outside already. At the very least there wasn't a multitude of stars hanging in the air. I wasn't planning on making *that* mistake ever again. I floated out Twilight's memory orb and the shard piece from my other pack. The shard hung there in midair for a moment before it impacted into the orb. The purple shard inside the orb grew larger, forming into a vaguely star-like shape with the orb at the middle. Accenting two sides of the star were a tinted yellow and orange set of crystals. I noticed the yellow ones were... faded. I wondered briefly what that meant before the star-crystal began to pulse.

I lifted it up, feeling the energy coming off of it as it pulsed. Memories, emotions, all things great and small flooded my mind as I connected with the energy of the shard. I blinked, and I was no longer in the Everfree Forest of the Wasteland. A bright and beautiful sun shone down from above, the sounds of the forest teeming with brilliant life instead of dangerous evil. I looked about, the shimmering glow of the green underbrush surrounding me.

"What the..." I said aloud as the images began to fade away, returning to the drab dreary Wasteland I was used to. "What was that?" The star began to pulse faster, sending a beam of light soaring into the sky. *Shit!!!* I thought, fearing that something or someone would see the light and know exactly where we were... like the other Elements. The light pooled into the sky and shot forward, coming to rest over the top of the mountain range at the edge of the northern part of the forest. It then dissipated in the form of what appeared to be Twilight's cutie mark.

"Star? What the heck is going on out here?" Violet said. I looked back, my eyes wide.

"I have no idea," I said, looking down at the star-crystal. "Did you see that flash of light?" Violet cocked her head in confusion.

"What flash of light?" She said. I blinked. *Violet didn't see it? But it was super bright...* I thought, the gears in my head clicking into place as I realized I'd been the only one to see the beam of light. It was because I was still holding the star-crystal in my magic! *But that must mean...* I thought, looking at where the light had dissipated.

"Violet, I think I know where the second piece of this shard is located," I said, pointing off in the northwest at the mountain range. "Up there." Violet looked at where I was pointing and grimaced.

"Jeez... that's really far," she said. "Are you sure?" I looked down at the star-crystal again. I nodded.

"This thing showed it to me," I said, lifting the star-crystal so she could see it. Violet's eyes widened with awe.

"Oh... wow... it's pretty," she said, lifting a hoof to it. "Can you feel that? It's like it's alive." I put my hoof on the star-crystal. It pulsed slightly under my touch. I could feel the pulsing growing, the connection to Twilight growing. I blinked.

"Yeah..." I said. "I... I can." I looked over at Violet as I lifted the star-crystal and placed it in my saddlebags. My eyes felt drawn to it. *What happened? Why did I see old Equestria? What did it even mean?* I thought.

“What do you think it means?” Violet said as we returned to where the others were sitting inside the cave. I shrugged.

“I don't know,” I said, looking to the others. “I know where the next piece of the shard is. It's up in the mountains... somewhere. I don't know exactly where.”

“The mountains?” Lilith said. “That's... that's pretty far away.” I nodded.

“Yes, we had better get some rest. Thankfully it seems like this cave is abandoned. We'll hole up here until morning and then make our way towards the mountains while looking for the medicinal herbs,” I said. Sunshine raised a hoof.

“Question,” she said. “What if we run into another one of those... alicorn things?” I grimaced.

“Then we fight. We can't let them have the shards,” I replied. “We need those to face Spark.”

“And what are *we* going to do about old Sparky-poo?” Lilith said. “What's our game plan there?” I hesitated. I hadn't really told the others yet about my plan to save the wayward Element. I wasn't sure I was ready to, either. There were too many things I still didn't know, too many pieces of the puzzle I'd yet to figure out. Was Spark like the other Elements? Would I even be able to reach the true Magic behind the corruption like I'd done with Honesty? I didn't know. Resigning myself to my answer, I finally sighed and spoke.

“To be honest, Lilith... I don't know. I don't know how this is going to play out. I just know that Spark needs to be stopped... somehow.” I looked over at Violet. “For right now, we're playing this by ear. We find the shards, we'll find Spark eventually.” I trotted over to where Violet had laid out our bedroll. I plopped down, groaning as I turned my attention to my bandages. Thankfully I wasn't bleeding again, but I still felt like I could use a long hot shower, something I was pretty sure I was not going to get in the Everfree Forest. Violet sat down next to me, using her horn to cast her healing spells on my minor cuts and bruises, relief flooding through my body under her ministrations.

“You know, you really gave me a scare there,” she said softly. I winced.

“Sorry,” I simply said. Violet's gaze narrowed at me.

“What happened?” She asked. “You know... when you cast that memory spell?”

“I saw the spirit of Honesty... along with a memory of Applejack,” I said, starting to explain what Honesty had told me. I left out a few details, notably the part about sealing Spark using another of Twilight's secret spells. Violet and I spoke about the details of the memory until it was time to sleep. I yawned loudly, laying my head on the ground. Violet did the same and soon she began to snore softly. I sighed, rolling onto my side. I wasn't able to get to sleep, despite how tired my body actually was. My brain kept running over the memory with Honesty. I couldn't turn it off.

I sighed, rolling over away from Violet and standing. I tiptoed softly towards the entrance of the cave, looking out into the forest. I noticed Steeljack sitting outside the front, gazing calmly across our surroundings.

“Shouldn't you be resting?” I whispered as I sat next to him. He looked up in surprise.

“Star,” he said. He lowered his head. “Couldn't sleep. Figured this was the best place for me to be.”

“Steeljack...” I said, shaking my head. “You need to rest. You can't be doing too hot after getting hit by that venom.”

“I'm fine,” Steeljack said, his eyes drifting down to his chest. His armor had yet to finish repairing itself. The hole was still there, but smaller. It was no longer smoking. “I won't lie... that hurt like hell... but I'll be alright.”

“Are you sure?” I said. Steeljack nodded. I smiled, shifting on my haunches. I looked out at the forest. Nothing stirred in the darkness, which worried me greatly. The forest was teeming with thousands of little things that would love nothing more than feasting on our tender flesh. “I couldn't sleep, either.”

“Oh? Why's that?” Steeljack asked. I sighed.

“Just... a lot on my mind, I guess,” I said. “I've been thinking a lot about where this is all going. Spark... the Elements... Twilight... I don't know what to do with it all.” I sighed again. “I've got a bad feeling about what's coming next.” Steeljack grunted in response. We sat there a few moments more in total silence.

“You know...” he said finally, breaking the still air. “Patch would have liked to have seen this.” He motioned at the sky above the treeline. Though the forest hid a good chunk of it, I realized that I could still see the stars and the moon beyond the sky. The moon hung there, challenging anyone to look upon its glory and fail to see the beauty in its pockmarked surface. It glowed brilliantly, forcing the stars to share the sky beneath it, instead of with it. I smiled. Even after two hundred years, Luna's presence in the world could be *felt* just by looking up at the nighttime sky.

“Yeah... she would have,” I replied. “I... I miss her too, Steeljack.”

“When I was hit by that thing, I thought I'd never see her again, Star,” Steeljack said softly. From my close proximity, I could see the pained expression on the stallion's face. “I thought I'd... I'd be stronger about this, but I...” I sidled over, extending a wing around my friend. He looked up at me with eyes wide.

“It's alright,” I said. “It's okay to feel that way about somepony you care about. You really do love her, I can tell. I'm sorry to have to keep you two apart like this... but with her condition...” Steeljack nodded.

“I know,” he said. “I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her, or the foals for that matter. I made a promise to help you find this Spark bitch, and I'm going to keep it.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I... I really appreciate that. Just... take care of yourself, okay?” Steeljack grunted. I grinned. “None of that, now. You go rest. I'll take watch for the rest of the evening. I have a lot to think about anyways.”

“You sure?” Steeljack asked. I nodded. “Alright, then. I guess I'll see you in the morning.” The earth stallion stood, disengaging himself from my wing. He slowly made his way back into the cave as to

not wake the others. I turned my attention back towards the forest, lifting out Stargazer and setting it at the ready in case there was an attack, but at the moment there seemed to be... well, *nothing*. The forest still chittered and chattered with the sounds of its many denizens, but it was as if the entire place was asleep or taking a break. I shuddered. There was no way this peace could last that long.

Morning brought even more nothing from the forest as a hazy mist settled onto the section we had taken refuge in. The sky above was overcast. Thunder roared in the distance, indicating that it was going to rain.

My eyes twitched, forcing themselves open as I realized quickly that I'd fallen asleep while on guard duty. A blanket had been laid over me to keep me warm. I glanced up, seeing Sunshine sitting next to me. She smiled brightly.

"We didn't want to move you and risk any light from our magic," she said. "So we just kind of... let you be." I groaned, pushing myself up into a sit.

"Thanks," I croaked. "No issues overnight, I take it?" The pink mare shook her head.

"Nope," she said. "When you're ready, though, Violet is cooking up some breakfast. We're gonna need to eat if we're gonna make some progress through this forest." I nodded, standing and stretching. My wings and my entire body felt much better than they did the day before. I trotted into the cave, sitting down next to Violet to have some breakfast. Somehow she had managed to cobble together some firewood to make a fire and had made some oats. After eating, we packed up our gear and made our way into the forest once more. We walked along the underbrush in the direction towards the mountain range. The sky above turned a deeper and darker gray as the first drops of rain touched our coats. It was miserable. The rain came down, drenching us completely. I cast my alicorn shield, extending it over myself and the others to try and keep us dry, but it was far too late.

"How much farther?" Lilith said, breaking the silence that had fallen while we walked. I grimaced, pulling the star-crystal out of my saddlebags. It pulsed slowly in the direction we were moving.

"Far," I said, groaning. Lilith groaned as well, bristling her wings. They made a slight screech as metal ground against metal.

"Great," she said. "Any more wetness and I think I might rust."

"You're not the only one," Steeljack rumbled. I smiled and pulled up my PipBuck's map. So far it hadn't been much help in keeping track of where we were. The Everfree Forest didn't seem to be one for allowing ponies to map it to get around. It kept switching around, places moving away from where we had left them. I wasn't quite sure how it was doing it, but that was the only explanation I could find for why I kept seeing the same bush over and over.

Eventually, we found ourselves in a glade a mere thirty miles north of where we had made camp. A tiny way station building sat in the center of it. It looked completely abandoned. It was the perfect place to stop and take stock of our surroundings, as well as give Nixis a chance to gather some plants for Violet to identify. The rain had finally let up to a slight drizzle, making the trek merely tolerable as opposed to outright misery. The hellhound and my marefriend disappeared into the underbrush, while

the others scouted the area for anything useful. I sat next to the old way station, keeping guard of the place. Sunshine had gone in to check it out. Steeljack and Lilith sat at the edge of the glade, keeping an eye out for any trouble, especially of the timber wolf variety.

“Nothing,” Sunshine said, popping her head out of the way station. “Nothing at all. It’s been completely picked clean.” I grimaced, looking into the door. She was right. The way station was extremely clean for being hundreds of years old. A thin film of cobwebs covered everything. I was about to comment on this when I heard a scream. My ears perked up.

“Violet,” I said aloud, my eyes searching for the source of the noise. Another scream. West. I growled under my breath. “Violet!” I charged into the underbrush, barely aware of the others following behind me. The forest broke, revealing a large gorge below us. I heard another scream, followed by a roar. *That was Nixis!* I thought, rage filling my vision as I leaped down into the gorge, spreading my wings to slow my fall. My hooves struck the hard rock and I kept on galloping. Another roar split the air, and I turned the next corner in the gorge to see Violet and Nixis.

Two massive, eel-like creatures with red eyes and an overbite larger than their heads were sticking out of holes in the rock walls, their jaws snapping at the hellhound and unicorn. Nixis stood over Violet, snarling and roaring at the beasts. They seemed to stay away from him. Violet huddled beneath the hellhound, her horn flaring as blood pooled from her leg. I growled, lifting Stargazer and firing at the closest beast. Several of the bullets punched through the tough exterior of the thing’s skin, causing the monster to howl in pain.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Pick on someone your own size!” The beast reared back, blood oozing from its wounds. The other monster turned, shooting forward like a rocket at me. I growled and jumped to the side, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. Time fell silent as I queued up my shots. Releasing the spell, Stargazer took aim and fired, sending most of the rounds into the monster’s gaping maw. It reeled back, a screeching sound emanating from it as it whipped around furiously at me. It slammed into me, sending me soaring into gorge wall. I grunted, prying myself from the rock wall. The giant eel-like creature moved further out of its hole, attempting to snap me in two with its jaws. The giant overbite snapped down about two feet from my body, just barely clearing my wingtip.

I heard a snarl along with the rending of flesh as the monster jerked back. It howled loudly as it turned its attention back to Nixis, who had used the opportunity to attack. Sticky blood coated the hellhound’s claws, his breathing hard and fast. The other eel beast was hanging out of the rock wall, unmoving. From my vantage point, I could see a good number of massive cuts on it as well. *How in the heck did I miss that?* I thought. I didn’t have much time to answer that before Nixis jumped back from the first monster’s attack. I lifted Stargazer, sending another volley of fire into the beast. It snarled and snapped in retaliation before falling towards the ground with a heavy ***thud***.

I flapped my wings, soaring down towards where Violet sat. A shadow passed over the gorge, revealing itself to be Lilith. I looked back to see Sunshine and Steeljack standing at the end of the cliff wall. I sighed as I landed, trotting up to my marefriend. She looked up at me, a grimace on her face.

“Violet?” I said, hesitantly, my eyes drifting down to her wounds. She had been lacerated in several places, not deep but enough to draw blood. Her horn was pulsing furiously as she worked to apply her healing magic to stop the bleeding. I withdrew the last roll of bandages I had and set to work. Violet scrunched her face in response.

“Star... you don't need to do that. Those are the rest of our bandages,” she said.

“I don't care. You're hurt,” I replied.

“I'm fine. See? They're healing up,” she said, motioning to the cuts. While they did look better and the bleeding had stopped for the most part, even I knew with my own limited medical knowledge that she needed some additional aid. I shook my head.

“No dice, love,” I said as I finished applying the bandages. It wasn't pretty by any means, but it would work. “Now then... let's get you up.” I helped her up as the others reached us. Nixis stumbled, but appeared to be unhurt.

“What in the Sorrel Hells happened?” Lilith said. Violet grimaced.

“My... my fault,” she said. “We thought we saw one of the plants we were looking for... I ran out to grab it and those... things attacked. Nixis was only barely able to fend them off.”

“I apologize,” Nixis interjected. “I should have been faster.” I smiled softly.

“It's alright. No one's blaming anyone for this,” I said. “I think that from now on though, we shouldn't split up for any reason. We really do need the medical supplies now, so we should make that our priority.”

“I agree with Star,” Violet said. “That was the last of our bandages.” Her horn flared, lifting out a few multicolored flowers from her saddlebag. “At least, we found a few of the ingredients we needed to make some healing salves. Not gonna be enough though.”

“Right,” I said, glancing at Nixis. “So... where do we start looking?” The hellhound appeared... distraught. “Nixis? You okay there?” He looked up, nodding.

“I'm... I'm fine,” he said. “The rest of the ingredients we need should be able to be located further up the gorge line. We're looking mainly for a flower called Star Root. It's main purpose is that it can be wrapped and turned into makeshift bandages, if I remember correctly. My recollection of that particular process is a... bit fuzzy. Additionally, anything such as Heart's Desire can be useful for grinding up into healing salves.”

“Let's get going then,” I said, glancing up at the sky. “We're wasting daylight, and I know that don't I want to be stuck out here in this gorge at night.” The others nodded. We made our way back up out of the gorge and into the forest, Violet riding comfortably on my back. It wasn't as if she had to, but even if she was able to walk I wanted her as close to me as possible. I had insisted, and she had accepted with a grumble. We trotted along the gorge line, scanning the forest for anything potentially dangerous. My E.F.S. was now just a sea of red, poignantly pointing out that the entire forest was our enemy. While we walked, we managed to find a few of the plants that Nixis had mentioned, but no Star Root for the bandages. We kept moving, sticking to a direction that took us towards the mountains.

Another abandoned way station appeared just inside the forest along the gorge line. Cobwebs covered the entire clearing, hanging from the trees. The ground was littered with scores of black flowers that had blue stars emblazoned on them. The station itself sat apart from the flowers, standing on pylons in the middle of small lake and connected by a graceful span of a metal bridge. It was almost like a

garden center, as if the ponies who worked here had been cultivating the starry flowers.

“Star Root,” Nixis breathed. “And lots of it.”

“Finally,” I said, smiling as I took a step forward, my hoof landing in a smattering of cobweb. I went to take another step, finding that I was unable to. My hooves would not move from the cobwebs. I was stuck! I grunted. “Umm... guys... I think I'm stuck.”

“Shit,” Violet said from my back, her eyes widening as she looked up into the trees. “That's the least of our problems.” She pointed up and I followed her gaze upwards. Movement in the forest above us. I heard the sounds before I saw them. Skittering and chattering insects. One of them slid down a web in front of us. It appeared to be a spider of some sort, except that it had twenty spindly legs and was bloated in odd contortions. A rainbow colored crystalline star sat on the thing's abdomen. It screeched wildly, spewing forth a stream of multicolored... *stuff* from its mouth. The liquid dropped to the ground with a sizzle. I heard cries from behind us as more skittering echoed throughout the glade. We were surrounded.

“What the...?” I said, throwing up my shield as the stream of rainbow liquid hit it, causing it to pop and snap. My eyes went wide as I recognized what it was. “Shit shit shit! They're spitting taint! Get me loose, get me loose, get me loose!” Violet snarled, lifting Thunder Flash in her magic and using it to send the spider spawn into the next life. She smacked my head hard with her fetlock.

“Get it together, Star,” she said. I grimaced, glancing back at the others. More of the spiders crawled in through the underbrush, boxing us in to where we'd be unable to move because of the cobwebs. Steeljack and Sunshine stood rump to rump, while Lilith hovered above them. Nixis was busy slashing at the ground, trying to sever the cobwebs holding me into place. Steeljack took aim, firing into one of the arachnids that got a little too close, while Lilith sliced another in half with her wing blades. I found my leg moving freely again, albeit with a big chunk of rock attached to it. Nixis grimaced.

“Sorry, best I can do,” he said. I nodded, returning my focus to the situation at hand. The skittering sounds of the spiders were getting louder as the things just appeared in the clearing. Each one was different, bloated and misshapen with varying amounts of legs. Some of them didn't even *have* legs! They all shared the same rainbow colored star. I knew what had happened to these things. This was what taint did. Taint turned everything into grossly misshapen monstrosities, except the incredibly rare lucky pony. My eyes locked on the way station at the center of the lake. There weren't any cobwebs there! I knew what we had to do. My gaze narrowed and I flared my horn, pooling my magic.

“Everybody hold on!” I shouted, releasing the teleportation spell before anyone could react. We landed on the platform next to the station's door with a massive ***thud***. Violet rolled from my back, but managed to land softly as her own horn caught her in her magic. I pushed myself up immediately, lifting Stargazer out. Several of the tainted spiders climbed onto the metal bridge. They screeched as they began skittering across it. I growled, sending a few shots out that ricocheted off the steel bridge. A stray bullet hit one of the monsters, splattering it into globs of rainbow paste. More of the spiders followed behind it.

“The bridge!” Sunshine called out, reaching out for the control panel on the platform. She pressed a button on it, the bridge grinding its metallic way into the murky waters below. The spiders fell into the water, howling and screeching. The rest of the tainted horde hung around the edge of the water, not daring to enter into the dirty depths. I grimaced.

“Great. Now we're stuck on an island in the middle of a bunch of tainted monsters,” I breathed out. “Is everyone alright?”

“I'm okay,” Violet said, pushing herself up to a standing position. She winced. “Well... Aside from being teleported again.”

“All good here,” Steeljack said.

“Same,” Lilith said. “What do we do next?” I strapped Stargazer back to its harness, glancing out at the spiders. They had yet to challenge the water. I looked up, expecting to see them above us, but there was... nothing. I blinked. The complete absence of cobwebs around the platform told me that there was something protecting that place.

“We hunker down inside this station and see if we can cook up some of these plants,” I said. “Unfortunately, I don't think we're getting any Star Root.”

“Not with those things out there,” Nixis snarled. “I agree with Star. We need to rest for a bit. Violet's hurt, and we're going to need her help with the potions.”

“I've... I've got an idea about that,” Sunshine said. “I use earth magic. I could pull a few of those flowers over here easily.” I smiled.

“Give it a try then,” I replied. The pink unicorn nodded, her horn lighting up. Several of the plants out beyond the lake disappeared, much to the ire of the spider creatures that skittered over to investigate. They reappeared in a heap of magic in front of Sunshine. She grinned.

“Looks like your magic is back and working,” I said.

“Feels great to finally be able to use it again,” she replied. “That should be plenty, right?”

“Looks like it,” Violet said, lifting the flowers in her magic. “Let's get down beneath cover.”

“Alright, I'll hang out here and keep guard while you guys investigate,” Lilith said. “I don't feel like doing another stint in a dark confined place.” I nodded, motioning to the others.

“Just be careful, and close the door if any of those things manage to get over here.” I said. I flared my horn, checking the door. It opened just fine, creaking slightly. I poked my head in, the dark musty smell of the tiny hall assaulting my senses. I made my way inside, wondering what in the hell these little stations had been used for. One of them had been used to cultivate and breed those creepy wasp creatures that had attacked Steeljack. What had been this one's purpose?

I pushed those thoughts out of my mind as we reached the end of the main hallway. It was not the time or place to think about those things. I needed to get Violet well enough to continue and rebuild our medical supplies. The room opened up into a main room with stairs going down to a research lab below. Several broken terminals littered the floor along with overturned filing cabinets. There was absolutely no movement amidst the rubble, and no skeletons either. There had been nopony here when the war had ended, but something had occurred here.

Violet trudged down the stairs in front of me, wincing with every step as she reached a table with a hot plate. She pulled out a broken beaker, setting it on top of the device. Nixis loped down the stairs after her, while Steeljack and Sunshine rested near the main entrance. I trotted down, watching Violet and Nixis pull out what plants they'd collected and start to mash them up. Violet's horn glowed softly, turning on the hot plate and depositing the mashed up plants inside.

"I'm gonna look around while you guys are doing that," I said. Violet nodded, her expression pained. I could tell she was still feeling the aftereffects of her injuries. The fact that we were out of Med-X didn't help things much. I grimaced, wishing that I knew more that could help her. Instead, I focused on searching the rest of the lab. I found a still working terminal in the rear of the room. Hooking up my PipBuck, I began to search for the password. I had to admit, practice had made it a lot easier to get into these things. The password ended up being '*star-spider*'. I blinked. That made a little sense, at least, given the things outside.

There were a lot of pictures of various plants and flora along with an audio log. I pulled the audio log onto my PipBuck and perused the menu. An ***OPEN SAFE*** option struck my eye. I clicked it, hearing a soft hiss come from the wall next to me. I stood, using my magic to force the safe door open the rest of the way. I blinked. Inside the safe was the mother load of healing supplies. Cartons of healing potions, bandages, and even two to three bottles of super restoration potions stared back at me from the wall alcove. Several syringes of Med-X sat along the back wall, and there was even what looked like a tube of Hydra.

"Umm... Violet?" I called out.

"Yeah, Star? I'm a little busy at the moment," Violet replied. My eye twitched.

"You might want to come check this out," I responded. "I just found a bunch of medical --" I didn't even have time to finish my sentence before Violet pushed me aside. Her eyes lit up as she took in the treasure I had uncovered. Meanwhile, I fell to the ground rather unceremoniously, glaring up at my marefriend.

"This... is... PERFECT!!" She squealed, digging through the supplies and pulling them out of the safe. "Huh? What's this?" She tossed something out of the safe that landed square on my face as I was getting up. I fell backwards again, my head feeling like it just gotten hit by a freight train. I looked down to see what had hit me. It was a statue of a beautiful yellow pegasus mare with pink hair. She was surrounded by woodland creatures. My eyes widened. It was Fluttershy. The inscription at the base of the statue held the words ***Be pleasant***. I smiled, taking the statue into my magical field. A jolt of energy struck me and I smiled even wider. I felt... nice. I think that was the only possible way I could explain it.

"Star? You alright down there?" Violet said, her telekinetic field holding all of the medicine at once. I noticed that she had already downed one of the healing potions and was looking significantly better. I nodded, my anger towards her forgotten thanks to the pleasant kindness of Fluttershy's statuette. I stood, stuffing the statue into my bags with the others. I realized that I'd almost obtained all of the Ministry Mare's statues. I was only missing one. *Twilight Sparkle*, I thought, grimacing. *It would have to be her, wouldn't it?*

"Yeah, I'm fine. So... good find?" I asked.

“Are you kidding? This is exactly what we needed,” she said as I followed behind her over to where the others had gathered. Nixis nodded in approval as Violet spread out the supplies on a nearby table. “Keep that hot plate running, Nixis. I’d like to still get some of the flowers brewed up in case we need them.”

“Will do,” Nixis replied, turning back to the beaker, stirring its contents gently with a glass rod that had been laying on the counter. Violet proceeded to separate out the supplies among each of us, ensuring that each of us had enough to make do. I sat back, watching her take charge of the situation. I smiled. I turned my attention to the audio log I’d copied from the terminal. I flipped on my earbloom, setting the file to play. The soft voice of a mare started up the recording.

Official Ministry of Peace Recording Code Alpha Alpha Gamma Sigma, Research Station X-17

Head Researcher Green Hoof speaking...

We are making good progress on the plant work, categorizing the various plants of the Everfree Forest and their uses as biological and medicinal agents. The Everfree Forest is one of the last bastions of a wild world, and the plant life that has developed here is absolutely extraordinary.

One of the more interesting plants that we’ve managed to grow is Star Root. The plant itself is fascinating mostly due to it’s unique flower. The flowering plant grows in bunches, which serve as a breeding ground for the star spiders. The little arachnids are positively enamored with them. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. We found out just how much they like the flowers when a few of the spiders followed a sample into the lab. They didn’t hurt anything, and were rather glad to be let out, but after that we did all testing and studying with the Star Root outdoors.

The Star Root is also highly useful as a medicinal wrap. It’s extremely effective at healing common wounds and skin ailments, while providing a mild soothing anesthetic. Unfortunately, the act of preparing the flower for use involves high amounts of extreme heat, as the Star Root in its natural state is highly toxic to the skin, causing massive breakouts in mere seconds and the potential to cause fatal injury. Only a unicorn can handle the flowers safely enough to place them under the heat required to purge the toxins from the plant. It is believed that it is a safety mechanism, one that does not seem to affect the star spiders, as they appear to share the same toxin in their blood...

The rest of the message was garbled static. My eyes widened as I watched Nixis over by the hot plate. The Star Root we had collected was sitting on the countertop near the hellhound. He went to reach for one. I jumped onto my hooves, latching onto the flowers with my magic and moving them out of Nixis’ reach.

“Stop!” I shouted as I dropped the Star Root. “The plants, they’re --” A loud screeching noise cut me off. A star spider with a multicolored star on its back shot forth from the heap of plants. It grew right before my eyes, misshapen and bloated with twelve spindly legs. It howled, leaping through the air at me. I didn’t have enough time to get Stargazer out of its harness before the thing latched onto my neck with its fangs. I cried out in pain briefly as Nixis swung, tearing the spider away from my body. His claws shredded the monster into multiple pieces.

“Star! Are you alright?!” Violet exclaimed, jumping up from her sitting position. I nodded weakly, feeling the venom from the spider’s bite already coursing through my body. I staggered, falling forward onto my face. I groaned loudly. From somewhere above me, I heard Violet call out. I faded out of

consciousness, the darkness overtaking me.

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My eyes opened and I groaned loudly from my prone position. I was at the library again. *And here I thought that Twilight didn't want to see me...* I thought, pushing myself to my hooves. *Maybe she wants to talk about the shards.* I grimaced, pushing open the door. I knew on the outside that I was out cold, thanks to the venom from the spider bite. I wondered briefly, if the star spider had powerful venom before it was tainted, what in the hell did tainted venom do to a pony? I was reasonably sure it wouldn't do much to me, being an alicorn, but I wasn't a scientist or even a smart thinky pony to know for sure. I sat there for a moment, pondering what extra appendages I might end up with when I woke.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I entered into the library proper. As always, Twilight appeared to be deep in her reading in the middle of the library's common room. She looked up, frowning as she saw me.

"Umm... hi?" I said, waving and grinning sheepishly. Twilight sighed.

"You know these little visits are really starting to cut into my studying time," the purple mare replied nonchalantly. "I thought we agreed that you weren't to come here unless it was important." I glared at her.

"It's not like I had a choice," I said. "I was knocked out, poisoned. I'd much rather be having a nice fever dream about my marefriend's plot than be here."

"So eloquently put," Twilight said. "I am aware, of course, of your predicament." I grimaced, slumping to my haunches across from her.

"So what now? Just wait til I wake up?" I asked. Twilight shrugged, her gaze dropping back to her book. With nothing better to do than wait, I decided to bring up the one thing that was bugging me. "The shard, Twilight. It's broken up into multiple pieces." The alicorn's eyes went wide as she looked up at me.

"What?" She said. "What do you mean, it's broken up?"

"As in, shattered. Discord spread it around the forest in four pieces. I have one already," I said. Something in the back of my mind worried me. If Twilight had known about the poison, why didn't she know about the shards? Was the connection getting weaker? Was I getting weaker? Would I even know when the connection gave up and I died? Or would I just suddenly keel over in the middle of my morning breakfast, or when using the bathroom? *The Ministry Mare died today of a heart attack while she was taking a shit*, I thought, frowning. *Not exactly something you want to hear on the radio.* Twilight frowned as well.

"I... I hadn't anticipated that possibility," she said. Her wings fluttered and she flared her horn, bringing a chalkboard into existence. She flew up to it and began writing down figures with a floating piece of chalk. "...carry the two... multiply by seven hundred and sixty three... that's not right... that's a square..." I blinked, not even remotely understanding any of the writing on the board. It was completely foreign to me. I raised a hoof to try and get Twilight's attention but it was too late. She'd already gone off the deep end.

“Uh... Twilight?”

“And then the multiplicative property of the trinomial... No... that's not right either...”

“Twilight?”

“Ah *HAH!*” Twilight shouted, her wings flapping hard. “It's really very simple! The shard was never supposed to be fragmented that much, because it's a stable power source, but Discord's magic must have introduced an unforeseen instability that allowed him to fragment it! Of course!”

“Huh?” Twilight glanced over at me, grinning sheepishly.

“Sorry. I got a little too excited there,” she said, coming back down to ground. She cleared her throat. “As I was saying, Discord's magic functions on a completely different level than normal unicorn magic. The shard that I used was a stable magic source, something I invented. It was originally intended to be used in the Stargazer project. Of course, we all know where it ended up getting used. I never got to invent another one before the war ended...” I blinked.

“You mean my minigun?” I said. Twilight nodded excitedly.

“Yes, Stargazer was originally meant to be a magical energy weapon, using the base starmetal core combined with a stable magic source. The shard that I sealed Spark in would have allowed the weapon to convert it's kinetic force into magical energy. Quite powerful, really,” she said. “I don't even think Star Gazer himself even knew what he really created.” I blinked again.

“How... how would that have interacted with the starmetal?” I asked, my train tracks completely derailed from talking about Discord for a second. Twilight knew a lot more about the Stargazer project, mostly because she was the one who ordered its creation. *Why, though? That's what I don't get, I thought. Why order the creation of a weapon for Luna, unless she really meant to use it herself?*

“Oh, well, you know... starmetal is a powerful and highly sturdy alloy,” Twilight explained. “Some say that it steals a bit of your soul every time you come into contact with it or that it's poisonous, but the chunk that was used in Stargazer's core never exhibited any of those behaviors. That made it's use ideal for combining with the magical energy source.”

“Where... where did you find core for the weapon?” I said, looking in amazement at how much information I was getting about my gun. In the back of my mind, I still wondered about the shard. It was some sort of power source? There was something that Twilight hadn't bothered to tell me about, and that unnerved me greatly.

“Ah, that actually came from the Princess herself. She provided me with the core when I ordered the creation of the weapon for her,” Twilight said, placing a hoof to her chin. “Come to think of it, I have no idea where she got it.”

“Great,” I said. “Just... great. So, the shard is some sort of magical energy source. That might explain why it's gotten all... weird?”

“Define weird,” Twilight said. I grimaced.

“When it... when it merged with the memory orb it became like this... this... star crystal thing. It showed me where the next piece was. At the time, I assumed that it still had to do with your spell, but now... I'm not so sure. It showed me old Equestria... before the war. The Everfree Forest, specifically,” I explained. Twilight frowned.

“The shard may be acting a little flaky thanks to Discord, but it's most likely drawing on the power of the memories locked inside your mind,” she said. “My memories, to be precise.”

“Will it happen again?” I asked. Twilight shrugged.

“That, I do not know,” she said. I looked down at the ground, sighing. “I do know that the rest of the shards are the only way that we will have any shot at defeating Spark. I can still feel her presence. She's waiting for us to come to her. I don't know why.” I blinked. Spark had the Elements under her hoof, she had the spell, she had everything she needed... so why wait? Why was she just biding her time? Was she waiting... for us? For Twilight and myself? She needed something from us... something that only I could provide. Cruelty had made mention that it was my body that she required... was that it? Or was there more? Twilight continued talking about the shard, but my mind filtered out her words until she tapped me on the shoulder.

“Wh-huh?” I said. *Right. Smooth, Star. Very smooth*, I thought.

“Star... I think you need to leave, and get some rest. You have a lot to do still,” Twilight said. “Now... wake up.”

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“Is she awake?”

“Oh, Luna I think she is...”

“Everyone back, don't crowd her!”

“Alright, alright, Violet. Sheesh.”

My eyes fluttered open and I looked up into the green eyes of my marefriend. They were red and puffy. She had been crying. I lifted a hoof weakly to brush it along her cheek.

“Hey,” I managed to say. My voice croaked in my throat.

“Hey,” Violet replied. “We really gotta stop doing this.”

“Yeah...” I said weakly, pushing myself up into a sitting position. I felt very strained, but I was able to sit. The others had gathered around the way station, including Lilith. “What happened?”

“You got hit by the venom from that thing,” Violet said. “We thought we'd lost you. I pumped some of the healing plants into you and sort of... hoped for the best.” I nodded.

“How long?” I asked.

“Few hours, give or take,” Sunshine said.

“I heard the shouts and came in,” Lilith said. “Those... spider things were starting to creep me out anyways.” I grimaced.

“So... what else is up? Did those things try to get in?” I asked. Violet's face grew dark. “What? What's wrong?”

“Umm... You'd better look in a mirror,” Sunshine said. I blinked. Violet's horn glowed, lifting out a mirror out of her bag. It was the first time I'd seen my reflection in what felt like forever. My gaze drifted around the surface of the mirror, taking in my features. I smiled, trying to see what Sunshine was talking about. My mane looked normal, and although a little baggy my eyes looked fine as well. Even my ears looked great – wait. My ears? I wiggled both of them, pinned them back and grimaced.

“But...” I said, looking at Violet. “What... what happened to my left ear?”

“It... it just regrew, all by itself,” she replied. “We're not even sure how.” I blinked again. I knew how. I knew what it had to do with.

“Taint,” I said. “The spider's venom... it had taint in it. It must have had some effect on my ear.” I wiggled my ears again. I couldn't believe how good it actually felt to have the use of my left ear again! I smiled. “This is a good thing, right?”

“I... guess?” Sunshine said. “A little freaky, if you ask me.” Violet grimaced. I groaned, pushing myself up to my hooves, much to Violet's protestations. I waved a hoof.

“I'm fine, I'm fine,” I said, parking out. I was shaky, but I was standing.

“You still need to rest, Star,” Violet said.

“We don't have the time, Violet,” I said. “We need to get going. We've got medical supplies, so let's get the heck out of Dodge.”

“That may be easier said than done,” Lilith interjected. “Those things are still surrounding the lake this place is set over. They know we're here.”

“I've got an idea for that,” I said, grinning. “Those things are attracted to the Star Root. Let's give them what they want.” I strode forward towards the entrance, igniting my horn and grabbing my saddlebags, attaching Stargazer to its harness as I went. “Everyone grab your things, it's time to go.”

I pushed open the door and stepped into the hall. The others followed behind. I stepped out into the Everfree Forest once more, standing on the metal platform. It was still night out. The skittering sounds of the star spiders met my ears. My ears! I still couldn't believe it. Hundreds of little red eyes glittered in the night. The monstrosities had us completely surrounded.

“When I say go, go. I'm going to distract them,” I said, flaring my horn. “Run for the tree line and don't stop. We'll make for the mountains.” The others nodded. I could tell that Violet wanted to argue, wanted to say something, but she didn't. She stayed deathly quiet.

I reached out with my magic, latching onto as much of the Star Root as I possibly could hold onto at one time. I lifted hard, yanking them out of the ground. The star spiders reacted immediately, turning towards the glowing plants. I floated along the plants towards the far end of the clearing.

“GO!” I shouted. Sunshine smacked the button to extend the bridge, the grinding metal carrying the rusty thing over to the other side of the lake. Nixis snarled, bounding across first to defend against any wayward spiders. None of them seemed to pay any attention to my friends. I stepped across last, still carrying the Star Root in my magic. The star spiders followed along diligently, chattering and skittering. It was working! I almost wished I could have found Green Thumb. I'd have kissed her if she wasn't dead! I was trotting happily along towards the tree line when I heard the hissing. I turned. Every one of the tainted star spiders were staring at me, their beady red eyes focused on me.

They began to charge as I dropped the Star Root from my magic, turning into a hard gallop. *Shit shit shit!* I thought frantically.

“Everyone run!” I called out ahead of me. One of the tainted spiders appeared in front of my field of vision, snapping as it launched at me. I reached out with my telekinesis, tossing the monster into a nearby tree. It splattered to the ground in a heap. My heart pounded as I kept running. Despite the fact that the tainted venom had somehow regrown my ear, I didn't relish the thought of getting bit again. I broke through the tree line along the gorge, my friends in relative sight ahead of me. It was still dark, but I could see Sunshine and Violet's horns lighting the way. I ran hard until I caught up with them, the chittering sounds of the spiders fading into obscurity. I stopped, looking back at the tree line.

“We... we lost them,” Violet said, panting loudly. “Are you alright?” I nodded.

“Yeah... Yeah I'm okay,” I said. “Let's keep moving, though. I don't think I want to be around if those things decide to get brave and follow us.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Lilith proclaimed. I smiled weakly. I still felt a little shaky, the adrenaline from the chase finally driving down inside me. We started forward as one, making our way along the gorge and tree line. I pulled out the star-crystal, floating it in front of me to use it as our guide. Eventually we had to break back into the tree line as morning broke. The forest was calm again, the only sounds the normal chatter of insects. I breathed a sigh of relief. I played with my PipBuck's radio as we walked, hoping to pick up some sort of signal, but was unable to. *Must be far outside of the range of the MASEBS towers*, I thought.

The forest swept away at around noon as we finally found ourselves at the foot of a mountain trail heading upwards. The star-crystal pulsed quickly. I remembered that it had pointed at the top of the mountain. I groaned loudly. Even in nature, the Wasteland had some form of stairs. It was a bitch like that. We started up the trail, the heavy sun above us cooking us while we climbed. The path itself was rough, but felt like it had been pony made. It wasn't like the other trails we'd come across. Once or twice we even passed by a metal railing that looked out upon the forest. I stopped at one, taking the opportunity to scan the horizon. I pulled out a pair of binoculars out of my bags, putting them up to my eyes.

There. I saw it. Southeast of our position, was the remains and remnants of the *Overcast*, a Thunderhead class Enclave ship that everypony in the Wasteland knew had been present at the slave leader Red Eye's last stand at... the Cathedral. The complex beside the downed ship was equally

ruined. It's spires, once glorious and regal, now lay broken back at odd angles or even in the middle of the courtyard next to the building. It had no windows that I could see. There didn't seem to be any life out there at all.

"See anything?" Violet said as she stepped up next to me. I floated the binoculars down to her to let her get a look.

"That's where Spark is," I said solemnly. Violet nodded, saying nothing. We stood there for a good few moments before she spoke again.

"I'm... I'm sorry about earlier. I should be happy for you, your ear being fixed and all. It's just... I was so scared I'd lost you that when it happened... I assumed the worst," she said. I smiled, turning to nuzzle her.

"It's alright, Violet. I was scared too. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for scaring you," I said. "I can't... I can't promise I won't do that again. We don't know what facing Spark will bring. But I promise that it will all end well, alright?" My marefriend nodded and I smiled again, giving her a kiss on the cheek. I realized that we were relatively alone, the others having continued slightly up the path.

"We'd better catch up to the others," she said. I nodded. We strode forward together, taking up the rear of our little herd. We talked while we made our way up, talked about each other, about our adventures. Anything to pass the time we had until we reached the top of the mountain. My new ear came up several times, and we all theorized that maybe my hearing could be better with a tainted ear than a regular one. It seemed rather silly to think that, but maybe... just... maybe. Within several hours worth of climbing, and without any issues, we reached the top of the mountain.

As I crested the ridge, I felt the heat first. It was dull, but it was still heavy warmth emanating from the mouth of a large cave set in the peak of the mountain. I grimaced, pulling out the star-crystal. It pulsed brightly now, and I knew that this was where the next shard piece was.

"Everyone hang loose. I'm going to go see what we're dealing with here," I said, flapping my wings and taking to the air. The heat of the cave intensified as I entered. A stray set of words from Twilight's memories echoed in my mind. *Geothermal power? What's that?* I thought, shrugging them off and continuing forward. A rumbling noise stopped me cold mid-air. I turned the corner of the cave entrance, my eyes widening as I saw what was waiting for us inside.

Laying upon a massive mountain of gold, gems, goblets, priceless artifacts, even some technological items such as Steel Ranger armor, was a dark green dragon. At the top of the pile, a single purple shard blinked and pulsed in the darkness.

"Well... shit."

Footnotes:

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

New Perk! T'aint Happenin': You've been hit with a dose of taint that regrew your ear! Your hearing is now 20% cooler.

Violet Iris: Maximum Level Reached!

Steeljack: Maximum Level Reached!

Lilith: Maximum Level Reached!

Chapter 33: Beginning of the End

Phew, this spell's a toughie. But I feel lucky this time! One, two...

Mourning. Mourning is the natural response to death. We all mourn for the loss of another. We all cry and feel the pain that we will never know that friend's voice, their touch, their smile ever again. That they are gone.

I often wonder, did I ever truly mourn the loss of my mother, of my Goddess? I feel like I never did. I wish sometimes that I had. Despite how twisted her minds had become, Trixie's love for us was pure. Twilight's gentle guidance helped us along. Mosaic and Gestalt gave us focus. We all participated in glorious Unity.

But that is no way for ponies to live. Because without emotions, there is no mourning. Friends who are lost are forgotten, not remembered. There is no hope, no desire, no pain. Without pain, ponies can't feel. They can't connect with others.

That wasn't a way I could live. Not anymore. For if I could not remember what is to come next, I would go insane. I would scream and tear at the world until I could *feel*. I would mourn. If I couldn't mourn, I would lose everything. I would not be able to celebrate, to love.

I would die.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the cave, focusing on the purple flickering source of light just below the sleeping form of the dragon. I grimaced, racking my brain for what I knew about dragons. All my reading from Fort Knowledge hadn't covered dragons at all. Twilight's memories were silent on the matter, despite the fact that she herself had a dragon for an assistant. Instead I decided to study the slumbering beast. It's scales were a dark forest green with light green spines running up and down its back. Puffs of smoke bellowed from its nostrils, floating up and out of the top of the mountain.

"Well... shit," I muttered to myself quietly. There had to be a way to get the shard out of there and get away without waking the dragon up. I carefully lit my horn, reaching out across the dreary cave for the pulsing shard. My telekinesis wrapped around it and attempted to lift it carefully from the mounds of gold.

Nothing happened. The dragon shifted in its slumber, the shard moving with it's body. My gaze narrowed at the blinking crystal. It was connected to a chain that was wrapped around one of the dragon's forearms. It was attached! Not only that, it wouldn't even respond to my magic! I nearly cried out in defeat right there. I pulled out the star-crystal from my bag. It was blinking rapidly in time with the shard in the cave. There was no doubt about it, it was definitely another piece of the shard.

A clicking sound drew my attention. My eyes drifted down to my PipBuck. The radiation counter on it was clicking slightly up into the green. I blinked. *Radiation? Here? But there's been no radiation anywhere else in the Everfree...* I thought. I looked back up at the dragon, realizing that it didn't look absolutely perfect. In fact, it was a bit bulgy and gross in some parts of its body. *What the... is it a ghoul? Or just radioactive?* I mused as I pondered the possibility that the radiation was coming from the dragon itself. That was bad. It meant whoever got the closest to take the crystal would have to be able to withstand the rads.

Pocketing the star-crystal, I quietly made my way back to the mouth of the cave where the others waited. I sat down, sighing.

"We've got a big problem," I said. Violet stepped forward, cocking her head.

"What do you mean?" She asked. "Is the shard in there?"

"It's in there alright," I replied. "Along with a nasty looking dragon. In fact, it's attached to a chain that's wrapped around the damn thing's arm."

"A dragon?" Violet said. "What in the heck is a dragon doing all the way up here? I thought most of the

dragons were gone.” I shrugged.

“All I know is that there's one here, and it's asleep. We need to get the shard away from it,” I said.

“So... stealth mission then,” Lilith said. I grimaced, but nodded. “You do know this is you we're talking about here, right? You're not exactly known for stealth.” She grinned. I glared at her.

“Funny, funny,” I said. “There's another problem too. The dragon's emitting some radiation. Whoever gets close to it is going to need to have some Rad-X and RadAway handy.”

“What about levitating the shard away?” Sunshine said. I shook my head.

“Wouldn't work. Tried that already,” I replied.

“Hoard magic,” Violet said. I blinked in confusion, prompting Violet to continue. “Hoard magic. The shard is part of the dragon's hoard, so it can't be removed by magical means. In a sense, it belongs to the dragon. The only way to get it out of there is to physically remove it.”

“How do you know so much?” I said in awe of my marefriend's intellect. Violet snorted.

“Because I read,” she said, a subtle grin playing on her face. “Unlike somepony I know.”

“Hey, I read!” I exclaimed.

“Old Power Ponies comics don't count,” Violet said, sticking out her tongue. I glared at her too. Violet merely rolled her eyes. “Oh, fine. Sorry, sweetheart. You're just too easy to get riled up.”

“Regardless, we need to get this shard away from the dragon, right?” Steeljack interjected. “Who's going to get it?”

“I'll do it,” I said. “I should be able to get close enough if I use my invisibility spell.”

“And when something goes wrong?” Nixis asked, a wry toothy grin on his face. Violet giggled, earning herself another glare.

“If something goes wrong, we'll grab the shard, provide a distraction for the dragon and then high-tail it out of here before it even knows its missing,” I replied, ignoring the statement of 'when' versus 'if'.

“What about us?” Violet said. “What are we supposed to do while you're getting the shard?”

“Stay hidden and watch the dragon. If it wakes up, well... then I guess we'll be running out,” I said. “I'm not really sure we want to fight this thing.”

“Couldn't we... you know... just ask it for the shard?” Sunshine said, her tone hopeful. “Maybe its friendly.”

“Hasn't been a single thing in this forest that's friendly so far,” Steeljack replied gruffly. “Unfortunately, we have to react as if the thing is hostile because if we don't... it will kill us.”

“As much as I applaud wanting to take the diplomatic route,” Violet interjected. “I agree with Steeljack. Dragons aren't well known for their niceties. Especially when it comes to their hoards. They're extremely protective creatures.”

“It's settled then. I'll sneak in, grab the shard, get out,” I said. “Easy peasy lemon breezie.” I unlatched my bags, handing them over to Violet so that they didn't flap around and make any noise while I was walking. I also disengaged Stargazer from its harness, leaving it in my marefriend's capable care. The only thing I kept was the star-crystal in hopes that it would somehow aid me in taking the shard piece.

I trotted lightly over to the cave entrance, flaring my horn. I felt the tingling sensation of my invisibility spell washing over me. I moved forward, veering to the right up the side wall of the cave as I entered. A nook with a platform overlooking the central chamber sat embedded in the wall. I watched as the others carefully and quietly made their way up next to me, using the tiny alcove as a means to watch the dragon. They settled in to keep an eye on things, Violet issuing a Rad-X pill to the others to combat any radiation.

Sneaking my way down to the central floor, I grimaced as I realized the scope of what I was attempting. The dragon's hoard was scattered throughout the cavern haphazardly, piles ranging from tiny molehills of old

Equestrian bits to massive hills of golden trinkets and technological treasures. The broken remains of a several spritebots filled one corner, while at least *two* intact suits of Steel Ranger power armor stood stoically amidst another pile. The dragon rested comfortably on the largest pile, a mountain within a mountain. The closer I moved, I noticed that the dragon was certainly a lot bigger than I'd originally noted. *Just how old do these things get?* I thought as I tip-hoofed between piles of jewels and gold chalices. I reached the edge of the pile the dragon was on, getting a much better look at the beast.

It had to be at least hundreds of years old. I wondered briefly if this dragon had seen the end of the war. My PipBuck was clicking harder now, its meter moving up into the yellow. The radiation this thing was emitting was incredible. It was like its own nuclear reactor! I extended my wings and flapped as silently as I could, bringing myself up the hill without stepping on any of the trinkets or treasures along the way. I found myself directly in front of the creature's left forearm where the chain was attached. The shard piece jingled slightly as the dragon breathed in and out. I reached out, placing a hoof on the shard. It was warm and pulsing, like the star-crystal was. The chain attaching it was silver and gold, glittering in the darkness.

I carefully undid the clasp holding the shard onto the chain, reaching out to grab the shard with my hooves. A loud rumbling sound stopped me as the dragon's body tensed and the shard went dropping down to the bottom of the hill, loud clinking noises following every bounce. I turned slowly to my left, coming face to face with two glowing green eyes.

"A thief," the dragon rumbled loudly. "Seeking my treasure. And such a pretty little thing, too. Pity. I'll have to eat you." My eyes widened. *It can see me?!* I thought frantically. The dragon chuckled darkly.

"Oh, I know that you are there, little thief," it rumbled again, its mouth opening slightly to reveal row after row of glistening teeth. "Now, hold still while I devour you whole." I dropped the invisibility spell as the dragon lunged forward. My wings snapped in, dropping me down onto the pile of gold and coins roughly as the dragon's jaws snapped down. It growled loudly, its eyes following me as I leaped from the pile into the air. I was airborne for a brief moment, the dragon's massive paw slapping me out of the air and towards the cave wall, where I hit with a grunt. The dragon stretched out, its muscular forearms shoving its massive body upright.

"Resilient little thief," it said, its eyes drawn over to the alcove. It sniffed the air. "Little thief brought me dinner. How... appreciative I shall have to be." It snarled loudly as my friends charged down the rough stairs leading down to the central floor. Moments later the alcove ceased to be as the dragon's tail whipped about and smashed it into featureless rubble. Peeling myself off the wall, I heard Steeljack open fire with Tempest's rifle, sharp retorts echoing around the cave. The dragon roared, the piles of golden trinkets shaking under the beast's furious wrath.

"Violet!" I shouted, taking to the sky as my marefriend tossed Stargazer up to me. I caught it in my magical grasp, bringing it to bear at the winged creature. I set off a burst of shots, each one unfortunately bouncing off the dragon's scaly hide. *What?* I thought frantically. *But... Stargazer is supposed to be able to hurt even Discord! Why is it not working for me now?!* It roared again, turning its attention towards me. I felt the air around me sucked in. My eyes widened as the beast's maw expelled a gout of bright green flame right at me that illuminated the entire cavern. I panicked, calling forth Shining Armor's shield into existence as the flames reached me. I bounced away under the explosive pressure, my PipBuck screaming into the red. A rush of energy filled my body as the radiation did, strengthening the shield and keeping me from being burned to a crispy bit on the floor.

The dragon's fire cut off as the beast was distracted by fire from a different source. Violet shot Thunder Flash, kicking out bright streams of silver at the creature. They too, bounced off the dragon's hide, but at least distracted it from firebreathing. I grimaced, dismissing the shield and scanning the cavern for the shard. Its gleam couldn't be seen from where I was flying. In the distance, Lilith was up in the air as well. The Bitch wound up, its whining sound ringing clear across the cavern as it delivered its payload. The dragon, without batting an eye, reached up and swatted the projectile out of the air, sending it soaring towards the nearest cavern wall, where Nixis and Sunshine stood. Several large rocks plummeted towards the two, only to meet vines that sprouted from the ground, protecting the unicorn and hellhound.

I soared down, firing off another burst of shots that proved to be just as ineffective as they were the first time I'd tried. My PipBuck's rad-meter had returned to clicking normally as the dragon wheeled around and tried to strike me with its tail. I flew up, barely missing the heavily spiked appendage. *This is crazy!* I thought, spinning about and firing again. Again, the bullets bounced off. *How in the hell are we supposed to stop this thing if I can't even hurt it?!* The thought of what Twilight had told me rung through my mind. The star-crystal shard was an energy source of some sort. Even incomplete, could I use it to power up Stargazer?

Would it even work? I had to try. I floated out the star-crystal, looking for a place on the gun's chassis where it would fit. A compartment on the side opened up, revealing a hollowed outline of a six-pointed star. *Of course she would,* I thought as I realized it reminded me of Twilight's cutie mark. I slid the crystal into place, closing the compartment. I took aim at the dragon, who was preoccupied with slashing at Lilith. I pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. Stargazer didn't even fire. It sat there, and I pulled the trigger again and again. Still, nothing shot out of the gun's barrels. I growled, opening the compartment and pulling out the star-crystal. It came out infuriatingly easy. I lifted Stargazer again, pocketing the crystal. It hadn't even worked at all! I pulled the trigger once more, and still nothing happened. I looked at my E.F.S., wondering what in the actual hell was happening. Several messages popped up in the upper left hand side of my vision.

Incompatible Power Source Detected...

Stargazer system has failed to load compatibility module...

Reboot Required...

Shit! I thought frantically. Not only had I managed to make the crystal not work with it, but I'd also somehow shut down Stargazer's systems and made it not work either! I realized I didn't even know how to reboot it. Without Patch around to look at it, I was dead in the water as far as firearms technology was concerned. I latched the gun to my harness, intent on looking at it later. I turned my attention back to the dragon. It was still attempting to slash at Lilith, who had continued to elude it by zipping back and forth erratically. I dove down, putting all my effort into a sharp buck at the dragon's snout. It felt like I was striking solid rock. Pulling away, I landed on the cavern floor next to Violet, groaning loudly.

"Star!" My marefriend exclaimed. "Are you alright?"

"Stargazer's shut down, none of our attacks are working," I replied. "We need to find the shard and get the hell out of here."

"I think I know where it is," Violet said, pointing with her metal hoof. I followed her gaze, seeing the blinking shard underneath the dragon's stout legs. It bounced with the dragon's stomps, but the creature refused to budge from the spot. It was still trying to blast Lilith out of the air, massive blasts of fire that barely missed the nimble mare. She was getting tired and I knew it. I groaned ever louder. No wonder I couldn't see the shard from the sky! It was under the stinking dragon!

"Great, how do we get it away from there. Not like I can just fly in and grab it without him noticing it," I said.

"We need a distraction," Violet said coolly. "You let me deal with that. You grab the shard and then teleport us back outside the cave."

"Teleport?" I said. I knew how much Violet hated teleporting. Violet grimaced.

"Yes! No time, just get ready to go!" She shouted, charging forward and sending several blasts of silver at the dragon's legs. The beast roared in response, exhaling a stream of green flame that melted a pile of gold near her. I growled, taking to the air again next to Lilith, who'd gained a reprieve from Violet's attack. I scanned the area. Steeljack, Sunshine, and Nixis were still together, now waving and jumping up and down to get the dragon's attention. Violet had made her way over to the forefront, using Thunder Flash to lure the dragon in.

"Little thieves... such pretty little trinkets you have... Razorfang will HAVE THEM!!!" The dragon snarled loudly. Then... it grew bigger. I blinked. It was a minimal amount of growth, but it grew bigger all the

same. It snarled and snapped as it reached out with its claws to slam down on my friends. I flared my horn, casting Shining Armor's shield spell over them as the claws came down. They impacted hard, but the purple barrier held. I grunted, leaning into the pain of maintaining the shield. This was not going according to plan! The dragon reared back, preparing to unleash a blast of flame upon the shield. I panted, the earlier attacks having drained my magic enough that I couldn't hold Shining Armor's shield. I needed to do something. Snapping my wings in, I came into a dive, desperately reaching out with my telekinesis and slamming the dragon's jaws shut. It snarled flame, goutts of green pulsing out of the corners of its mouth as the massive beast whipped its head towards me.

"Grab the shard!" I shouted, releasing my hold on the dragon's jaws. Green flame shot out, barely missing me as I dropped like a stone towards the ground. It impacted with the ceiling, turning it into molten rock almost immediately. My eyes widened. I really didn't relish getting burned up by that fire! My friends were on the move again, hopping over the piles of metal and gold towards the blinking shard. Violet reached it first, picking it up with her hooves. The dragon's attention turned instantly, roaring loudly.

"MINE!" It snarled and snapped, as if it somehow knew that Violet had picked it up. *Hoard magic, remember? Violet said so*, I thought.

"Violet! Toss the shard up into the air and get everyone out of here!" I called out. I soared downwards as Violet threw the shard up. I managed to latch onto it, grabbing the blinking crystal with my forehooves. The dragon roared again as I lurched into the air, the shard pinned to my chest. "Come and get me you overgrown lizard!"

"I will KILL YOU, THIEF!" The dragon howled. "Your bones will serve as lovely toothpicks when I am finished with you!"

"First time I've ever been called a toothpick!" I called back, teasingly. "Let's see if you got the skills to pay the bills!" I turned and twisted through the air, flapping my wings as hard as I could. I felt the air drop out behind me as another blast of flame hit the wall next to me. I cringed, pushing forward. The rad meter on my PipBuck was blazing now this close to the flame without a shield. It gave me the strength I needed to keep moving. I was glad that I'd told the others to get out of here. Several blasts of silver told me that Violet at least, hadn't listened. I groaned. The sound of gunfire renewed itself, attempting to draw the dragon's attention away from me. *No! Go run! I'll be fine!* I thought frantically. The dragon turned to where my friends stood, near the rear of the cave. He growled loudly, stomping forward.

"Little thief's friends are annoying, Razorfang SMASH!!" He roared. I grimaced as I stopped in mid-air. I couldn't use Stargazer, and the radiation was bleeding off as fast as I was accruing it to be useful. We were stuck. I could only do so much to keep the dragon's attention before it decided that killing my friends was easier. I did the only thing I could think of. I flew down and landed next to my friends.

"This doesn't belong to you!" I shouted, lifting the shard so he could see it. "We didn't even want to fight you in the first place!"

"Star, what the hell are you doing?!" Violet exclaimed. I lifted a hoof, silencing her.

"Razorfang! That's your name isn't it? You can understand me?" I asked. The dragon snarled and roared, but wasn't moving forward.

"Razorfang! Yes... I am Razorfang! My hoard! MINE!" It replied. I narrowed my gaze at the green monster.

"I don't want any of your horde, just this," I said, shaking the shard a bit. "And only this. Maybe we can offer a trade?"

"Little thief wants to trade? Little thief will die for its impertinence," Razorfang snarled. The dragon opened his mouth, sucking the air in around him.

"Star... now would be a good time for a teleport..." Violet said, nudging me. I nodded, starting to flare my horn. I was about to cast the spell, the dragon's mouth ready to open to unleash its torrent of flame before a single gunshot rang through the air. A bullet impacted the dragon's right eye, blasting the glittering orb into a

ruined crater. Blood spurted from the wound, spilling forth over onto the dragon's face. I blinked. *I recognize that gunshot!* I thought as my eyes turned towards the source of the sound.

“Leave. My. Friends. ALONE!” A mare's voice called out, followed by the sharp retort of a gun we all knew too well. Para Bellum. My eyes widened as I realized that sitting on the top of a nook near the entrance to the cave was none other than Patch herself. The one-eyed green mare had her sniper rifle resting on the rock, its barrel smoking. She fired again, hitting the dragon in the neck. It punched through the heavy scales like a knife through butter, the dragon howling loudly in pain. Standing next to Patch was a female hellhound. Avira. I blinked, realizing the how of her arrival, if not the why.

“Patch?” Steeljack said, his visor retracting back. I realized quickly that this was our chance.

“Everyone, get going to the cave entrance,” I said.

“I'll go and help Patch and Avira,” Steeljack said quickly, charging off towards where his love was. I couldn't quite see Patch too well from where we stood. Was she still pregnant? Why did she come here of all places? I didn't know, but I didn't have time to think about it as I followed behind the others. I stopped near the entrance hall, looking up at where the grey stallion stood next to Avira.

“Steely?” Patch said. “Get out of here, there's no time!” She returned to her scope, firing off another shot with Para Bellum at the angered dragon. The cave trembled underneath the monster's fury as it managed to pick itself back up off the ground. It glared directly at where we were standing. Steeljack looked up, cursing under his breath.

“Patch, we've gotta go. You shouldn't be here!” He replied loudly. My eyes widened as I realized why. Patch *was* still pregnant. Not only that, she was *very* pregnant. Her belly was swollen and she looked strained. Her mane was ragged and frayed, and she was devoid of her normal barding. I doubted that it even fit anymore.

“Don't worry about me! I can get out of here just fine!” Patch said, taking another shot, this time missing the dragon, which was stomping across the cave. I flew up to the nook, landing in between them. Avira made her way down the stairs to follow after Nixis, who waved as the others galloped out of the cave. I nodded, letting her go.

“Star, get Patch out of here, now!” Steeljack said. I nodded, reaching out with my hoof and placing it on Patch's shoulder.

“Come on, my friend. We got what we came for,” I said softly. Patch glared, but finally relented, nodding as she allowed me to pull Para Bellum up for her in my magic. The mare's single eye widened as she realized that Steeljack was no longer next to us. He was down in the cave center, sending shot after shot with Tempest's rifle at the dragon.

“Steeljack, what are you doing?!” I called out. Steeljack lifted a hoof.

“Get her out of here! I'll distract it!” He called back. Patch started to call out, but the grey stallion continued on. “No arguments! I'm not going to let that thing get you. I love you, Patch. Now GO!” Patch turned to me frantically.

“Teleport, teleport!” She said, tears forming in her good eye. “Star, please!” I nodded, bringing my magic to bear. I heard the dragon roar, and felt the air in the cavern drop away. I glanced up, noticing the dragon was aiming right at us. There was going to be no time to cast a teleport and get away from that. It would incinerate us. I shuddered as I pushed into the spell, but my magic was starting to get weak from using it too much.

A sharp retort cut through the still air, the bullet from Tempest's rifle striking the dragon unerringly in its neck where it was still bleeding. The dragon halted its breathing and roared, turning its attention to Steeljack. The stallion leaped forward, peppering the beast with another round of shots.

“Hey, you! Yeah, you. Ugly! Leave my marefriend alone!” He shouted, stomping his forehoof into the ground. The dragon snarled in response.

“Steeljack!!” Patch cried out. Steeljack's visor pulled back, grimacing.

“Star, I told you, get her out of here!” He yelled. Patch scrambled up to get Para Bellum back onto the ledge, sending a series of shots at the dragon that ultimately went wide. Steeljack leaped into action, moving to the side of the cavern around the dragon while firing to keep the dragon's attention. The dragon roared, turning towards the gray stallion.

“Thieves! Stealing my treasures! I will crush you! I will burn your bones to a charred crisp!” The dragon called out. Patch fumbled with her weapon, the sniper rifle clattering underneath her shaky hooves. My PipBuck chattered at me, letting me know that the radiation levels were still steady. I had to do something. I had to get Patch out of here, but Steeljack...

“Patch, we need to get out of here!” I shouted. The green mare shook her head furiously.

“Not without him!” She croaked. “Come on Star, you gotta get him out of there!” I grimaced, glancing across the cave, through the piles of molten metal and blackened treasure. In a short matter of time, the dragon had done worse damage to his own hoard than we could have ever done ourselves. He was clearly mentally unhinged and not willing to listen to reason. Steeljack... he couldn't stand up to that. I realized that he knew something, something else that he thought we didn't. *The venom*, I thought, my eyes widening. Did he perhaps think that the venom would eventually kill him? That the antidote hadn't worked after all? I pursed my lips, nodding. I wouldn't let Steeljack give his life away like this. He deserved to live, to see his foals, to be happy. He deserved it more than anypony I'd ever known.

“I can try again. It might take me some time though,” I said. Patch nodded frantically. My horn sparked, the magic for the teleport spell building up again. I started to envelop all of us in its throes, but Steeljack was moving very quickly. Teleporting an erratically moving target was highly difficult, and it wasn't like I could restrain him. The grey stallion looked up at us, and more specifically... Patch. He mouthed something I couldn't understand. His visor closed up and he resumed his assault on the dragon, focusing on the beast's existing wounds. I leaned into my quivering weak magic, finally getting a lock on him. I was in the process of casting the spell when I heard it.

The air sucked out of the cave, and a blaze of green flame erupted from the great beast's maw. Steeljack disappeared in a boiling maelstrom of balefire. My spell broke in half in the sound that came next.

Steeljack *screamed*. It was the most horrifying sound I'd ever heard in my entire life. *No... No no no no no no!* I thought as Patch howled from beside me. Tears were streaming from her good eye and she was crawling up to get Para Bellum back into place. *Steeljack! We need to... I need to... FUCK!!!*

I turned, tears spilling forth from my eyes as my horn reassembled another spell in the back of my mind. I roared, casting it on the dragon. The anti-gravity spell took hold immediately, ripping the dragon from the cavern floor and sending it flailing unceremoniously towards the roof of the cave. It slammed into it with a tumultuous crash, sending shockwaves through the mountain. The dragon's fire cut off, revealing Steeljack.

The stallion was standing still, the armor that was Tempest smoking. I shouted for him, but he did not move. I roared in anger, a spike of pain coming from my horn as I forced the teleportation spell. Time and space fell through and we reappeared outside the cavern near the others. I turned to the cave entrance. The gravity spell wasn't likely to last, and the dragon would definitely leave the cave to get to us. I had no choice but to seal it in. I snarled, ripping stone by stone from the entrance. The others were shouting, I couldn't hear them. I had to stop this. No pony else would... No... I couldn't think like that. Steeljack had to be fine! He just had to be! I couldn't accept that he was... he was...

The dragon came wheeling around the corner, roaring loudly as the last stone I needed came free. The entire mouth of the cave came tumbling down, collapsing on top of the massive green monster. It howled as dust and debris struck its already serious wounds, struggling to get free of the avalanche. It wasn't enough. Soon, nothing but rock and rubble covered where the cave had been.

“Steeljack!!!” I heard someone cry out. It must have been Patch. I turned, almost as if on auto-pilot. Violet was with her, kneeling next to where Steeljack had fallen from the teleport. Her horn was glowing furiously, ripping apart Tempest with fierce determination. She cried out as she removed the helmet.

“No... no dammit... NO!” Violet shouted, her voice choking. I stepped over, unsure why. I needed to know. I needed to see. He couldn't be... he couldn't... no... I wouldn't accept it...

Violet was ripping at her saddlebags now, a constellation of healing potions flowing out on her magic. At some point, Lilith and Avira had stepped up and were hanging on Patch. The green mare was calling out her lover's name over and over, as if to call him back from the gentle clutch of... No... I couldn't say it... He wasn't...

I stepped up and saw him. The charred remains of Tempest lay scattered around him. Not that it mattered. There was no recognizable difference. Steeljack's grey coat had been *melted*. My PipBuck clicked in his presence, leftover rads from the dragon's fury. His mane and tail had been completely singed away, and his face... Oh Goddesses... his face... It was when I saw his face that I knew... that he was...

Steeljack... was dead. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. Violet was trying her best to heal him, but it wasn't going to work. The damage had already been done. I lifted a hoof to her shoulder, stopping her from pulling out another healing potion. She'd already tried to fit one in his... mouth.

“Violet.”

“No, no no! I need to save him! He's going to be alright!” She cried out.

“Violet!” I said sharply, stopping her cold. I pulled her in and embraced her, my own tears finally spilling forth from my face. “He's... he's gone. Violet, stop, he's gone. He's gone.”

“S-S-S-Star...” Violet said. I pulled away, crawling over to where Patch was being tended to by Avira and Lilith. Nixis and Sunshine stood vigilant, their own expressions ones of loss and sadness. I grabbed Patch, prostrating myself before her.

“P-P-Patch,” I stuttered. “Patch... I'm... I'm so... I'm sorry...” Patch said nothing, returning the embrace as we both let out sobs of pain and suffering. “I should have been faster... I should have...” Patch clung to me tighter, sobbing harder. She looked at me, her eye red and puffy.

“He knew,” she said finally. “He knew... He knew he was... going to die. He gave his life. Why? Why did he do that? Why?!”

“I don't know... I don't... I should have saved him, Patch...” I said. Patch shook her head. I knew why. She had told me already once before. It wasn't truly me that had caused it. But I sure as hell felt like it was. Right then, I'm sure that she felt the same as I did.

“Not... not your fault, Star. He knew... knew the risks. He knew what could happen,” she said, choking on her tears. “I knew them too. But he's... he's *gone* Star... He's really gone, isn't he?” I nodded, tears streaming out of my own eyes. “We... we need to bury him. We can't just... just leave him like that...” I nodded again, pulling myself from the green mare and standing. She was right. We had to bury him. We couldn't leave him here. He deserved better. He deserved... I slumped to my haunches next to Patch. We sat there for what felt like forever, and cried.

I stood over the hole by myself, scraping out piles of dirt and rock with my aching magic. It was a nice little part of the cliff that overlooked the entire forest. The others were still in the back of the clearing with Patch and Steeljack's body. I had volunteered to handle digging the grave. I had to. Patch was a right mess, and my own tears had all dried up hours ago. A throbbing headache pulsed at the base of my horn and echoed in my entire body as I continued to dig. I felt horrible.

Steeljack was gone, and there hadn't been a single thing I could do to get him out of there. Was it my fault? I had managed to stop the dragon from breathing, but just a little too late. The damage had been done. Had Steeljack known? I didn't see how he could have. He was too busy worrying about Patch.

Patch. I wondered how she must be feeling. Would we have all made it out alive if she hadn't shown up? I sighed. I couldn't think that way. Patch had saved us. If she hadn't shown up... we'd have all been dead. Instead, now it was just Steeljack who'd died. Steeljack... who'd given himself up so that his love could be

safe.

I hated it. I cursed the very ground I now dug up to bury him. Steeljack didn't deserve to die. He deserved to live. He was supposed to be happy! But... the reality of it was that he did die. And the dead don't come back to life. Or did they? Twilight had come very close to casting her spell that nearly resurrected Shining Armor. But it required another pony's body. Could I do that to somepony? Steal their body and force Steeljack's spirit into it? *No*, I decided. *I could never do that to him. He wouldn't let me. He'd just smile and say that everything was alright. Well it's not alright... It's just... It's not!* I knew deep in my heart though that the spell wouldn't help. It wouldn't really bring back Steeljack. It wouldn't allow his spirit to move on. I had to let him go, to find peace.

I don't recall how long I actually stood there, staring at a deep hole in the ground before I felt Violet tap me on the shoulder. I jolted out of my numbness to look down at her. She nodded at me solemnly. Her eyes were red and puffy, much like everyone else's were. I glanced back to see Nixis carrying the body. He was trying to restrain himself, but I could tell that he too was hit hard by this. Steeljack and he had forged their friendship in the heart of combat at Colter Field, and the respect the hellhound carried for his friend was truly strong. Avira walked beside him, keeping a paw on him for support. Her expression was pained as well, as if she herself had felt every ounce of Nixis' love for his friend.

Nixis gently laid the body down into the cold earth. It looked as though Sunshine and Violet had wrapped him in some of the gauze we'd found at the star spider station. He looked... peaceful. Tempest had been completely stripped from him, the rifle and charred helmet floating off to the side in Sunshine's magic. Lilith and Patch appeared, stepping up next to Nixis as I flared my horn, returning the dirt to the earth it came from and covering Steeljack forever. When the grave was covered, I floated a large rock from the collapsed cave entrance and placed it over top. Tempest's rifle and his helmet rested against it now. My magic flared up once more, and it was as if the pain in my horn seared the words into the flat side of the rock.

HERE LIES STEELJACK.

FRIEND. LOVER. FATHER.

FOREVER AT PEACE

"Steeljack... we first met at the NCR Hotel in Filly," Patch said, breaking the cold silence that filled the air. Her voice was weak, but it didn't matter. We listened. "He... he was so nice to me, and eventually we found ourselves with a lot of spare time on our hooves." She chuckled slightly. "We all know how that turned out. He cared, a lot more than anypony ever realized. He didn't say much, and I know that his kids would have been proud to have him as... as a father." She broke down, crying some more as Lilith pulled her in close for a hug.

"Steeljack would have been a great dad," Violet said softly. "He would have done anything to protect them from the Wasteland, just as he did for Patch." Another awkward silence descended upon us.

"True friendships are forged in fire and hardships," Nixis spoke finally. "Steeljack gave me the opportunity to be a better dog, to shake off the mantle of the slave. He taught me to be a friend. He will be missed and regaled in the tales of my kind for centuries to come." Avira nodded silently.

"I didn't know him that well," Sunshine admitted. "But he was always very nice to me. I miss him already." Everyone looked up to me, expecting me to say something.

"Goodbye Steeljack," I simply said. "You were a true friend. On your grave, I vow that I will protect your foals and their mother with my very life."

"Me too," Lilith said. "I know that.. that I wasn't always very nice, and especially not so nice to Patch. But I will make sure that she and her foals will live long and healthy lives. I owe that to Steeljack. He was a great stallion, and I will miss him so much." I nodded, turning to look down at Patch.

"And that means that you should not be here. You should be back in Ponyville with Avira," I said shortly. Patch sighed, pulling away from Lilith.

"I... I couldn't just leave you guys," she said softly. "I had to do my part. Avira only just helped me here." I

smiled as best as I could manage.

“You still saved us from the dragon, Patch. I'm... I'm not angry that you're here. What happened... what happened is nopony's fault. Not even yours,” I said. “Steeljack gave everything to protect you, and now I will do what I must to keep you safe. We're going back to Ponyville to resupply and take you back.”

“I agree with the Ministry Mare, young Patch,” Avira said, stepping up and placing a paw on the green mare's shoulder. “As I said many times throughout our journey here. Your condition is rapidly approaching it's ultimate conclusion, and you should not be out shooting dragons. You should be in bed.” Patch nodded numbly.

“It's settled then,” I said. “We'll make camp here tonight, since it's a relatively safe spot where we have height advantage, and then we'll head for Ponyville tomorrow morning.” The others nodded. Sunshine and Lilith trudged towards the clearing along with Patch. I stayed put, my eyes drifting down to the gravestone. I sighed, slumping to my haunches while the others made their bedrolls up. Only Violet remained. She tried to smile, but I knew that she couldn't.

“Are you alright?” She managed to ask. I shook my head. “Do you want to come to bed?”

“I think I'm gonna stay here for a little bit, Violet,” I said softly. “I need to think about some things...” Violet winced, but nodded all the same.

“Alright,” she said, trotting off towards the others. I lay down next to the gravestone, mulling over my thoughts. I had to wonder if Twilight's resurrection spell really could work. Maybe there was a problem with it? Maybe that's why it didn't work in the first place! Maybe I could fix it! A delirious fantasy of me fixing the Wasteland's problems with a single spell washed over me as I fell asleep. There was one pony who would know if I could do this, and I had to speak with her.

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I opened my eyes, standing up immediately. The door to the library lay before me, slightly ajar already. Twilight was expecting me? I stepped forward, pushing the door open and making my way into the library. Twilight was where I expected she'd be, sitting in the library, a book floating in front of her. She peered around it, rolling her eyes.

“I thought you would show up,” she said. “Have a seat, Star.” I plopped down across the main room from her, narrowing my gaze at her.

“You expected me? Why?” I asked. Twilight lowered the book, nodding.

“You seek something that is beyond your control,” she said. “Of course you would come to me about it.”

“The resurrection spell,” I said. “Will it work? Can I bring him back?” Twilight pursed her lips, shaking her head slowly.

“I'm sorry. The resurrection spell is... it's evil, Star. Pure and incarnate. Alicorn magic is powerful, and not to be trifled with,” she said. “Besides... even if it could work, it requires a body. Do you have a healthy body that you could bring Steeljack's soul back into?” I grimaced.

“I don't,” I said. “But maybe that's the problem... maybe we can fix the spell, make it better?”

“No, Star. You must accept the reality of the situation,” Twilight replied. “Your friend is gone. His soul is beyond the veil now. Much like Shining Armor's was.”

“What do you mean?” I said, cocking my head.

“Souls pass from this world onto the next, Star. They are guided into the Summer Lands, the eternal resting place of all ponies. To pierce that veil is to steal the authority of a Goddess,” Twilight explained. “Once a soul has passed the veil, it is too late.”

“But you almost succeeded with Shining, right?” I said. Twilight shook her head.

“Shining's soul was already gone by the time I sealed Spark. Spark led me on, making me think that I could do it,” she said. “But it was only a ploy to get me to cast the spell to give her a body. Shining was dead. His

soul passed the veil. The spell can only acquire a soul that has yet to pass on, which is incredibly rare.” I blinked. My thoughts turned to a specific green mare who had done that very thing. Lucky. I’d gotten her killed, and yet her spirit persisted. Did that mean there was a chance for her? Could I bring her back? I grunted, returning my attention back to Twilight.

“Steeljack wouldn’t have passed on,” I said defiantly. “He’d want us to try and save him!” Twilight scoffed.

“By all accounts, Star. Your friend would have passed on. You were safe, his lover was safe. His unborn foals, safe. He did what he did to save them,” she said. “That in itself, is a good death.”

“There’s no such thing as a ‘good’ death,” I snarled. “What was I thinking, coming here and asking you about this? You won’t help.”

“I’m sorry, Star. You know as well as I do that what I’m saying is right,” Twilight countered. “You cannot bring your friend back to life anymore than I was able to with Shining.” I scowled, hanging my head.

“I just thought that... maybe there might have been a chance,” I replied, feeling a little defeated. Twilight looked away for a moment.

“Did you know that my brother had a son?” She said softly. My ears perked up as I looked up at her. I shook my head. She sighed, but continued. “My nephew. He was such a lovely little unicorn. He was their only child. He was so talented. When the war started in full swing, he joined my Ministry.”

“What... what happened to him?” I asked.

“I don’t know... he died most likely. Or became a ghoul. Either way, my point is... I know how you feel, Star. I wanted badly to save Shining Armor. I wanted it so bad I fell for Spark’s trap,” she said. “A trap that took two hundred years for me to finally rectify.” I nodded, looking down at the ground for a moment. A long awkward silence descended upon us.

“Twilight?” I said finally, breaking the silence. The lavender mare met my own gaze. “When I faced Honesty... she told me that I might need to seal Spark away. Using... using *that* spell.” Twilight’s gaze narrowed at me.

“I see,” she said coolly. “You know that defeating Spark is what is required. Once Spark is out of the picture, I will be able to fix things properly.” I grimaced, unsure of what she meant by that last remark. All I wanted was for this to be over, to be able to go home, wherever that was now. It had been so long ago that I’d left Fort Knowledge, did I truly belong there anymore? With Steeljack gone... where did any of us belong?

“I... I will do what is necessary,” I said. “If Spark is to be sealed, then I will do it. But not before I try talking to her first. If she can be convinced --”

“No, Star,” Twilight said, cutting me off. “Spark can never be convinced. She is dangerous and evil, and she must be stopped at all costs.” I glared at her. At all costs? At all costs didn’t include losing one of my closest friends. Twilight’s horn glowed, bringing the book she had been reading back up to face level. “Now then, if that is all you have... I have some reading to finish.” I sighed, nodding and turning back towards the library door. I stopped in the frame.

“What was his name?” I said. Twilight peeked out from behind the book.

“What?” She asked in return.

“His name. Your nephew. What was his name?” I repeated.

“Star Gazer, why?” She replied. I blinked. Saying nothing, I turned back into the doorway and stepped into the void.

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My eyes shot open and I realized I was still resting near Steeljack’s grave. It was a little cold, but the sun was quickly peeking out from behind the clouds. I thought about the last question I’d asked Twilight. Her nephew was Star Gazer. That name ringed all sorts of bells. He was the one who’d designed my weapon. No wonder she had known so much about it. She’d asked her own nephew to build it!

My eyes drifted to the now inert firearm. It had yet to come back online after I'd tried to use the shard to power it. I wondered if I had broken it. My eyes forced open even wider. The shard! I'd completely forgotten about the second piece. I turned my eyes back towards the gravestone. It was understandable why, but even Steeljack would have agreed that I needed to keep moving forward. As much my heart ached, as much as I wished he was still here... He wasn't here, and I was going to have to accept that. There was no magic spell, no cure. Nothing, other than our memories of him, that could keep him alive.

Opening my saddlebags, I lifted out the star-crystal and the shard I'd collected from the dragon's cave. Focusing my magic on both, I felt the surge of energy rush up between them as they began to merge. The star-crystal changed again, gaining a few more points around it. It shimmered in the darkness as its light shot up into the sky once more. I knew this part. I stood, the light covering everything as far as the eye could see. It flickered, changing again. The Everfree Forest of old sat in all its splendor before me. In the distance I could see a castle, in my time and place the Cathedral. Even during whatever time this crystal was showing me the castle was in ruins. Then the crystal flickered again, returning me to the Wasteland that was my home.

Picking up speed and intensity, the star-crystal strobed this time, sending a pulsing beam of energy out into the forest. The final piece of the shard was located downwards and deeper. I couldn't quite see what it was pointing to, just the edge of several ruined structures. I narrowed my gaze as the beam dissipated. I knew that just like before, I'd been the only one to see the light. It was light in my mind, not in the real world. *Just what is this thing?* I thought. *Twilight claimed it was a power source, but it's unlike nothing I've ever seen before! The power pulsing through it is insane!*

I pocketed the star-crystal, pushing myself up into a standing position. The others didn't appear to be awake yet, although I didn't see where Violet was laying. I tip-hoofed over, checking on Patch. She and Lilith had fallen asleep next to each other, the black mare extending a wing over to help keep the earth pony warm.

Patch herself... didn't look good. I wondered how much more radiation she had accrued in the dragon cave. Doctor Rot had been off by a wide margin. Patch's foals were coming, and they would be here a lot sooner than any of us could have even believed. Was it some side effect of the radiation? Or something else?

"Star?" I heard a voice whisper. I turned to see Violet. She was standing at the far edge of the clearing, Thunder Flash hanging off of its harness. I made my way across our camp, coming to rest next to her.

"Sorry, I kind of fell asleep," I said softly. Violet smiled.

"We noticed. We've been taking turns keeping watch. It's been my turn for a few hours," she said.

"Thankfully there's been no issues."

"Good," I said, trotting past her to glance over at the gravestone again. "Hard to believe."

"It is," Violet simply replied. "It's only been a few months, I know... but it feels like I knew him for well... forever."

"Violet?" I said, drawing her attention. "Patch isn't looking so good. I'm worried that her foals might come sooner than we can get back to Ponyville." My love nodded thoughtfully.

"It's certainly possible. I looked over her last night, and she seems healthy enough," she said. "She's handling this far better than everyone else is... than even *I* am."

"Patch is a lot stronger than anyone gives her credit for," I replied. "I suspect however, she's bottling that pain inside. She's going to self-implode before too long if she keeps it up." Violet grimaced.

"We're never going to forget him, are we?" She said.

"Never," I said. "He helped us get away. He saved Patch. He was a hero." I sighed heavily. "And for a moment there, I thought about the possibility of bringing him back to life."

"You... what?" Violet asked, her eyes wide. I nodded.

"It's... it's not possible though. Steeljack... he would have moved on. He wouldn't have stuck around in spirit form," I said. "Like... like Lucky." Violet scowled.

"But Lucky is merged with Spark," she said.

"But if I can separate her... maybe I could fix that mistake. Twilight might be able to help with that," I said, staring off the side of the cliff into the drab forest. "Maybe I can give her a second chance."

"Well... okay," Violet said. "Just be careful, Star. You know how much I hate this whole Twilight business." I nodded. "Speaking of, did you find out where the next shard pieces is at? You said there was... one more to get?"

"It's somewhere in the forest," I said. "Some ruins out there. It'll have to wait. Getting Patch back to Ponyville safely should be our top priority. Plus, we're all going to need to stock up on food and medical supplies." Flapping wings caught my ears, perking them forward to listen better. "Violet... you hear that?"

"Yeah..." Violet said. "What is --"

"Well, now... I was told that you were all sorts of tough, so-called... Ministry Mare," a voice from above called, loud enough to wake the rest of my friends from the clearing behind us. My eyes shot to the sky, blood-red as they were, and focused on the mare that had spoken. It was a light blue alicorn, hovering in mid-air over the forest. A red glowing gem sat in her chest, and her mane and tail were chromatic in nature. A wicked little smirk graced her sharp face.

"Let's play a little game, shall we?" She crowed.

"Who are you?" My voice rang out across the mountain clearing. My tone was very throaty, thanks to the amount of crying I had been doing. The others were still, watching intently. I was angry. Angrier than I'd ever been in my entire life. I had just buried a close friend, and now one of these... these things shows up? It wasn't right. The cyan alicorn hovered impassively in the air.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm Loyalty, otherwise known as Obsession," she said, her pale eyes gleaming. It was an Element, of course. Loyalty... Rainbow Dash. If this golem thing was anything like its spirit's bearer, we were all well and truly fucked. I kept thinking, trying to figure out why only one of these things kept showing up at a time. Maybe Spark needed the others to keep searching for the remaining shard fragment. I shuddered to think of what would happen if the other three Elements just suddenly showed up out of nowhere. We wouldn't survive.

"Fuck off," I retorted angrily. Obsession's mouth turned into a coy grin.

"Such language," she said. "You really are something, you know that? Putting down Deceit like that? That takes some skill. I'm almost impressed."

"I don't... I don't care," I said. "Leave me alone. Go run and tell Spark I'm through playing her sick little games, and that I'm coming for her. As soon as I have the last piece of the shard... I'll be paying her a nice little visit."

"No can do. And for the record, I'm here because I wanted to see what you had that took down Deceit," Obsession replied, yawning. "I could give two shits about what Spark is up to."

"I thought you represented Loyalty?" Violet managed to say. Obsession chuckled.

"Loyalty? I'm loyal, alright. Loyal to only one thing... myself," she said, her expression darkening as she narrowed her gaze at me. "Now then, from where I'm sitting I'm not seeing anything absolutely special. So, how about a game?"

"Fuck your games," I snarled. "Come here and let's get this over with." Violet looked at me, grimacing.

"Star?" She said cautiously. I lifted a hoof, waving her off.

"Don't worry. You guys stay here. I'll be done shortly," I said, lifting into the air with a flap of my wings. Obsession grinned.

"Excellent," she said. "The rules are simple. You, me, and a flight race." I nearly reached out and strangled her, or shot her, but after remembering that Stargazer was out of commission I knew the latter wasn't an option. I'd just lost somepony close to me and this bitch wanted to challenge me to a fucking race?! I

growled under my breath.

“Or I could just skip the race and kill you now,” I said flatly. Obsession looked... amused?

“You’re forgetting the best part,” she said. “If you win, I’ll tell you all you want to know about Spark. I’m sure you want to know what she’s up to, right?” I grimaced. She had me there. I needed to understand Spark, and how I could save her without using the sealing spell that Twilight created. If Obsession knew anything about Spark it was worth finding out. *Besides... playing along might get you close enough to cast the memory spell in the first place*, I thought. I finally nodded, slipping my gear off and floating it towards the ground where Violet caught it in her magic. I gave her a slight nod as well, indicating that I’d be okay.

“Alright...” I said. “We’ll do this your way.”

“Good. The rules are quite simple. You just need to beat me over to that other mountain range and back,” Obsession said, pointing at the second mountain peak further up the range. I blinked. It had to be over a mile away, at least!

“When do we start?” I snorted. Obsession responded by flaring her horn, summoning into existence a single stop light. I rolled my eyes. “Seriously?” The bulb flared to life, a bright red against the early morning sky.

“Starting positions,” Obsession said wryly, hovering up higher into the air level with the light. I did the same, forming a second lane next to the other alicorn. The light changed to a bright amber. I narrowed my gaze at it. Five seconds passed before it turned green. I shot forward, flapping my wings as hard as I could. I looked to my side briefly, seeing nothing but sky. Obsession was nowhere near me, or even in front of me. I was winning! I had to be!

Then it hit me. Literally. Obsession slammed into my side, stabbing her horn into the plentiful flesh of my thigh. I howled in pain, nearly dropping from the sky right there. I flapped my wings hard, pushing away from the cyan mare, sending a blast of telekinesis at her. She moved deftly out of my reach, cycling back around for another pass. I growled. *So that’s what kind of race this is*, I thought. *One without rules.*

I kept moving forward, keeping the blue mare in my peripheral vision as she curved through the sky at me. I put up my alicorn shield, hoping that it would do something against the other alicorn, but it didn’t help at all. Obsession struck with the force of a skywagon slamming into the ground, sending me flying through the air as my shield shattered. I tried to catch an updraft with my wings. I spun about, spreading my wings as the other mare reached me. She wrapped her forelegs around my neck, grinning widely.

“Did I forget to mention one teensy weensy little thing?” She said as she pushed down, causing the wind to rush up around us. “I’m going to break your little body into tiny little pieces, and send you to Spark in a bag.”

“F-F-Fuck you,” I replied, gritting my teeth. I flared my horn, firing another telekinetic blast right into the mare’s face. It ripped her away and I spun back upright, flapping my wings until I was stable. A multicolored blur shot past me, and I felt pain searing from my flank. I glanced back to see blood streaming from three perfect cuts along my hindquarters. I turned back to see Obsession flying down at me from above, her wings folded in for maximum speed. I banked to the left, spinning into a roll to hopefully get away from her. She dove right past me, spreading her wings and pulling up to hover just above me.

“Well, you’re better than I thought you’d be, Ministry Mare,” she called out. “But you’re still not fast enough to beat me.” I hated to say it, but she was right about that. I wasn’t a fast flier by any means, and I had no doubt that Obsession could have flown back and forth twenty times between the two mountain peaks in the time it would take me to make one trip. She was toying with me, like a star spider playing with its food. I had fallen right into her trap, and let her pull me into her environment. Her playground. Without Stargazer, I wasn’t even sure how I’d destroy the gem in her chest in the first place.

“You’re fast,” I replied. *Maybe if I keep her talking long enough I’ll have some time to work something out*, I thought. “You said you don’t care about Spark, only yourself. Why help her then? Why not help yourself?” Obsession sneered at me.

“Helping Spark will help me, naturally,” she said. “Perfect world, and all that. Once we’re in control,

everything will be just... awesome. You ponies, you're so pathetic. You say you want harmony, but your actions speak so differently. You kill, you lie, you steal. What are you loyal to?" I growled under my breath. I was getting entirely sick of the rhetoric that these things kept spewing.

"I'm loyal to my friends!" I barked. "My love! The ponies who can't fend for themselves! And I will not let some tyrannical phantasm like you decide what's best for them!" I flared my wings and flapped them hard, propelling myself at the chromatic mare. My horn ignited, sending a blast of telekinesis at her. Obsession lifted a wing, her own horn glowing as she batted away the blast. Her eyes widened as I collided with her, the force of the blow sending her spiraling backwards. I latched onto her with my forehooves, putting my weight into everything I had. For once in my life, I was glad I had some weight to use to my advantage.

I pushed down, using my telekinesis to hold back Obsession's wings, sending us both into the next best thing to free fall. The wind whipped us back and forth while she struggled to break free. I tried my best to get close enough to her horn to cast the memory spell, but every time I thought I had it the wind knocked my head back. Obsession snarled, setting her own horn alight. Nothing happened and I had to wonder what it was that she had done. The sound of thunder told me all I needed to know. I pushed off of her to avoid the lightning bolt I knew was coming, and it struck the gem in her chest squarely. The smell of ozone filled the air as she hovered, smiling lazily at me.

"Impressive, Ministry Mare. I didn't think you had it in you to try and pull something like that off," she said. "But let me show you how it's done, alright? This is how a real aerial fighter does things." Her wings buzzed and her horn ignited once more. The sky around us grew dark and drab as magical dark clouds popped into existence. Obsession grinned, kicking out at one of them, sending jolts of lightning through the air at me. I flapped hard, moving out of the way as they passed, feeling the static and the sheer surge of power the bolts had exuded. The lightning circled about the two of us, connecting to the dark clouds and creating a structure akin to a giant cage surrounding us. The air crackled and popped as I hovered there. I was trapped, no two ways about it.

I heard shouting from below me. Lilith had flown up to try and help. Given that she was the only other flier, I almost expected it. The Bitch was whining loudly, its barrel pointed at the cyan alicorn. Obsession grinned widely.

"Seems you've gotta let your friends do your dirty work for you, don't you? Pitiful," she said. "Too bad really. You get to watch her die." She kicked out, slamming her hooves into one of the clouds, sending a massive bolt out of it that soared through the air at Lilith. My eyes widened. *No! I'm not going to lose another friend!* I thought, frantically searching for an answer. If Lilith fired now, she'd blow herself to bits! I flared my horn, weaving the magic into what I'd hoped would be a combination spell. I let the spell cast, dropping into the teleport and reappearing in front of Lilith. Immediately a purple bubble appeared around me, taking the full brunt of the lightning bolt's strike. I pushed back, sending the bolt wide away from me.

I lifted a hoof to signal. Lilith took my cue as she soared around the side of my bubble, releasing The Bitch's furious vengeance. The missile shot through the sky, cutting through the clouds like butter. Obsession didn't even move. I wondered what trick she had up her sleeve. Just as the projectile reached her, she ignited her horn and swatted at it with her wing. It exploded, engulfing her in its flames.

"Woohoo!" Lilith shouted. "Star, are you alright?" I nodded shakily.

"Lilith, be careful. She's not --" I started to say before a multicolored blur shot out from the center of the explosion. Obsession landed a brutal hoof strike on Lilith's chest, sending the black mare soaring back towards the earth below. "Lilith!!!" I turned on the spot, flapping my wings hard and fast to catch up with my falling friend. I locked my wings to my sides, my speed increasing to that of a rocket. I was *not* going to let another friend die! Lilith just had to be okay!

I reached out, grabbing onto the black mare with my forelegs, flaring my wings to slow my descent. Lilith shifted in my grasp, groaning loudly. A buzzing sound came from above us, catching my immediate attention. I blinked, casting my shield spell on instinct. A blast of lightning struck the shield, ricocheting away. Just because I was trying to save my friend didn't mean that Obsession was done with me. She was only just starting.

“Star...?” Lilith struggled to say as her eyes opened and she glanced up at me. I looked down, a grimace forming on my face.

“I’m gonna have to put you down along the mountain range,” I said. “I can’t protect you and fight her at the same time.” Lilith scowled.

“You can let me off,” she said. “I can fly. Just had the wind knocked out of me.” I nodded, allowing the pegasus to extricate herself from my grasp. Her wings spread open and she caught the updraft next to me.

“What do we do?”

“We don’t do anything. Lilith, you need to get back to the others,” I said. “She’s not going to wait for very long.”

“But Star --” Lilith started to reply. I shook my head firmly.

“No, I need to do this on my own. There is one thing you can do for me though,” I said, causing her ears to perk up. I grinned. “Get me Stargazer. I don’t know that I can get it to work, but it’s my best shot.” Lilith nodded and took off like a rocket. I saw the blur go after her as soon as she left my side. I roared, reaching out with a shield barrier that Obsession bounced off of, spiralling through the air in a rainbow blaze. She glared at me as Lilith continued to make progress back towards the mountains. “Hey. You and I have some unresolved business, remember?”

I grinned, flapping my wings and heading back up higher into the sky. I called on my alicorn shield as I climbed, hoping it would deter the other alicorn from attacking. Obsession chased after me, making strafing feints that barely grazed my barrier. The plan was working! I just had to wait for Lilith to show up with Stargazer. I hit my peak and curved downwards, pulling into a dive that took me closer to the mountain range. All I had to do was to keep moving. Keep moving and I could end this. I circled around, leading Obsession on the wildest of goose chases I could think of. All the while she kept harassing me, saying nothing.

“What’s the matter, timber wolf got your tongue?!” I called as glanced back. Suddenly, my shield flickered out of existence. I faced forward, groaning as I realized that I’d fallen for her trap once more. I’d flown right into the bank of storm clouds! The whole time she’d been on my outside because she was steering me into an obvious trap. Obsession sneered as she closed in on me, reaching her hoof out to strike.

A gleaming blue missile shot up into the sky, slamming hard into the other alicorn’s head. It knocked her back slightly as I realized what it was. *Stargazer!* I thought, grinning as I looked down. Lilith saluted and I caught it with my magic. I could still feel that the weapon was inert. There had to be a way to jump start it!

What if I try the crystal again? It’s got more pieces now! I thought frantically. It was the only thing left to try! Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the star-crystal and slammed it into the receptacle on the gun.

The weapon began to hum loudly as my E.F.S. began to scroll several messages.

Power Core Accepted.

Power Compatibility Module Loaded [OK]

Stargazer System Booting (StarOS V 1.13, PONIX Compliant)

Waiting...

Waiting...

Stargazer Firing System now activated. Have a nice day.

I blinked, feeling the power within the weapon. It was ready to go. This changed the whole complexion of the day. Obsession snarled, recovering from her blow in mere seconds. She buzzed her wings fast, knocking several bolts of lightning out of the clouds at me. I turned and fired.

What came out of the weapon was not bullets. It was more akin to a blast of laser fire. Stargazer spat pure and unadulterated hell from its barrels, the bluish beams connecting with the bolts of lightning and dissipating them instantly. They continued forward, slamming into Obsession. The cyan alicorn howled as she flailed away from the lash of the beams. I whooped a cry of delight. This thing was *awesome* now!

“Looks like I've got the upper hoof now,” I called out. “Give up yet?”

“Just because you've got some pretty new toy doesn't mean I'm giving up,” Obsession snarled. Her horn flared, sending two massive bolts of lightning at me. I threw up my alicorn shield and moved to the side, bringing up E.S.A.T.S. The spell came up just like it usually did, allowing me to queue up shots at the other mare. I let the spell drop, sending every shot I could at Obsession. Beams of blue light poured forth from Stargazer's barrels, searing across the sky at the cyan alicorn. She moved quickly, dodging most of my shots but catching one in her left wing. She roared in pain as the shot pierced it, sending her spiraling downwards.

This was my chance. I dismissed my alicorn shield and held Stargazer to my chest, snapping my wings into a dive to follow Obsession. She was flapping her other wing, trying to stay aloft as I caught up with her. I grabbed onto her neck with my forehooves. I had to force her to the ground. If I could get her grounded I could cast the memory spell properly. I didn't quite know what would happen if I cast it in mid-air, and quite frankly I didn't want to know. I pushed down on the cyan mare, putting all my weight onto her.

“Get... get off me!” Obsession roared, shifting her weight to try and throw me off. I retaliated, reaching out with my telekinesis to pin her one working wing. I grinned as I wrestled my hind legs around hers, holding the alicorn in place. Her eyes widened. “What are you, fucking crazy? At the speed we're going, you won't survive the fall! I might not even survive the fall!”

“I know,” I called out through the whipping wind. My mane was being thrown all about, making it difficult to speak. “That's why I need to be on top!” Obsession's eyes widened again, the realization of what I was doing setting in. If I kept my hold on her, she wouldn't be able to use her speed against me. True, I might not survive the crash, but I was banking on the golem's physical integrity to protect me. All I had to do was keep Obsession facing down, which thanks to my telekinesis wasn't an issue. The ground rushed up at us at alarming speeds. We were no longer diving, we were *falling*.

Obsession howled all the way down, trying to struggle out of my grip. I held firm, reaching forward with my horn. There was no way to know if this would work or not, but I had to try. Fifty feet, thirty feet, twenty feet, ten feet. I pushed forward, casting the memory spell and touching my horn to Obsession's own. The world fell away into nothingness as we hit the ground.

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I blinked. The memory spell had worked! It must have, I was in a memory instead of broken into pieces on the ground. I was sitting in an office, next to the one and only Rainbow Dash. I nearly whooped for joy. Violet had told me the memory spell had created some sort of shield around us when I did it to Deceit. I had risked everything on it doing the same here. Now all I had to do was to wait for Loyalty to show up. I glanced over at Rainbow Dash. She was poring over papers on her desk, designs and plans for large tower-like structures. I blinked again. I'd seen those towers before, all around the Wasteland. I never really knew what they were for, only that they did something with the weather.

There was a knock at the door. Rainbow Dash looked up from her work.

“Come in,” she said. The door creaked open, revealing a dark gray pegasus stallion with a slicked back silver mohawk. On his side he carried a very familiar weapon. Thunder Flash hung loosely from a battle saddle the pegasus wore. Rainbow's face brightened slightly at the sight of him. “Thunderlane? What a pleasant surprise.”

“I'm sorry for dropping in unannounced,” the other pegasus said, trotting up to the chair in front of the Ministry Mare's desk. He slid in easily as Dash regarded him carefully.

“You're not here for a social call, I take it,” she said coolly. Thunderlane grimaced, but nodded.

“It's Cloudsdale. They're reluctant to provide any more pegasus power to fund the war effort,” he said.

“They're worried that lack of pegasi will affect Equestria's weather.” Rainbow smiled softly, gesturing to the papers on her desk.

“See these?” She said. “This will solve that entire problem, Thunderlane.” The gray stallion looked at the papers, his face screwing up in confusion.

“What is it?” He asked.

“It's a system for controlling the weather,” Rainbow replied. “Think of it as a network of systems that will regulate Equestria's weather. I've got a meeting with the Princess and Apple Bloom later today to discuss the building of it.”

“Regulate the weather?” Thunderlane said. “How?”

“By using a single pegasus to power the whole thing,” Rainbow said. Thunderlane cocked his head, causing Rainbow to roll her eyes. “By using the power of a Crusader Maneframe, thanks to Apple Bloom, a single pony can jack herself into the whole network and regulate all of Equestria's weather. We'll be able to commit the pegasi fully to the war, and end it for good.”

“But... that's... that's insane, Dash. Cloudsdale... you know they won't go for it,” Thunderlane said. “It'll render hundreds upon hundreds of pegasi all over Equestria without a job.” Dash rolled her eyes.

“Don't think I haven't thought of that, Thunderlane. But, this war, it needs to be won. The zebra don't have the air support we do. The pegasi will win the war. It's in our blood,” she said defiantly. “In fact... I'd... I'd like for you to be our test candidate for the entire program.”

“Me?” Thunderlane replied. “Why me?”

“Because I know you want to see this war ended just as much as I do,” she said. “You haven't forgotten Rumble, have you?” Thunderlane growled under his breath.

“Rotten, dirty zebra scum,” he hissed. “I'll never forget what they did to him.”

“Good,” Rainbow said. “You think you got what it takes? You'd be single-hoofedly responsible for helping to end the war. Imagine the glory of that, Thunderlane. Your loyalty to your country will save us all.”

Thunderlane nodded as the memory slowed to a crawl. I glanced over to see a cyan alicorn sitting impassively in the corner. She appeared to be... crying? I grimaced.

“Are you... alright?” I said softly. The alicorn glanced at me, her jeweled eyes shining in the low light of the office.

“I had forgotten just how much she meant to me,” she replied, her hoof regarding the still form of Rainbow Dash. “She was the strong one. Not me.”

“You gave in to the others, compromised what made you... well, you,” I said.

“What is loyalty, really?” The cyan mare said. “I wish I knew. I gave up my values of that when I saw how ponies treated each other. How my bearer... how she treated the other bearers.”

“You have a chance to stop this, Loyalty,” I said, stepping closer to her. “You can help me defeat Spark. You know that not all ponies are like that. There's a new bearer out there waiting for your guidance, for your spirit to help them show the Wasteland what loyalty is truly about.”

“And what is loyalty 'truly' about, Ministry Mare?” Loyalty asked. I grinned.

“Loyalty is about staying true to yourself, to being there for others no matter what. It's about being loyal to the concepts of Honesty, of Kindness, of Generosity. Hell, it's even being loyal to Laughter. It's about being there for those you care about, and never, ever giving up,” I said. “Something I know you could never do. Just like Rainbow, you'd never give up.” Loyalty sat there for several moments, contemplating my words. She sighed.

“You know as well as I do that I can't help you,” she said. I nodded. “I can disperse my spirit so you can defeat my mortal form, but you know that I can't fully be destroyed.”

“I know, but you know that Spark's goal can't be allowed to be achieved. This world doesn't need a complete and perfect order to everything, it needs love. It needs the ponies who will bear the Elements,” I said. “It needs for you to find them, so that they can heal the Wasteland.”

“And what about you?” Loyalty asked. My eyes widened. “Are you not one of the ponies who will heal the Wasteland?”

"I... I don't think I am honestly," I said. "In all my travels, all I've ever done is make bad things happen. Sure, there's been some good here and there, but I haven't done anything important. All I'm doing is cleaning up my mess. I don't deserve the mantle of Element bearer."

"Are you sure?" Loyalty said. "You have done much good for the Wasteland, Radiant Star. I don't think you see it, but you are a loyal friend, loyal to a great degree." I shuffled my hooves, looking down at the ground.

"I'm not loyal," I said. "I've let my friends down plenty of times. I... I didn't save Steeljack when I could have, I lied to my marefriend about my memory orb problem. I nearly got my friend Patch's unborn foals killed due to radiation."

"And yet, through every time you're always there for them, trying to help, to make up for your failings," the cyan mare said. "If that's not loyal, I don't know what is."

"I... I guess," I said softly. "You know, I'm supposed to be lecturing you."

"Funny how that turns out," Loyalty replied. "I will help you, Radiant Star. To make up for my failings, as best as I am able to." I nodded.

"I know this sounds like a funny question, but what did you ever know about... about Twilight Sparkle?" I said. Loyalty's gaze narrowed at me.

"Enough to know that she is not blameless either," the cyan mare said harshly. "Rainbow was a very close friend of the purple alicorn, of course. She is as much to blame for the state of the world as was Rainbow. At least Rainbow wanted to save Equestria."

"And Twilight didn't?" I asked.

"You've seen the legacy she left behind, first-hoof," Loyalty said. "The Goddess, I.M.P. Her work was the stuff of monsters and destruction, not peace. Do you know what Rainbow Dash originally wanted the Single Pegasus Project to originally be?" I shook my head. "She wanted to use it as a way to save the world. It was Luna and Twilight, and the others... they wanted to use it to wage war. Rainbow had to fight to build it the way she wanted to."

"What would have changing the weather have done to save Equestria?" I said aloud. Loyalty grinned.

"You've already seen the fruits of that labor, even though you don't know it," she said. "Sunshine and rainbows. The one you call the Destroyer. The S.P.P. brought sunshine back to a world that desperately needed it."

"And you saw all of this?" I said. Loyalty nodded.

"We had to watch. We were always watching. The world had changed so much," she said. "But we stood vigilant... hoping... hoping that ponies would remember our virtues."

"And they have," I said. "You said so yourself. There's a pony out there who exemplifies the virtue of loyalty. If Spark has her way..."

"I know," Loyalty said. "I fear however, our time is up, Radiant Star. You must destroy the gem on my mortal form. She will not have my spiritual support, but I warn you, she is a lot stronger than you give her credit for. You will not be able to trick her so easily again." I grimaced, but nodded.

"Thank you," I said. Loyalty smiled as the misty world faded to darkness once more.

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My eyes shot open and I began to move, ignoring my immediate surroundings and situation for flight. A bolt of lightning hit the ground where I had been, scorching the earth. I growled. Obsession was so fast she was already out of the memory spell, in the air and mobile. They had both been healed up already and she was flinging another bolt my way.

"What did you do to me?!" The cyan alicorn roared, her eyes blazing furiously with magical fire. I jumped out of the way, taking to the sky to avoid her lightning. I flared my horn, snatching Stargazer to the ready as I turned around and fired, barely missing the mare. Obsession was screaming through the skies at me. I

took a brief moment to get a handle on my surroundings while I flew. The mountain range the others had been holed up on was still quite close. We hadn't managed to make it far before the idea of race turned into a dog fight. I had to end this quickly, and destroy that gem. Loyalty had warned me that her golem wouldn't make it easy for me. I had to do this the old fashioned way.

"Come and get me if you want to find out!" I teased, pulling up into the air with a smirk on my face.

Obsession snarled and shot after me, following close behind. Black storm clouds filled the air around me. Lightning bolts scattered at me from every angle, forcing me to fly erratically to try and dodge them. There was no doubt about it, Obsession was *pissed*. I ached all over, the side effect of the memory spell combined with hitting the ground, but I was doing my best to not focus on that while I flew. I was already thankful enough that I hadn't died, and that the shield from the memory spell had protected us.

"Get back here!!!" Obsession shouted, her wings beating as hard as they possibly could. I realized quickly that without the spirit's influence, the golem itself was physically weaker just like Deceit had been. That meant that I had the advantage. I pressed forward, pulling up higher and higher, the atmosphere growing thinner by the moment. *Do these things breathe?* I thought. I was about to find out. The higher I went, the harder it became to keep my wings flapping. It was getting cold. Obsession was closing in. I had to keep going! The cyan mare latched onto my tail with her teeth, intent on dragging me back down towards the earth. I grunted in pain at the force at which she pulled. I was going to certainly be missing more than a few tail hairs when all was said and done. I kept flapping my wings, the beating interspersing with Obsession's own wing flaps. She was getting winded too. I was getting the best of her! I just needed to keep going.

My eyes became blurry as I gasped at the thinness, feeling faint from the lack of air. I knew this was crazy but it was the only way I could think of to incapacitate her. Finally I felt her unlock from my tail, her form falling out of the sky towards the ground. I gave on final agonizing flap and snapped my wings in to my sides, dropping down after her. The world snapped back into focus as the sweet, sweet air filled my lungs. I sped downwards, hoping to catch Obsession before she hit the ground. As I neared her I noticed something very wrong.

"Gotcha," the cyan alicorn said, her eyes flashing open and her wings snapping open. She lashed out with a hoof, hitting me directly in my barrel. I yelped from the pain as the bitch knocked me through the air like I was a rag doll. It had been a trick! She'd turned it around on me and used my own tactic against me! Her rose colored eyes narrowed as I ripped out Stargazer, my improved weapon blazing out a torrent of blue light that she deftly avoided. "Fancy gun you got there, Ministry Mare. Did you think that such an obvious trick would stop me? I'll give you a hint, I don't actually breathe air like you do. All you were doing was making yourself weak."

"Figured it was worth a shot," I snarled back, spreading my wings to slow myself to a hover. Obsession sat there in the air in front of me. A bemused smirk crept along her face. "We still haven't finished our race, Obsession. Remember? I win, you tell me all about Spark. I thought you were more sportsmarelike than that."

"You're right about that," she replied. "I did promise you a race, but I lied, didn't I? You've fallen for every single one of my traps. And the others thought I couldn't take you on by myself. Hah!"

"Wait... what?" I said. "What about the others?" Obsession snarled loudly, baring her teeth at me.

"Enough of them. They're not important! I'm the tough one! The toughest of them all!" She roared. "I'm done with playing nicely, Radiant Star. You will submit, or I will beat you to a pulp so bloody your horn and wings won't even identify you."

"Fuck you," I said, lifting Stargazer. "You aren't going to stop me from getting to Spark." Before she could respond, I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up as many shots as I could on the blue mare. Time fell back into place, and Stargazer exploded with blue light, sending streams of magical energy streaking into the other alicorn. Her horn glowed as she clapped her wings together, a shield forming around her. Stargazer's blasts turned the shield into glittering fragments as they shattered it and sunk home in the golem's chest. She snarled as the gem in her chest began to flicker.

And then it stopped. I cocked my head in confusion. Then I realized what I was staring at. The form in front of me shimmered slightly. *SHIT!* I thought as I was hit from behind, forcing me to drop Stargazer from my magic. Obsession landed on me hard and I felt something crack as pain shot through my entire body. I went plummeting down, two cyan hooves wrapped around my barrel. I howled as I tried to struggle out of Obsession's grip.

"I'm faster than your pathetic little toy, Ministry Mare," she called out through the whipping wind. "Now let's see how well you survive hitting the ground at high speeds." *Shit shit shit shit!* My mind frantically tried to piece together how to break free. Obsession was putting not just her weight into me, but using her wings to buzz us along faster. We were flying towards the ground at insane speeds. Teleportation was not an option. I couldn't cast it fast enough! An idea formed in my mind, and I gritted my teeth through the pain. Flaring my horn, I cast my spell.

And suddenly, as fast as I was going down, I started pushing up into the air on Obsession. My weight held us there and slowed our descent to a point where neither of us moved. Obsession's face screwed up in extreme confusion as she tried to figure out what I'd done.

"Gravity spell! Turns out I was prepared for this!" I proclaimed, grinning widely. I winced as Obsession's horn flared to life. I reached up with my forehoof and punched her in the face, slamming into her horn and causing her spell to flicker out. Blood streamed from where my hoof had struck her. Obsession's wings stopped buzzing, causing us to float upward from my own weight. I glanced through the air for Stargazer, sighing. It was nowhere to be seen. I could only hope it hadn't fallen into a pond somewhere. Obsession draped limply over me, only impeding my speedy ascent by her weight. She sputtered, trying to move to get a better grip on me.

"But I'm... I'm the fastest, I'm the toughest!" She stammered out through the blood running down her face. I struck again, this time in her chest. The gem in the center began to flicker and shine. I blinked as it started pulsing brightly. *Umm... it didn't do that with Deceit... did it?* I thought. I tried to pull away from the dying mare-golem, the gem pulsing faster and faster as I finally slipped off. The gem exploded, jolting me with intense force as I shot up into the sky thanks to the gravity spell. I groaned, my entire body feeling ridiculous amounts of pain. Violet was going to pissed at me for this, if I survived. I felt the spell drop, my horn flickering out as I lost consciousness. The last thing I remembered was the ground rushing up towards me.

I was somewhere else. Somewhere completely not in the Everfree Forest. I was staring at the vats. The vats that had birthed me. That wasn't possible. Maripony had been destroyed. How were these things even here? Standing above them was *her*. Spark. Had I been captured after I defeated Obsession? No, that couldn't be right. My friends would have saved me. I was alone, meaning that this must have been some sort of stupid dream. I'd much rather have been in the library. Twilight at least wasn't likely to try and kill me.

I stood, watching carefully as Spark turned to regard me.

"You're starting to become a real pain in my flank, you know that right?" She said angrily. "First Deceit, now Obsession? Fucking Celestia, Star, you're a real bitch."

"Spark," I spat, ignoring her comment. "It's been too long."

"Not long enough Star," Spark said. She motioned to the vats. "Looks familiar doesn't it?"

"Where are we?" I said, glaring at her. "Where are my friends?" Spark coughed.

"Well, for starters you're not anywhere physically. This is a mental connection," she said. "As for your friends, I would assume they're with you." So this was just some sort of lucid fever dream! I blinked. Spark rolled her eyes. "Lucky says hi, by the way."

"She's... what?" I said, blinking again. Spark groaned.

"Yes, she's still in there. Persistent, really. She's happy to see you," she said. "I however, am not. You and I still have unfinished business, and things will go far easier if you just give up."

“Forget it,” I said, growling under my breath. “I won't give in to you.” Spark's gaze narrowed at me.

“Oh right. Your vain little quest to *save* me,” she said. She lifted into the air, flapping her wings. “Look upon this, Radiant Star. This is the center of a new world in the making. These vats were brought here by a pony named Red Eye. After his defeat the vats sat here in disarray... until I arrived.” My eyes widened.

“You want to make more alicorns? Like the Goddess?” I said. Spark chuckled.

“Making everypony into an alicorn? No. The Goddess had it all wrong. Alicorns are troublesome. A subservient slave race of all ponykind, however?” Spark replied. “The I.M.P. is for the others. I've nearly got all the components in place to bring them into the physical world and give them bodies of their own. All I need is one thing.”

“The power source,” I said. “You need the power source that Twilight used to seal you.” Spark grinned widely.

“Of course. Once I have that, I will cast the resurrection spell on a grand scale, granting life to the Elements. Then, all of ponykind will fall before us, and we will rule,” Spark said. “Think about it, Radiant Star. No more war. No more hate. Harmony. Pure and simple Harmony.”

“That's not Harmony, Spark. That's Unity,” I argued. “And you won't succeed. I'll stop you.” Spark lowered back down to my level, rolling her eyes again.

“Please. You're going to stop me?” She said. “I hate to tell you Star, but you're being led in the wrong direction by that Sparkle bitch.” I blinked.

“What's that mean?” I said.

“You really believe Sparkle has your best interests at heart? Even you had to notice how quickly she betrayed me,” Spark replied. “I've seen every corner and crevice of your mind, Radiant Star. I know things that you don't.”

“Mind telling me then? Save me some trouble?” I said flatly. I was getting rather pissed at the fact that there were so many who knew more than I did that thought it was fun to keep secrets from me. Discord, Spark, Twilight even... I pondered what Spark said. I'd been feeling for some time that there was something Twilight wasn't telling me... but I'd figured it hadn't been that big of a deal.

“No can do, Spark. In order for my plan to work, the Sparkle bitch needs to go for good. Telling you anything would jeopardize that plan greatly,” Spark said. “Now... this is all the time this mental connection has for us. I will be seeing you, Radiant Star. Bring me the power source... and you will be able to fulfill your destiny.”

My eyes opened slowly, a dull ache settling in as I tried to adjust to my surroundings. It was dark. The only illumination was from a campfire nearby, but I couldn't make out what else there was thanks to how blurry my vision was. *Where...?* I thought, as my mind focused on what had happened. Had I hit the ground? Was I dead? Could I even move? Fortunately enough, the answer to that question happened to be yes. My hoof lifted in front of my face. I looked down my sides to see bandages all over my back and rear legs. My wings had also been bundled up. I groaned.

“She's awake!” I heard Violet's voice call through the haze as she appeared next to me. “Star? Can you hear me?”

“I... I'm not dead?” I asked. Violet smiled sweetly, giving me a nuzzle.

“No, sweetie. You're not dead. You're very much alive,” she said. “In terrible condition, but you're alive. You're lucky we had the medical supplies.” I nodded, lowering my gaze to the ground. My eyes began to finally adjust, noting that we were on the mountain clearing that Steeljack was buried on. I tried to shuffle up to a sitting position but it was futile. “Whoa, there. You shouldn't be moving around. You took quite a beating there.”

"Everyone else?" I asked. "Lilith?" Violet nodded.

"They're okay. They're here," she said, motioning up to where the campfire was. Everyone else was gathered there. Lilith sat next to where Patch was laying, a makeshift blanket covering the pregnant mare, who appeared to be sleeping. Sunshine sat on the other side, next to Nixis and Avira. I sighed as I found myself looking for Steeljack, checking all the places he would normally be. I heaved a sigh, letting the mixed sadness and relief whoosh out of me.

"I hurt," I said, grunting. "Like... a lot."

"I'd expect so," Violet said. "You fell pretty hard. You were pretty damn lucky that Lilith managed to slow your fall."

"Obsession?" I asked. Violet narrowed her eyes.

"Gone," she said. "Disappeared." I grimaced, nodding.

"Good," I replied, wincing. "Looks like we're stuck here for another night, if I'm not up." Violet nodded, lighting her horn and letting her magic roll over me. I felt soothed, smiling softly under her ministrations. My mind went to what I had just experienced. Spark. Her words had cut through me hard. What did she mean about Twilight? Was Twilight lying to me? Was there something else that I didn't know that was important? I made a mental note to approach Twilight more judiciously the next time I spoke to her.

Violet eventually finished up, leaving me to rest. I spent a majority of my time listening the others, staying relatively quiet. Violet was discussing the state of our medical supplies with Avira and Nixis, laying out all the supplies we had left. As it turned out, we were still in dire need. Avira mentioned that a cart had been left down the mountain path that they had used to get there. Inside of it was some additional supplies. It now sat near the camp, having made it through the excitement relatively intact. Patch had slept through the most of the time. I didn't really blame her. She'd been through a lot in the past day or so. I wanted terribly to go to her and just hug her, but couldn't bring myself to wake her.

I finally managed to be able to stand, much to the protests of my marefriend. I shook a hoof, claiming that I was alright. I needed some alone time. I walked carefully across the clearing to where Steeljack's grave was. I sat down in front of the stone, sighing loudly.

"I wish you had been here," I said softly to no pony in particular. Somewhere, I liked to wish that Steeljack was listening to me. "It feels like you're already slipping away from us. It's not a good feeling." I groaned. "I don't know what to do, Steeljack. Spark... Twilight... neither of them are telling me the whole truth. The strange thing is... I fear what Twilight's secret is more than I fear Spark's perfect world."

Of course, no pony responded. I really missed Steeljack. I sighed.

"It sucks," I said, my ears drooping. "I want to save Spark, but it doesn't seem like I'm going to be able to if she doesn't want to be saved. Everything seems to be pushing me towards sealing Spark." I lowered my head. "I'm not sure I can do... do that. I'm not strong enough, Steeljack. I just don't think..." I sighed. "I don't think I can do it. I'm just not strong enough..."

"You are stronger than you believe," a voice said in the calm darkness. I blinked as Nixis quietly loped along the clearing and made his way to my side.

"Nixis," I said softly. "How long were you there?"

"Long enough," he replied calmly. "And you're wrong. You're stronger than you even know. You can save this Spark if you only try." I looked away.

"Discord prophesied that I would bring about a great storm of chaos into the world. I've never really been able to piece together what he truly meant," I said. "What if this is it, Nixis? What if... what if I make the wrong decision? What if saving Spark is the wrong decision?"

"One cannot truly know what the right or wrong choice is, Star. That is part of living. We all make choices, good... or bad," the hellhound replied. "It is how we approach those choices that make us who and what we are." I nodded, soaking in his words like a sponge. Could I be strong enough to face Spark and finally

decide how to handle her? I had to. No pony else was going to swoop in and save the day for me. There would be no Steeljack, stepping in to hold off a dragon so that the mare he loved could live. I would have to make the hard choice. The choice to put myself into the dragon's maw and hopefully come out alive.

"Nixis...?" I said. The hellhound raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?" He asked.

"I miss him," I said bluntly. "I keep seeing it over and over, and I know... I know it wasn't truly my fault... but I still feel like it was."

"You will always miss him, Star. As will I, and the others. That is how he will live on. His spirit is carried in our hearts, his resolve giving us the strength to carry forward," Nixis said softly. "But the living must not go on mourning the dead. They must celebrate life. I know that from somewhere... Steeljack is watching over us." I looked over at him and back to the gravestone. Yes... somewhere. Beyond the veil, Steeljack's life and death would inspire and strengthen us. I knew deep down that Nixis was right. That I had to cease mourning, and start living. Steeljack wouldn't want us to wallow in his death, he would want us to complete the mission, to keep moving forward. In fact... I dared to think that he would probably slap me silly for thinking the way I had been. That drew a smile to my face.

"Thank you, Nixis. I believe I'm feeling a little bit better about --" I started to say before the sound of shouting caught my ears. I turned to see Violet across the clearing, her eyes fierce with determination.

"Star! Nixis! I need you!" She shouted. I stood and galloped painfully to where she stood.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I said. Violet grimaced.

"It's Patch. She's..." Violet trailed off. My eyes widened. No, no, no! She couldn't be! She just couldn't be! I had to see for myself. I pushed past Violet before she could finish, coming into the camp proper where Lilith was cradling Patch's head. I realized very quickly that not only was Patch not dead, but she was groaning loudly and panting hard.

"Star!" Violet said as she caught up to me. "You didn't let me finish!"

"What's happening? Why is she making those noises? What's wrong with her?!" I panickedly exclaimed. Violet stopped me with a wave of her hoof.

"Star... Patch is *foaling*," she said with utter seriousness. My eyes widened even further. My panic kicked into overdrive.

"She's failing?! What's failing? I don't understand, tell me what's wrong with her!" I said, shaking Violet. My marefriend withdrew, groaning.

"Star. It means she's having her babies!" She said forcefully.

"Oh. Ohhhh...."

Footnotes

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

Violet Iris: Maximum Level Reached!

Patch: Maximum Level Reached!

Lilith: Maximum Level Reached!

Chapter 34: Castle of the Royal Sisters

Oh. There are six Elements of Harmony, but only five are known: Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Honesty and Loyalty. The sixth is a complete mystery. It is said, the last known location of the five elements was in the ancient castle of the royal pony sisters.

Forced Harmony. Slavery. How far from each other are these concepts, really? In the end, is the harmony that Spark wants for the Wasteland nothing more than the forced servitude under the pretense of cooperation, of joy, and of friendship? Are we to be slaves to the ideals of her type of harmony? Are we automatically forced to be kind, to be generous, and to laugh? Are we supposed to ignore pain, ignore hate, and ignore suffering?

Or are we something much more? Are we kind and cruel, generous and selfish, honest and lying? I believe we are all of these and so much more. The six concepts of harmony cannot even begin to comprise the complexity of a pony's emotional landscape. The life experiences of a pony shape them, define them, and guide them ever forward through life. And what is it truly for? Forced Harmony?

I reject that idea. Harmony, true harmony, is about accepting the differences and the emotions that make us who we are. It hardly needs the distillation of the six core values, because there is so much more to it than that. Pain, grief, love... these are things a pony needs just as much as they need generosity, kindness, and loyalty.

These are the things that make a pony. Not some ideal that is set atop a pedestal, but the real, honest emotions that define a pony.

Harmony. Slavery. Two different ideals, and yet... not so different at all.

My brain *exploded*. I had seen everything from balefire dragons to spirits of harmony in physical forms, and yet nothing... nothing would ever have prepared me to deal with a mare who was about to have foals. I was frantic, flailing about like a mad mare.

“Ohmygosh, what do we need? Do we need towels? We don't have any towels. WHY DON'T WE HAVE ANY TOWELS?!” I shouted, running back and forth in the clearing, looking for anything that remotely looked like a towel. “AND WHY DON'T WE HAVE ANY HOT WATER?!?”

“Star.”

“OH AND WE'LL NEED SOMETHING TO HOLD THE FOALS IN, WE'LL NEED TO MAKE SOMETHING!!!!” I proclaimed loudly. “WE'LL HAVE PATCH MAKE THEM... WAIT, THAT'S NOT RIGHT SHE'S HAVING THE FOALS!!!!” I grinned super wide as I flared my horn, trying to pick up what I assumed were spare pieces of fabric. Wait, that's not right. Why would we have spare pieces of fabric? And why were they green and mare-shaped? Violet glared at me, her eyes narrow. She reached out and bopped me on the horn, knocking my magic out and causing her to drop to the ground.

“Star... WOULD YOU CALM THE FUCK DOWN?!” She roared. I blinked. A cry of pain came from

across the clearing, drawing Violet's attention. She trotted over to where Patch was laying. I slumped to my haunches, eyes wide. The green mare looked terrible. Her mane was ragged and she was breathing hard.

"Shh," Lilith cooed softly from next to her friend. "It's alright, Patch. Just breathe, alright?"

"That's right, just breathe. You're gonna be alright, you just need to breathe," Violet added. "Avira, help me prop her head up here." The female hellhound nodded, using a rock to bring Patch's head up a bit.

"H-H-Hurts, ahh.. ahhh!" Patch managed to say. She shifted, trying to get up. Violet pushed back, keeping her lying on the ground.

"No no, you need to stay there, Patch. Your foals are coming, alright? Can you hear me?" Violet asked. Patch nodded her head as best as she could. "Good. You need to breathe. You're just feeling normal pains, but it's gonna get a lot worse so we need to give you some Med-X. Not a lot though, okay?" Patch nodded again. Violet smiled and floated out two syringes of Med-X, nodding at Avira. The hellhound gently held onto the earth mare as Violet injected her with each syringe. I sat there, blinking and feeling very confused. I needed to help!

"But... but towels. It's... it's unsanitary!" I proclaimed loudly. Violet facehoofed.

"Would somepony kindly calm her down so I can pay attention here?!" She said. Sunshine nodded, trotting over to where I was slumped. She smiled sweetly. I knew that smile. She wanted to stop me from helping! Well I wasn't going to let her!

"TOWELS! HOT WATER! FOAL CLOTHES!!!" I shouted, trying to push past Sunshine. The pink mare grunted, flaring her horn and pushing me back into place with her telekinesis.

"Star!" She said. "You need to calm down! It's going to be okay! Just chill, alright?"

"But... but... I can't! We need to do something! She's having *foals*, Sunshine!" I yelled back. Sunshine sighed and rolled her eyes, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

"I know she is, but Violet's got this well in hoof, alright? You need to calm down, you're not helping things," Sunshine said. "You just sit there and wait, okay?" I blinked.

"But... but... I can't..." I said, trailing off. "I can't help. I can't do anything?"

"Star, I don't think they need any help right now. Trust Violet, please?" Sunshine said. My senses finally came back into play, and I sighed. No, Sunshine was right. Violet did really have things under control. I had wanted to help so bad I had let my common sense run away with my imagination. Right now they were sharing a lovely cup of tea under an apple tree in the back of my mind. I nodded finally.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I kind of freaked out there for a moment."

"You kind of did, yeah," Sunshine said. Another grunt of pain took my attention away from the pink mare. I looked over at Violet who was hovering over Patch, her horn aglow.

“What happened? What's wrong?” I said frantically. Violet grimaced and my eyes widened even more.

“It's fine, Star. She just needs to breathe is all. She's a little weak from the trip up here, I think,” my marefriend said. “You didn't eat like you were supposed to did you?” Patch struggled, her eye opening up to acknowledge Violet's question with a slight nod. Violet groaned. “Alright then, this is going to be rough for you then.” Her horn flared, running her magic over the earth mare's body. “I can't tell too much, I'm not an expert at this, but the foals definitely want out. It's just a matter of when. We can't move her in this state.”

“Great. What do we do then?” Lilith said, frowning.

“We're going to have to deliver the foals here,” Violet said. “It's less than optimal, but we don't have any other options.”

“But... we can't do that. What if—?” I started to say. I was interrupted by a loud ringing roar that came from far off in the forest below us. I turned my head towards the sound. It was followed by a thundering sound of something very big stomping on the ground. I could see trees ripping over from our vantage point, but was unable to tell what was causing them to fall. I grimaced, finishing my statement. “...something decides to investigate.” Violet scowled.

“Hopefully it's nothing but some random creature,” she said. “We still can't afford to move her. If we do, we could endanger her and the foals.” I stood, unlatching Stargazer from its harness.

“This is something I can do to help,” I said. “Keep an eye on her, Violet. The first chance we have to move her and the kids, we will. But I don't believe for one second that we won't be attacked, not when the other Elements know where we are. Not while Spark knows where I am.” I looked at the others. “Nixis, Sunshine, Lilith. You're with me. Avira, you stay here with Violet. We're gonna try and secure this area as best as we can, in case something does try to come up here.” Sunshine and Nixis nodded, the two walking over to where the path sloped down the mountain. Sunshine began casting her unique brand of magic, creating a barrier of vines that wrapped around two large rocks.

Lilith nodded, her expression sour. Clearly, she didn't want to leave Patch, but she knew she had to. She reached down, gently nuzzling her friend before picking herself back up. Violet stayed next to the earth mare, who was now panting and groaning quite loudly. Another roar sounded in the distance. This time, it was closer. I narrowed my gaze out at the forest. Something was coming, but was it just some random Everfree monster, or had it been sent? Patch cried out in pain again. I glanced over at Violet.

“Violet, is there any way we can keep her quiet?” I said. “She's likely to bring every nasty critter from all the way out to Ponyville and back.”

“Sorry, Star, she's gonna be in a lot of pain. We only have so much Med-X, after all. I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises,” my marefriend replied. Her horn glowed softly, the magic rolling over Patch's prone form. Another roar. More trees falling down in the distance.

“Alright,” I said, turning my attention to the barrier Sunshine had created. Nixis was busy reinforcing it with more rocks that he had brought over from the collapsed cave entrance. Lilith had taken to the sky, looking down the mountain path for anything that might be coming up it. I sat there for several tense moments, the only sounds being Patch and Violet. Another set of trees fell at the edge of the path

leading up the mountain. Something very large bolted out of the trees and began to scramble up it. The sound of thunder accompanied it's every step.

“Incoming!” Lilith shouted. “I can't see what it is or get a bead on it!” I grimaced. *I knew it, I thought. Is it one of the Elements? Or something else? Whatever it is... it must be huge.*

“Sunshine, keep the barrier up,” I called out. “Nixis. You and I will engage whatever it is. Lilith, you provide ranged cover. Whatever it is, it's NOT getting near her.” Sunshine nodded, her horn glowing as more magical vines climbed up the makeshift barrier. I trotted up to one side of it, watching and waiting for the thing to finally show itself. Another roar floated up to us from the side of the mountain as a massive black beast came charging up. It's eyes were a deep red, all six of them. Wait... six eyes? I blinked, realizing that the monster not only had six eyes, it had three *heads*. I couldn't see much more than that, before the thing moved again.

I levitated Stargazer out, trying to get a lock on the monster with E.S.A.T.S., but was unable to for some reason. I shook the minigun, wondering if it wasn't still somehow on the fritz, but everything appeared to be working. The thing was just not able to be targeted! I growled under my breath. The Bitch whined above us, sending a missile soaring through the air at the path before the monster. The rubble exploded, but did not deter the black blur that went right through the flames. The beast stopped in its tracks, sending out a challenging roar that finally gave us a chance to see what we were up against.

As I'd already figured out, the thing had three heads, each one sporting a pair of red glowing orbs. Each head was canine in nature, highly akin to how a hellhound might look. Rows of shiny silver teeth lined the mouth of each head, long red tongues rolling out along with massive globs of drool. The beast's body looked like it shouldn't even feasibly support it, the bulky neck that split off into the three heads slimming down to a muscular canine body. Each of it's legs ended in a giant paw with razor sharp claws. It's tail tapered off, tiny glittering spikes adorning every few inches of it. It was a creature designed for killing.

“A cerberus!” Nixis proclaimed. I blinked.

“A what?” I said. I had never seen such a creature before, but clearly Nixis had, or at least knew what it was. I stood at the ready, watching the beast. It hadn't started moving yet, merely standing there and studying us, like it was analyzing how best to rip us apart.

“A cerberus,” Nixis said. “I... I didn't think they were even real. According to some of the books I've read, they were originally guard dogs for the realm of Tartarus.”

“Tartarus?” I said. That was another new one on me. I'd never heard of such a place. It didn't sound like a very nice place, though. Nixis nodded. He didn't get any further chance to explain what he meant. The giant three-headed dog snarled, leaping forward at the makeshift vine barrier. I grimaced, turning Stargazer downwards and firing, sending a blaze of blue laser light at the monster. It dodged in mind-air, somehow bending its body around the stream of fire. Landing, the creature turned its snarling attentions to me. One of its massive paws came out of nowhere, smacking me out of the sky. I grunted, hitting the ground with a ***thud***. Within seconds, all three of the thing's heads were hovering over me. Its red eyes glared.

“Umm... good... doggy?” I said sheepishly. I could feel and smell the breath of the monster's heads. I

almost passed out from the foul stench. The beast lunged, and I reacted as best as I could, casting Shining Armor's shield. The three heads struck the shield in unison, roaring in anger as the purple barrier prevented them from eating me alive. The cerberus didn't get another chance to strike, Nixis' attack turning its attention elsewhere. Nixis had leaped out from our makeshift wall and was running along the creature's back, slamming his claws into the base of the cerberus' necks. Howling, the beast bucked up, attempting to fling the hellhound into the air. Nixis clung to it, refusing to give up. His claws dug in deeper, forcing a cry from the cerberus. The monster's frantic thrashing eventually dislodged my friend and Nixis jumped away, barely missed by a slash from the canine monster's claws.

Dropping my shield, I pushed myself to my hooves, lifting Stargazer. I dropped into E.S.A.T.S., still couldn't lock onto the cerberus, so I aimed carefully and let forth a stream of fire. The cerberus snarled as it took the full brunt of Stargazer's upgraded firepower, shrugging it off and batting at me with a paw. I re-activated my shield with a flare of my horn, taking the blow in stride. Something just didn't add up about this thing showing up now. It had to mean something. In the back of my mind, I really doubted that Patch's cries had drawn the beast, rather it was already on its way to see us. But why? A sliver of thought came forth. *Cruelty... She must be back. She's the only one of the five who would operate by proxy like this*, I thought. *Shit... that's not good*. My mind rolled back to the hydra I'd fought that the yellow alicorn had so casually discarded. If she was controlling the cerberus, there was no telling how rough this thing could be.

"Star!" I heard Lilith shout from above. "You alright down there?"

"Been better," I called up, holding the shield up as best as I could while the cerberus attacked. It roared loudly, clearly frustrated that it couldn't get to what it had construed as easy prey. "Be on the lookout for a yellow alicorn. I've got a feeling this thing isn't alone!" Lilith nodded, her attention turning to the sky to search for any sign of Cruelty. I glanced up at the cerberus, my horn feeling very strained at holding the shield spell for so long. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait much longer. Several long vines burst forth from the ground, wrapping around the cerberus' legs and holding it in place. The monster snarled, its attention turned away from me and to the vines. Dropping my shield spell, I lifted into the air, ready to strike at Cruelty if she showed.

She didn't. After several tense moments, the cerberus had managed to break free of its bonds and was attempting to scale the barrier that Sunshine Sky had erected. There was no sign of Cruelty anywhere. Had I been wrong? I scowled, bringing Stargazer to bear. I fired, hitting the cerberus in the rear legs. It howled in pain, pulling away from the barrier to try and leap into the air at me. My eyes widened as the sky was suddenly full of giant three-headed dog. It slammed into me hard, forcing me from the sky. I hit the ground, gasping for breath and starting to move before the cerberus could land on me. The beast thundered onto the rocks next to me, its red eyes turned right at me. All three heads were snarling. I pushed myself to all four hooves, shaking but alive.

"Where's your mistress, huh, boy? Why doesn't she show herself?" I muttered under my breath. My side hurt. Why did it seem like every time we ended up in a skirmish with anything in this forest that I ended up getting seriously injured? I was getting really sick and tired of it. The cerberus was getting tired too. Its breathing was labored, the injuries it had already sustained from Stargazer's blasts slowly getting to it. I took a step forward. The cerberus roared in response. I grimaced. "You're not here for Cruelty are you? What am I saying... you probably don't even understand me." The cerberus went silent, its red eyes fixated on me.

"Star!" I heard a voice from behind me. I looked back briefly to see Sunshine Sky and Nixis. "Are

you alright?" I nodded, my eyes returning to the three-headed dog. It wasn't attacking. Why wasn't it attacking? I took another step forward. It roared again in defiance. Then I realized what was going on. It was afraid of me. I had seriously hurt it, and it didn't like that fact.

"Whoah there... we're not going to hurt you, ummm... boy?" I said, chancing a guess at the creature's gender. The cerberus growled under its breath, continuing its glare. I felt wing beats behind me as Lilith landed.

"No sign of that yellow alicorn bitch," she said. "What's wrong with that thing? A minute ago it was all bite." I grimaced again.

"I think Cruelty is playing with us," I said. "She's definitely behind this... I can smell it. But I don't think this beast came willingly. It came because she told it to."

"So it doesn't actually want to hurt us?" Sunshine Sky asked. I looked back up at the cerberus. It snarled but kept its distance from us.

"I don't think so," I said. I took a step forward, latching Stargazer to its harness. I lifted a hoof. "Look. We don't want to hurt you, but you were close to hurting my friends. I'm sorry I shot you. Can you understand me?" The cerberus rumbled, but nodded slightly with its three heads.

"The beast is scared," Nixis said. "I can smell the fear in the air. But its fear is not directed at us." I blinked.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Cerberus' like this one were tasked to guarding the deep dark places of the world that led to the realm of Tartarus, otherwise known as the Underworld," Nixis said. "Of course, Tartarus itself is a myth, some place I've only ever read about in books. I've never seen an actual gate, or an actual cerberus before today." He lifted a claw to his chin. "He must have been forced to be on the attack, instead of guarding. He fears the one who did that may return still."

"Cruelty," I said angrily. "Shit... and he just took us away from Violet and Avira. It's a fucking distraction!" I hurlyed myself into the air, beating my wings hard to make my way back to the clearing further up the mountain. I landed, noting that Violet and Avira, along with Patch were still there. Patch was breathing hard and heavy, Violet hovering over her and doing her best to keep the mare calm. Avira stayed nearby, handing Violet anything that she was asking for. Something was off. Cruelty wasn't here. If this was a distraction... what kind was it?

"The kind that gets you, and only you, just where I want you," a voice, silky and smooth through the whipping winds replied, as if reading my mind. I turned, grimacing. There she was. Standing atop the ruins of the collapsed cave entrance that had felled the dragon. Cruelty. Her coat was marred and her wings were bedraggled, the gem in her chest only glowing faintly. A wicked grin emerged along her lips as she regarded Violet and Avira, who had just noticed her presence. "Oh how sweet, new foals for me to play with. I shall show them the ways of true harmony."

"The fuck you will," I said, flapping hard and landing in front of her. "You'll leave them out of this, if you know what's good for you."

"Mmm... you know the last time we fought, you quite surprised me, Radiant Star. But our bodies are far more durable than yours, and it didn't take long for mine to regain its strength," Cruelty said, licking her lips.

"That was before I knew how to fight you," I said. "Or haven't you heard? I killed Obsession and Deceit."

"Killed? Hah! More like dispersed," Cruelty said. "You may have managed to destroy their mortal forms, but as long as Spark controls the spirits of Harmony, we will never stop. And once we have our own bodies, we will rule the Wasteland in perfection!"

"You're fucking crazy, you know that?" I said, stomping a hoof. "You just don't get it. You think that just because you're some overpowered spirit that it gives you the right to rule?" I growled, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. "You don't! I won't let it. I will stop you, Spark, and this whole crazy thing!"

"You can certainly try, Radiant Star," Cruelty replied. "But I think I ought to warn you. Your friends down the mountain will have to contend with my new pet. That was part of the distraction, after all. Separate you from them, kill them with a lovely little cerberus." She giggled. "But you... I get to kill you all by myself." I grimaced. My friends could more than take care of themselves... I hoped. Thoughts of Steeljack filled my mind. I heard roars down the path and silently prayed to Luna that they would be alright. They would have to be. I glanced back at Violet. She nodded and went back to working with Patch. There was no moving her, or it would risk hurting her or the foals. I couldn't live with myself if I managed to get Steeljack's unborn children killed. I had to get Cruelty away from the others, and finish her off myself.

"Then let's do this," I said, returning my gaze to Cruelty. "You. Me. Right here. Let's end this, Cruelty."

"Oh yes, let's," the yellow alicorn replied nonchalantly. She stepped forward, flaring her wings. Her eyes widened and I stopped dead in my tracks. *Shit, I remember this from the last time*, I thought as I tried to move my body. I couldn't move. Cruelty grinned widely. "Yes... You can't fight my powers, you pathetic excuse for an alicorn. Your body and your magic are too weak for me." I strained, trying to move even one muscle, but her Stare held me in place.

"I'm not weak," I said. Cruelty snarled, her eyes widening further, my jaws slamming shut to keep me from speaking. She chuckled.

"Really? You're pathetic," she said. She lifted her head, expecting me to come back with some quip. I couldn't. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" *Why can't I fight this? I thought. How can I fight her if I can't even move?!* Cruelty trotted up to me, keeping me firmly locked within her Stare. Her horn flared, creating a blade of pure yellow magic out of thin air. "You know I was really pissed off that you destroyed me, but I think we can let bygones be bygones. I'll cut your head off, and you'll be dead. That sounds like a fair and kind apology, doesn't it?" I struggled, flaring my horn, pouring as much magic as I could to break through the Stare. Shining Armor's shield spell blazed into existence, cutting off Cruelty's spell. Finally! I was able to move!

"Fuck you!" I shouted, sending out a wave of telekinesis that knocked the alicorn back. Dropping my shield, I forged my own magical blade out of magic and anger. I charged forward, slapping Cruelty in

the side of her face with the flat of the blade. She growled, punching me in the face with her hoof. I reeled back, grunting. Cruelty pressed the attack, slashing at me wickedly. I dodged to the side, slapping her on the flank with my magical blade as she passed by me.

“You bitch!” Cruelty snarled, spinning about to flare her wings. Her horn ignited, shooting a blast of telekinesis that sent me flying into the pile of rubble below the cave entrance. Pain shot through my sides as tiny bits of sharp rock dug into my skin. Cruelty hovered over me, floating her magical blade out beside her.

“You won't win,” I said. “My friends will come, and then you'll see just how powerful that magic really is.” Cruelty snorted.

“The magic of friendship? Please. What a joke,” she said. She stepped over me, pushing me down as I tried to get up. Her eyes widened and her Stare kicked in once more, freezing me in place. “Your friends are already dead. My new little pet will see to that. Do you like him? I found him nearby, lost and alone. I was so kind to him. I gave him a job to do.”

“You mean you forced him here,” I spat. I'd seen the fear in the cerberus' eyes. The beast hadn't been there under his own will, and I knew it.

“Well... I am highly persuasive,” Cruelty replied. “Once I've disabled you, I'll kill the rest of your little friends and take you back to Spark. I might even take you back in one piece. I mean... it's not like she needs your life or anything, just your body.” I growled under my breath.

“You lay one hoof on my friends...” I started to say.

“Or you'll what? Kill me?” Cruelty tittered. “I don't think so. I am in control here, Radiant Star. The Elements will be victorious!”

“What makes you so sure about that?” I said angrily. Cruelty's gaze lowered to Stargazer, which was still attached to its harness. I knew what she wanted. The shard. I flared my horn, disconnecting the gun and tossing it to the side. Stargazer clattered loudly as it bounced across the rubble, but I knew it would be fine. It had survived worse impacts. I grinned, knowing that Cruelty wouldn't be able to take her eyes off of me to go after it, otherwise risk letting me free of her Stare. It was her weakness, I had realized. She needed to be looking at her prey to control it.

“You won't get the shard,” I challenged. Cruelty grinned.

“Oh, I'm not worried about your half,” she said, putting a hoof up to her mouth thoughtfully. “I'll have it soon enough. Then I'll go see Avarice at the gates. She's probably already there trying to pry out the last shard. I'm pretty sure that it won't come out though unless we have yours, though. I suppose that means I'll have to kill you now. I had so hoped you'd make this easy on me...” Her magical blade started to lower towards my throat.

“Yeeeeeeeeehaaaawww!!” I heard a voice cut through the clearing. A loud crash and a louder roar accompanied it, causing Cruelty to falter. Her Stare fell away, allowing me to move once more. I jumped away from the mare's reach, my eyes following where the noise had come from. Sunshine Sky was *riding* the cerberus, a set of reins made out of magical vines attached to each of the beast's three heads. Nixis rode behind her. The pink mare crowed again as the canine monster leaped across the

clearing, snarling loudly at Cruelty. The alicorn mare scowled, flaring her horn and widening her eyes to cast her Stare.

“Oh no you don't,” I said, emitting a burst of telekinesis that knocked the yellow mare to the ground. Sunshine and Nixis jumped from the side of the cerberus to the ground.

“Good boy!” Sunshine said. “Now, go get her!” She pointed across the clearing at Cruelty. The yellow mare screeched as the cerberus, clearly pissed at his former master, charged down at her. Cruelty's horn ignited, teleporting her out of the way up into the air. The cerberus wheeled about, looking for her. She growled under her breath.

“But it was *my* pet!” She shrieked. “How did you stop it?!” Sunshine scoffed.

“You forgot one thing,” the pink mare said. “You forgot to be kind to it. Even big doggies like him need a little love, Cruelty.”

“That's right,” Lilith called out, landing next to me. “And you also forgot what we're capable of when we stick together, right Star?” I nodded, grinning.

“I'm so glad you guys are alright,” I said. “What in the hell happened down there?”

“Cruelty thought she had control of Snappy,” Sunshine said, glaring hard at the yellow alicorn. “You frightened him, you bitch.”

“Snappy?” I said, blinking. The three-headed dog growled in affirmation. I realized she meant the cerberus. I had to admit, it fit all too well. “Nevermind... Alright, Cruelty. The game is over. Give yourself up and I'll make this easy on you.” Cruelty sneered.

“I don't think so,” she said. “I saw what you did to the others. You won't catch me off guard like you did them.” Her horn flared, firing a blast of telekinesis at us. I responded by throwing up my alicorn shield, batting away the blast like it was nothing. When the light from the blast cleared, Cruelty was gone. Disappeared. I grimaced.

“Shit,” I said. “She fucking ran away!” The cerberus, or Snappy as Sunshine had so eloquently named him, let out a low howl. I looked up at him, smiling softly. “Are you alright?” The three-heads bobbed up in down in a sequence of nods. One of the heads turned to nibble at the beast's flank.

“Snappy here is a good boy!” Sunshine said, running up to the monstrous dog and wrapping her hooves around one of its heads. It rumbled happily at the embrace. I blinked. Lilith stepped up to me and chuckled.

“It's best not to question it,” she said. “I don't even get it, but when you flew back up here, Sunshine was able to get it to calm down. It's like a big puppy to her.”

“Can we keep him?” Sunshine interjected, grinning. I blinked again.

“I don't think that would be wise. He has a home he has to return to, I'm sure of it,” I said. The cerberus rumbled in affirmation. I stepped forward, a low growl emitting from one of its heads. “Whoa, boy. I'm not going to harm you. In fact... I owe you thanks.” I lowered to my front knees in

front of the monster. "If you hadn't intervened I may have died here. Thank you."

The cerberus regarded me for a few silent moments before taking a few steps forward. I felt its hot breath on the side of my face and then a tongue that gave me a very slobbery kiss. I chuckled, reaching up and patting one of the heads on the nose. The three-headed dog pulled back and turned, barking happily before it went scampering off the mountain cliff and back towards the forest. Sunshine groaned.

"Aww, I wanted him to stay," she said. I rolled my eyes.

"I know, but we can't just *keep* a cerberus as a pet, Sky," I said, chuckling.

"Indeed. According to legend, the cerberus' are actually compelled to guard their homes. It's in their nature," Nixis said. "I'm surprised Cruelty was able to get one to do what she wanted."

"I'm not. That bitch... she probably forced it to do what she wanted with that Stare of hers," I said. "And now she's fucking gone. The coward."

"Any idea where she went?" Lilith said. "I don't relish the thought of her getting the idea of sneaking up on us again."

"She mentioned something about gates, and Avarice," I said, sighing out of my anger. I trotted over to where Stargazer had fallen. I picked it up in my magic, attaching it to its harness. It was a little scuffed up but otherwise was no worse for wear. I slid open the power compartment, the star-crystal glowing brightly still inside. "It sounds like they know where the final shard is already. We're going to have to try and get there before them." A sharp cry cut through our silence. I realized that in the midst of the brief skirmish with Cruelty that I'd completely forgotten about Patch and the others. I turned back and blanched white at what I saw. I closed my eyes and put my head to the ground, hearing the chuckles from the others.

"Jeez, Star, you act like you ain't never seen one of those before," Lilith teased. "And I know for sure that ain't true."

"I... I just... I think I'll wait over here, if that's alright with you!" I shouted. I really hadn't needed to see... *that*. It was uncomfortable for me to see a close friend of mine that exposed. I stood for what felt like forever, my eyes shut tight. Patch's panting and sharp grunts began to get more intense and then... they stopped. I almost fainted. Picking my head back up, I started to turn to make sure that she was alright when I heard the most incredible sound I'd ever heard in my life.

Crying. Two wonderful little voices filling the air with the sound of crying. I opened my eyes and saw Violet next to Patch. She was holding two young foals in her magic and was in the process of covering them up with parts of her own cloth barding. I trotted over, my curiosity finally getting the better of me. Patch was no longer so exposed, and was instead covered up with the blanket out of Violet's saddlebags. She lay there still, almost too still, and I began to wonder if everything was alright.

"Is... Is she..." I started to say before her good eye opened wide. She smiled.

"I'm... I'm alright," she breathed out. "Just... tired." Violet looked up at me and winked.

"I should say so," my marefriend replied. "These two took a hell of a lot out of you." Her horn flared, bringing the two foals over to rest next to their mother. By the light of Violet's magic, I saw them for the first time. The colt was a deep grey color, his eyes blue as his father's had been. His mane was spiky much like Steeljack's, but was instead a grand navy color. His wings were tiny, and he was a bit filthy, but otherwise whole and intact. The filly on the other hand was as dark a green as her mother, but with a brilliant black mane that held a blue streak through it. I could see her horn as I looked into her eyes, orbs of the loveliest shade of grey. I smiled widely as they stopped crying, gazing upon me with awe. I slumped to my haunches next to Patch, placing a hoof on her shoulder.

"They're... they're beautiful, Patch," I said. "They're so amazing."

"My... my babies," Patch said softly, lifting her leg to bring the two foals close. They snuggled in with their mother, cooing quietly.

"Congratulations," Lilith said, giving her friend a close nuzzle. "Have you thought of what you're going to name them?" Patch nodded.

"The colt... his name is Lightning Chaser," she said, panting. It was clear that she was very, very tired. "And the filly... she's Starry Night." I smiled wide again.

"They are excellent names, my friend," I said. I reached down, extending my neck so that the foals could see me. "Hello little ones... I'm your... your godmother." Starry Night looked up curiously, lifting her tiny hoof and booping me in the nose. I grinned from ear to ear.

"Ohmygosh they're so cute!" Sunshine said. "I'm so so so happy for you!"

"I wish... I wish he could have been here..." Patch breathed. I sighed, nuzzling my friend closely. Steeljack may have been gone, but he was here in spirit.

"He would have been proud," I said softly. Patch nodded slowly, turning her attention to her foals. She pulled them close to her body as they started to nod off. I looked to the others. "I think perhaps we should let the new mother rest."

"I agree," Violet said. "Besides... we're planning on going back to Ponyville, right?" I grimaced, shaking my head.

"No. Plans have... changed."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes. There's no other way," I said, glancing over at Lilith. We all had retreated to the other side of the clearing, leaving Patch to rest with her newborn foals. Nixis had managed to start up a fire as the night began to fall. "Patch won't be able to travel easily on ground with the foals, and she'll be too tired anyways."

"But, Star," Violet protested. "We could use the supplies." I grimaced, shaking my head.

"There's no time," I replied. "Cruelty mentioned something about some gates, and meeting another of the Elements there. She said they knew where the last shard was. We need to get there before they do. They already have one of the shards, we can't let them have any more of them."

"But... you want me to fly Patch back to Ponyville?" Lilith said. I nodded.

"You're strong, Lilith. With the cart that Avira brought here, you'll be able to get them back safe and sound. Avira will go with you," I said. "She can provide any cover fire for anything that might attack on the way out of the forest."

"I will protect young Patch with my life," Avira commented. "But I agree with the Ministry Mare. We cannot leave her here, nor can you take her with you into combat with the foals." Lilith grimaced, sighing.

"Alright. I'll do it. I just... I hate leaving you guys," she said. "I just have a bad feeling about it." I smiled.

"Listen, your power armor has a tracker in it just like a PipBuck, right?" I offered. Lilith nodded. "Good. You'll be able to track my PipBuck tag then. Once you've gotten Patch situated, you can fly right back and join us. I promise we won't kick Spark's ass too hard before you get back." The black mare grinned.

"Sure thing," she said. "When do you want me to leave?"

"As soon as it's light out," I said. "We should give Patch and the foals time to rest first. They need it. The rest of us will be leaving earlier. We have little time to catch up with Cruelty and this... Avarice." I grimaced. I was pretty sure I knew which of the Elements that Avarice represented. *Generosity*, I thought.

"I still don't like this," Violet said. "But it's best for Patch to get the care she needs. Lilith... can you perhaps pick up some more medical supplies as well?" Lilith nodded. I stood, stretching out my legs.

"It's settled then. Everyone, prepare your things and say your goodbyes," I said. I trotted over to where Patch was lying, smiling softly as she opened her good eye at my approach.

"So, you're leaving," she said. It wasn't a question. I sighed, nodding.

"Unfortunately," I replied. "Avira and Lilith are going to ensure your safe return back to Ponyville, by the means of air carriage." Patch grimaced.

"I heard. I've been trying to sleep, but... I want to make sure they're alright," she said, her head motioning to the two foals cradled next to her. They murmured but continued sleeping. I noticed that she was starting to look and sound much better.

"It is understandable," I said. "I wish there was another way, Patch, but there isn't. You need to be safe. I promised Steeljack that I would protect you."

"I know," Patch replied. "You know what he mouthed? When it... when it happened?" I shook my head. "He told me to go. That he loved me. I could see it clear as day. I need... I need to live so that I

can take care of them. They need me. So... I'll go. I don't like it, but I'll go. I just hope... I hope you find what you're looking for."

"I... I do too," I said, giving her a quick nuzzle. "I bid thee farewell, my dearest of friends. And to your foals... I shall see you soon. I love you both." I stood, smiling as I watched the rest of my friends shower Patch with affection and goodbyes. I trotted outside of the group, glancing down at Lilith. She looked disconcerted.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked. "You're trusting me with an awful lot here." I smiled.

"I'm sure. You've come a long way from Lust, my friend," I replied. Lilith snorted.

"Some nights I don't feel like I have," she said. I rested a hoof on her shoulder.

"Trust me," I said. "You have. I trust nopony else to take care of Patch, Lilith. You can do this. Just return safely to us." Lilith nodded. I looked over at Avira. She was cradling Para Bellum in her claws.

"It has been quite the honor to have met you, Ministry Mare," she said. "I pray to the great beyond that you come back as well." I smiled, thanking her and then trotting past to gather our things. Within twenty minutes we were ready to get going. Lilith and Avira stood vigilant next to Patch, loading up the cart to be ready to go at first light. I started down the mountain path leading back to the forest, Violet, Nixis, and Sunshine Sky at my side. The forest path was eerily quiet, far more quiet than it had been before we had set foot into it. No insect sounds, no general forest life, nothing. All in all, it felt... wrong.

"Does anypony else feel like we're being watched?" Sunshine said, her eyes scanning the dark forest for anything bad.

"Yeah... when did this place suddenly get so creepy?" Violet replied. I grimaced, pushing my way through the underbrush. I didn't disagree. There was a wrongness to the air that felt like the whole forest was watching us carefully. I didn't like it.

"Something's up," I said. "The whole forest is on edge. I just hope Patch and the others get back to Ponyville alright."

"I am sure they'll be fine," Nixis commented. "For now, let us focus on the immediate concerns..." He sniffed at the air. "Like running."

"Running?" I said, cocking my head in confusion. Loud noises suddenly came from all around us, the sounds of groans and the rustling of the underbrush. A pony shaped monstrosity appeared from the trees to our left. Its body was covered in a very familiar blue plant. *Killing joke*, I thought, grimacing. The creature howled, its voice inequine as it shambled forward. Two others appeared behind it. "Running it is, then!" I started into a canter, spurred forward by the others who were matching my speed. The joke-covered creatures followed behind, their slow shamble making it relatively easy for us to keep ahead.

"Keep running!" Violet shouted. "Don't let them touch you!" The path ahead of was getting more overgrown by the minute. Growls and groaning emanated from the monsters. Despite their slow movement, they were keeping on our tails easily. I didn't understand it. I pushed through the last bit of

forest to find myself at the base of a cliff in a small clearing. My eyes widened. We were trapped! I screeched to a halt, turning about and unlatching Stargazer. Violet did the same with Thunder Flash. We stood and waited. Then one of the monsters burst through the trees, lifting a hoof. Several blue tentacles erupted from it, shooting across the clearing at us. I growled, lifting my alicorn shield around us. The tentacles struck it, deflecting away. The joke ghoul retracted the tentacles, instead sending them into the ground. My eyes widened.

“Underground!” I shouted, extending my shield below us just as two of the thing's tentacles burst out from underneath us. They smacked into it hard, pulling away. The joke ghoul just stood there, waiting. Three more of them appeared from the brush. Then another three. They had us surrounded. I grimaced. “Shit. I can't hold the shield for too much longer. If any of those things touch us...”

“Yeah... killing joke. We know,” Violet breathed, keeping Thunder Flash trained on the impassive group of plant things. “They're like... like ghouls, only...”

“Animated,” Sunshine finished. “Animated by killing joke. Fucking mockery of life. Everypony hold still. I can handle this.” Her eyes flashed and her horn lit up, sending a wave of magic through the ground. Several large stalks of vines burst from the ground around us, creating a barrier of vegetation that blocked the view of the joke ghouls. Sunshine roared, pouring magic out of her horn. A colossal vine pushed out of the ground, acting as a platform that carried us up to the base of the cliff. I breathed a sigh of relief as I let the shield spell drop, stepping off from the stalk onto the cliff with care. I looked down at the ghoul-like creatures. They were staring impassively up at us as Sunshine dismissed the vines. She panted hard from her heavy magic use.

“They're not very smart,” I said, grimacing. “They don't even seem to be trying to get up here.” I felt a hoof tap me on the shoulder. I turned, my eyes widening. Surrounding us at the top of the cliff were roughly twenty more of the creatures. They groaned, shuffling towards us. The creatures were a lot smarter than I'd initially thought. “Oh.”

“Fuck,” Violet said. “We're gonna have to fight our way out. How long can you keep up your shield, Star?”

“Not long enough,” I said, raising Stargazer along with my shield spell. “We're going to have to make this quick.” I lifted the gun, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up as many shots as I could against the group of monsters. Dropping the spell, I let loose, sending streams of blue light at the joke-ghouls. The magical energy punched through several of the monstrosities, filling them with holes and knocking them to the ground. Violet had floated out Thunder Flash, sending blast after blast of silver fire into the joke-ghouls. It wasn't going to be enough. My horn flickered as I struggled to keep the shield spell up.

“Star, you alright?!” Sunshine shouted, her magic working overtime as well to create vines that attacked the surrounding creatures. She was sweating profusely, her horn flickering as well. “I can't keep this up too much longer! I really wasted myself casting that big vine!”

“Look for an opening and take it!” I called back. I grimaced. There wasn't any opening though, not that I could see. *I really really REALLY hate this forest*, I thought angrily. It seemed like every step we had taken in this place was just waiting to eat us alive. I roared, unleashing hell with Stargazer. It was the only thing I could do. My shield was still working, but not for long. The joke-ghouls were already testing its strength by pounding against it with their tentacle-appendages.

Then I heard a roar. I looked up, seeing a large black form in the distance. The cerberus. It had somehow managed to find us again. My eyes widened, hoping and praying to Celestia that the thing was still friendly to us. The three-headed dog snarled and snapped, challenging the joke-ghouls. The plant-creatures turned, starting towards the cerberus, which happily turned tail and started to run. It was giving us a chance! The joke-ghouls began to follow after, apparently considering a three-headed dog easier prey than three ponies and a hellhound. I wasn't about to argue that logic however.

“Snappy!” Sunshine called out. I scowled. I wasn't sure what would happen to the big dog if the joke-ghouls caught up with it, but I wasn't about to stick around and find out so they could do the same to us.

“Everypony run!” I called out, charging forward into the brush, sending sprays of fire at the straggling joke-ghouls. They dropped instantly and I broke through back onto a path. The others followed behind and we ran straight for several minutes before finally stopping. I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized that the joke-ghouls weren't following us. I dropped the shield spell, wincing a bit at the headache I was developing for running it for so long.

“Is everyone alright?” Violet said, quickly dropping her bags to pull out bottles of water for everyone. Nixis nodded, his paw outstretched as he held onto Sunshine Sky.

“I'm fine,” she said, wobbling a little, but standing nonetheless. “I can keep going.”

“I think sitting sounds like a good idea, myself,” I replied, smiling at the exhausted pony as I slumped to my haunches. “Sunshine, come over here and sit. You need to rest more than anyone else, you really overworked your magic again.”

“I'll be alright,” Sunshine protested, but I glared at her hard. She nodded silently and sat down next to me. She wobbled a bit more, but was able to get down fine. “Okay I suppose I could use some rest. But what if those things come back? What if they got Snappy?”

“I'm sure that 'Snappy' is just fine. He is a magical creature after all,” I said. Violet sat down across from us while Nixis stood watch, sniffing the air. “Nixis? You smell anything?” The hellhound shook his head.

“No. Those things... they are gone from our vicinity. I cannot smell the cerberus, either,” he said calmly. Sunshine gasped softly. “I agree with Star however. Cerberus' don't survive to live as long as that one did in this environment without being at least somewhat resilient.” I smiled.

“See, Sunshine? Nixis said a bunch of big words. He'll be alright,” I said, grinning. Sunshine rolled her eyes, taking a swig of her water. “Feeling better?”

“A little,” she said. “I've never made a vine that big before.” I nodded, my mind drawn back down to Stargazer. I opened it up and focused on the star-crystal core. It flashed for a brief second and shot forth its light that only I could see, showing that we weren't far from where the final shard piece was. In fact, it was just through the brush up ahead. Closing the power core up, I grimaced.

“We're close,” I said. “I only wonder if we've managed to beat Cruelty and Avarice here.” The others were looking at me, expressions blank. “What?”

"I... I forgot to ask earlier, but since when could Stargazer shoot magical energy?" Violet said. I blinked. I realized I had forgotten to tell anyone else about what Twilight had told me. "I mean... I thought it was just a minigun... but that was a gem core you just looked at."

"That... that's the shard pieces," I said simply. "Twilight told me that it was all part of a supposed power source that was originally designed for Stargazer. It was to convert it into a magical energy weapon."

"Twilight told you that?" Violet said, her eyes wary. "Star... I'm not so sure that's a good idea to listen to her. She's the whole reason we're in this mess to begin with." I rolled my eyes.

"I know, Violet," I replied. "But Twilight has helped me figure this out, how to stop Spark. I need her help." Violet grimaced, looking like she wanted to say more. I stretched out, standing up. "We don't have time for this. We'd better get moving. If Cruelty and Avarice get their hands on that last shard piece, we'll be in big trouble. You okay to go, Sunshine?" The pink mare nodded, pushing herself to her hooves.

"Lead the way," she said, smiling. I nodded, taking the lead position once more. We carefully crept forward through the forest, the line of magic pointing me to the shard piece fresh in my mind. I broke through the last bit of brush, my eyes widening as we stepped into the clearing. It was a dark hollowed out section of the woods, filled with ruins and rubble. In the center of it... was a gate. A massive stonework thing built out of rock that was as black as any night. At the top of the gate, in the center of the arch, was a glittering stone. *The shard!* I thought. I took a step forward, feeling the temperature drop instantly. That certainly wasn't normal!

"Star..." Nixis breathed. "This place... it's wrong..."

"What do you...?" I said, my eyes focused on the shard piece at the top of the gate. Nixis growled under his breath.

"That's a gate to Tartarus," he said. "The Underworld."

I blinked, taking long moments to compose myself before speaking. The shard in the keystone glittered brightly, giving off an unhallowed glow that permeated every inch of the clearing. The gate itself was untarnished by the ages of time. A stone door sat between the two arches, giving off the impression that it went somewhere, but behind the structure only lay the rest of the clearing.

"Tartarus," I said, my breath appearing in front of my face as I spoke. The temperature had dropped considerably since stepping into the clearing, and I was starting to feel the chill. "I thought you said that was a myth."

"I did," Nixis replied as we continued into the clearing. "However, I also thought that cerberus' were myths, and we encountered one."

"Not just one, you pathetic fools," a cruel and wicked voice called out from across the clearing. "The one and only." My eyes went up to one of the ruined structures. Two alicorns stood there. One of them I recognized. *Cruelty*, I thought. The yellow alicorn stood behind the other alicorn, a grimace of

fear in her expression. The other alicorn regarded us impassively. Her coat was white as snow, her mane carefully groomed and absolutely perfect, its magnificence glittering in the darkness. Her eyes shone a bright purple, and the gem in her chest matched their color perfectly. Her tail curled around, styled to bounce like a spring.

"I'm assuming you're Avarice," I said. The white mare grinned.

"That would be correct, darling," she said. Her voice was... soothing and silky, almost like a mother reassuring a foal that they would be alright. "And what my companion says is quite correct. You didn't just encounter any cerberus. You encountered *the* Cerberus. There was only ever one."

"What do you mean?" Nixis said, his expression one of confusion. "The books I read..."

"Your books were wrong," Avarice said, turning to Cruelty. "Why don't you show them, my dear?" Cruelty's eyes lit up, like she had been praised for something. It was clear that she was afraid of this other alicorn and sought her approval. I narrowed my gaze at Avarice. What did that say about her, and her abilities? Cruelty stepped forward, opening her mouth and emitting a harsh guttural roar. The trees to the east of us began to fall down as the three-headed dog appeared again in the clearing. He growled loudly. At *us*.

"I'm afraid that you were quite mistaken about a lot of things," the yellow alicorn said. "Cerberus wasn't being mind controlled. He wanted to help us. This was just a ruse, to get you here." As if on cue, Cerberus snarled. I grimaced. This whole thing had been a trap. One big trap to force us into a conflict with two Elements. Spark was getting smart. There wasn't a lot of ways out of this fight, without Steeljack or Lilith around our firepower was low. Three unicorns and a hellhound an army did not make.

"But... Snappy helped us," Sunshine said quietly. "He was afraid of you!" Cruelty scoffed.

"Of course... because I asked him to," she said as she happily fluttered over to the three-headed dog. She gave him a light nuzzle, grinning widely.

"But... but he helped us attack you!" Sunshine shouted. "You're controlling him again! He's not your pet!" Cruelty spun about, glaring at the pink mare.

"What do you know? Huh? He's not just a pet, he's my SNOOGY WOOGUMS!" She cried out. "And he's the nicest puppy I've ever known! So you shut your mouth!"

"That's not very cruel," Violet deadpanned.

"I'll show you cruel," the yellow alicorn snarled loudly. Her wings flared, ready to spring into action.

"Cruelty, darling, that will be enough," Avarice snapped. Instantly the other alicorn stopped, mutely nodding and flying back to stand next to Avarice's side.

"So, you tricked us. Why?" I asked. Avarice tittered lightly.

"You see, Radiant Star, after you destroyed both Obsession and Deceit, and after your little visit with Spark, she decided it was time to put you down for good," the white mare said. "After all, she only

needs your body. Your life and your friends are expendable.”

“Well she won't fucking get that,” I said forcefully. “I'll do whatever it takes to stop her.”

“So vulgar, darling,” Avarice replied, looking back at the yellow alicorn standing beside her. “Cruelty, my dear. Your little pet can finish the others. I will handle her.” Cruelty nodded, a wicked grin creeping along her face.

“Oh Cerberus?” She called out. The giant dog's three heads perked up immediately at the call of its master. “Be a good little puppy and kill them.” The dog snarled, turning towards us. It snapped, breaking into a charge. Violet moved to the side, bringing Thunder Flash to bear. She fired, hitting the dog square in one of its heads, causing it to falter.

“Star, you get the shard, we'll handle this thing,” she said. Nixis leaped into action, drawing Cerberus' attention. The three-headed monster roared and scampered towards the hellhound.

“Are you sure?” I said, eyes widened. Violet nodded, sending another blast of silver fire at Cerberus, causing another cry of pain from the monster.

“I'm sure, just go. We can handle this,” my marefriend replied. “Sunshine! Use your magic to ensnare it!”

“But... Snappy...” Sunshine said, and I realized that the pink mare was highly upset at the revelation that her former pet was not really her friend. Violet snarled loudly.

“Snap out of it, Sunshine!” She shouted. “We need your help!” Sunshine nodded weakly, her horn flaring to cast her vine spell at the legs of the three-headed dog. I grimaced, turning my attention to where Avarice and Cruelty stood. The white mare glanced at her counterpart.

“Go. Keep your mental link with Cerberus. Do not engage,” she said. “*Yet.*” I could hear the venom dripping in her voice as Cruelty nodded, taking wing to land on another part of the ruin where the others were busy dealing with Cerberus. I grimaced again. I couldn't spend the time to make sure my friends would be okay. I had to trust that they would pull through this. There wouldn't... couldn't be another Steeljack. Avarice looked down at me and grinned. “Now then. Radiant Star, is it?”

“That's right,” I said. “I'm guessing that you're supposed to be Generosity?”

“Indeed, darling. That was my name, once long ago. Now I am Avarice, and my beauty is second to none,” the white mare replied. “I suppose then that we should start. You want the crystal, I want the crystal and your head on a silver platter. Seems like we both want something.”

“I want you to leave us alone, you bitch,” I retorted. “Spark will never succeed. I will stop you and this whole plan of yours.”

“How frightfully uncouth of you,” Avarice said. “I am afraid that I cannot let you stop us. Soon, we will have true physical form, and we will rule this... Wasteland you ponies have created. But enough of that... let us begin.” Her horn glowed briefly, flickering out with no noticeable effect. I narrowed my gaze at the white alicorn, lifting Stargazer into the air. It had worked well against Obsession, so I figured it would work well against this one too. I fired a blast of blue light at where the mare was

standing, the beams hitting some sort of invisible wall and bouncing back towards the ground. I yelped loudly as they nearly hit me.

“What in the...?” I said. “A shield spell? Please. Be more original.” Avarice chuckled, her voice carrying all around me. It was like it was everywhere.

“Oh... you are quite amusing, Radiant Star,” she said. “This isn't a shield spell. It's a *prison*.” My eyes widened. A faint shimmer emanated from in front of the white alicorn, and her image shifted. I spun about, realizing that I couldn't see the others anymore. Not even Cerberus or Cruelty appeared. Just an empty ruin and every facet of it containing an Avarice. Several of the images were distorted, stretched, or only contained her head. I realized that she was right. I was trapped inside a giant crystal prison. I couldn't tell how many walls there actually were, nor exactly how big the place even was.

Her horn. That must have been the spell she cast, I thought. She's fast. I growled, sending a blast of telekinesis at one of the Avarice's. It splashed against the surface of the wall, revealing a perfectly flat facet of crystal. A burnt spot remained where I had struck it. Avarice merely cackled.

“I'm afraid that won't do you any good, darling,” her voice echoed throughout the crystal prison. “This prison is absolutely flawless. You can't escape.” I scowled, charging at another one of the reflections, slamming into the hard crystal wall as the image flickered. Avarice laughed heartily as I pushed myself back up. I tasted copper. I grimaced, wiping my mouth with a fetlock. I felt blood come away. My jaw was burning, but I forced through the pain to spin around and lift Stargazer into the air.

“Show yourself!” I called out. “Fight me for real! Coward!”

“Coward? How uncouth,” Avarice nonchalantly replied. “I'm no coward, Radiant Star. I am a lady. And ladies simply don't duel the way you beastly Wasteland ponies do.” I roared, sending a stream of fire across the inside of the prison. It struck the wall, the image of Avarice disappearing as the beams bounced off. *How in the hell am I supposed to break out of this? I thought. I don't know shit about counterspells. I'm not even sure what kind of magic this falls under! Where's Violet when I need her, she'd know all about this.*

“Then prove it!” I called out, trying to bide my time. I hoped that I could goad the white alicorn into an actual confrontation. “Come out here and fight me!”

“Oh, you are quite the silly one, aren't you?” Avarice said. “I don't intend to fight you, Radiant Star. I'm *capturing* you. Once my dear Cruelty has taken care of your friends, we will take you to Spark. Your body will provide the magic needed to carry forth our ascension to Goddesses of the Wasteland.”

I blinked. Of course. It was a distraction tactic. Keep me occupied while the others were killed or worse, and then whisk me away to my ultimate fate. Well I wasn't going to let that happen. I had to do something. I flared my horn, casting a teleportation spell to see if I could escape from the prison. The magic exploded, sending me reeling back to the ground. Pain exploded in my horn from the magical feedback. Avarice laughed heartily.

“Did you really think you could escape so easily?” She said. “This place is barred from teleportation magic. Any effort to cast such a spell will eventually kill you. So do keep trying, darling. It's quite amusing.”

"F-F-Fuck you," I stuttered, trying to get up. "I will escape, and I'll save my friends. You won't keep me here!" I managed to get to my hooves, trying to process what to do. I knew that Avarice could see me through the prison. What if I gave her nothing to see? Could I block her from view so I could have some time to think of a way out?

My horn ignited once more, reaching into my mind for as much magic as I could possibly harness. Instead of attempting a teleportation spell, I sent a wave of telekinesis out that impacted every possible surface around me. The disjointed walls and ceilings of the crystal prison immediately went black under the impact of the magic, dimming the light present in my prison. I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I sat for several minutes of silence before the other alicorn spoke again.

"You are starting to very much annoy me, Radiant Star. I can see that going quietly is not going to work for you," Avarice said harshly. "I shall have to destroy you myself." I grinned. This was exactly what I was hoping for. A shape formed out of crystals at the far end of the prison. Avarice appeared in the flesh, her horn flaring as she created a brilliant sword made of crystals.

"Nice of you to finally show yourself," I said, igniting my own horn and creating a magical blade. Stargazer reattached back to my harness. Avarice grinned wickedly.

"I warn you, Radiant Star," she said. "You will not survive so easily against me like you did with the others."

"Bring it on," I replied cockily. I needed to throw her off her game somehow. Get close enough to cast the memory spell. A close combat sword-fight was just the thing I needed to do that.

"Very well then," Avarice said calmly. Her magic coated the blade she had created, and then suddenly there was utter chaos. The blade split apart into fourteen distinct crystals, each one spinning deadly as they came across the clearing at me. I yelped loudly, using my own blade to try and deflect when one of them came close. One of the crystals tore past my defense, grazing my shoulder. It burned! I cried out in pain, lifting a hoof to the wound. It had already cauterized itself! The crystals were searing hot! I growled, charging forward with my magical blade.

"Fancy spellcasting won't get you anywhere!" I shouted, intent on thrusting at Avarice's throat. The white mare grinned, flicking her horn. The crystals from her blade came together again, blocking my strike before dispersing once more. I jumped back just as four of the things struck the ground. Avarice laughed darkly.

"Is that the best you can do, darling?" She said, her voice light and airy. "I find it hard to believe that you of all ponies could have defeated Obsession and Deceit. But then again... neither of them were as strong as I am." I growled again, sending my blade back in for another strike, this time a slash. As expected, Avarice's crystals blocked, sending my magical blade reeling. It hit the hard crystal, disappearing in a flash of magic.

"Oh no," I said angrily, taking the opportunity presented. "I'm just getting started." I was gambling on the fact that it took time for her crystals to form and disperse, but it was the only idea I had at the time. As quickly as I could, Stargazer came up and I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time stood still as I queued up my shots. I released the spell, my minigun taking aim and spewing lasery death at the white alicorn. She reacted faster than I'd assumed, using her spare crystals to try and deflect the fire. One of the blasts grazed her face, burning her slightly. She snarled loudly.

“You... you've marred me!” She howled, placing a hoof to her now imperfect face. “HOW DARE YOU?!! I will destroy you for that!” The glow of her horn intensified, gathering more crystals into the air to fill into her blade. Soon, twenty shards of crystal buzzed and spun around the white mare. She roared, sending each and every one of them zipping at me. My eyes widened and my horn flared, instinctively casting Shining Armor's shield spell. The crystal shards struck it like nothing I'd ever felt before, hard edged fire in dozens of different locations at the same time. Somehow, the shield held. I grinned.

“What's the matter, Avarice?” I catcalled. “You get a beauty mark you don't like?” I grimaced as another wave of crystals battered my shield. My horn was already feeling the pressure of keeping up the spell. It wouldn't last for very long. I needed to cast the memory spell, and soon. How were the others holding up against Cerberus? How long had I even been here? A third wave of crystals slammed into the shield, finally shattering the magical barrier. Avarice stood, huffing and puffing as she maintained her control over the shards. Was she tired? I couldn't tell.

“I... I must admit that you are indeed quite strong,” she said calmly. I raised an eyebrow. She was far more calm than she had been a second ago. “I haven't ever had an opponent quite like you, darling. I must commend you for that. You even managed to... to mar my face. No one has ever done that before.” I blinked.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “You've had other opponents besides me?” Avarice grinned. *Yeah... that's right. Start talking, I thought. Keeps you from killing me sooner.*

“There was a time when the Elements of Harmony were real ponies, you know,” Avarice said. “Before the Tree of Harmony, before the time of Discord. When Equestria was wild and free, just as this forest is. When the ponies of the world cared more for it than they did themselves.”

“And you were real then?” I said. I had never heard this story before. The Elements were flesh and blood ponies once? What had happened to them? Was that why they wanted to have bodies again? I grimaced, shaking the thoughts from my mind. This was just to keep her talking. I had to have a plan to get in close. *Maybe a teleportation spell would work, I thought. But the prison is warded against that... unless... the prison is only warded from trying to teleport outside of it! Inside still might work!*

“Indeed, I was. I was once a proud and noble alicorn,” Avarice replied. “My friends and I... we each walked the paths that led us to our specific virtue. The Element of Harmony we represented.” She scowled and I frowned. That wasn't a good sign. “Oh, dear. I see what you're doing. You've got me monologuing! How silly of me to fall for that. I shall resolve to make your death quick, Radiant Star. Then we won't have to deal with such niceties as conversation.” The crystal shards in the air began to hum and buzz again. I flared my horn, hoping that I was right.

My efforts were met with some measure of success as I appeared in an explosive burst behind Avarice, knocking the white mare forward to the ground. She grunted loudly, struggling to get back to her hooves. I floated out Stargazer, bringing it to bear across the alicorn's face, breaking her concentration. Her floating shards fell to the ground, crashing loudly against the rough crystal surface.

“Stay down!” I shouted, using my weight to pin her. Avarice snarled, her horn igniting again to try and regain control of her shards. I lunged forward, sending my own spell out of my horn as the tips touched, and the world fell away into absolutely blackness.

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“Really, darling, you are quite lovely. I'm sure he'll propose,” I heard Rarity's voice before I saw her. I blinked. The city I was in was deathly familiar, albeit far cleaner than I had seen it. Manehattan. Ponies flittered to and fro through its crowded streets. Billboards for Sparkle Cola were accompanied by war propaganda posters that reminded the citizens of Equestria about the evils of the zebra.

The Ministry Mare of Image herself trotted around the corner, accompanied by a fetching younger earth mare, the latter clad in a cute little scarf and a beret while the former wore a dress I'd seen her in as part of her station. Flanking the two of them were two unicorns, identical in the trappings of security detail. The younger mare nodded, her cream coat shining in the sun.

“I... I don't know, Rarity,” the mare said. “He said he wanted to talk. You know what that means!” She stomped her hoof. I couldn't help but grin at that. She was terribly cute.

“Coco, you must have some faith in yourself. You are one of the most talented fashion designers in the country, not to mention the head of your own magazine. He'd be quite mad to not want to propose to you,” Rarity replied seriously. “Besides... you getting married would mean I would get to design your dress. It would only be right, after all.” Coco rolled her eyes and giggled as the two ponies found a quiet place in a nearby park to sit. I followed behind, keeping tabs on the memory as it continued to play. Rarity nodded at her security detail, who disappeared, saying nothing.

“I was actually surprised to hear from you, Rarity,” Coco went on to say. “I was under the impression that you didn't want to speak with me anymore.”

“Darling! Don't ever think that,” Rarity said, placing a hoof on Coco's shoulder. “You're one of my oldest friends, after all. What would ever give you that idea?” Coco sighed.

“I just... I just thought you might have been mad at me over Suri,” she said. “You two never got along well, and I know she said some... things.” Rarity smiled.

“I will admit I was... distraught over the fact that you had hired her,” she said. “But I could never stay mad at you over that. You were only doing what you had to for your business, and I was being called to assist Luna with the Ministries. How is Ms. Polomare these days?” The Ministry Mare's horn lit up, two glasses filled with wine appearing from nowhere. She offered one to Coco, who took it graciously.

“She's... better,” Coco said, smiling. “She's done a fabulous job managing the models, the magazine spreads, you know.”

“To be honest, I'm jealous just a tiny bit, darling,” Rarity said, taking a sip of her wine. “To be young, and to be free to do what you want with your life. There are days when I wish...” Coco cocked her head.

“Wish what?” She asked. Rarity smiled again, taking another sip.

“Nothing to concern yourself with, my friend. Now, tell me more about this special somepony of yours,” she said. “Is he handsome?” Coco grinned. Time fell into a frozen state as I noticed the white alicorn behind Rarity. Generosity looked down upon the Ministry Mare of Image with a warmth I

hadn't ever seen.

"I miss her greatly," she said. "I had forgotten just how much she put the needs of others before herself. A true spirit of Generosity." I nodded. The spirit mare looked up at me and smiled. "I'm sorry that it had to come to this, Radiant Star. Spark's strength is overpowering the spirits of Harmony. The corruption is too deep to save any of us."

"It's not that deep," I said, narrowing my gaze at her. "I know that I can do it. I have to. The world depends on it."

"I admire your dedication, darling," Generosity replied. "But the stronger Spark becomes, the more the corruption spreads to her."

"Corruption?" I said, raising an eyebrow. Generosity nodded. "You mean... Nightmare?"

"Indeed. Spark's soul, her magic, were tainted by the Nightmare. Her dreams of power fueled by the megalomania that was Nightmare," she said. "Power corrupts, Radiant Star. Never forget that." I grimaced.

"I... I need your help, then," I said. "Spark is dangerous. She's going to sow destruction throughout Equestria." Generosity narrowed her gaze at me.

"You know as well as I do that I can't help you directly, Star," she replied. "Spark still has control over us. I can give you the opportunity to destroy the gem, but that is all." I nodded, glancing down at Rarity and Coco. I suddenly realized something, looking back up at the alicorn.

"You spoke before about being a real pony, a real alicorn," I said. Generosity closed her eyes.

"Six friends, brought together by the same six virtues that bind ponykind," she spoke softly. "Yes... I was once flesh and blood. My real name has been since lost to history. I don't even remember it myself."

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Life. It happens to all of us, Radiant Star. We fought, we squabbled. Eventually, we split. Even powerful magical beings like alicorns can experience the loss of friendship," Generosity said.

"But you're... the Elements of Harmony," I said. "How could that happen to you?"

"There was one who sought to destroy the wonder and friendships that we had built," the white alicorn explained. "She was the Shadow. Nightmare. She succeeded in splitting us apart. We were offered a second chance, to save our world we had to give up our physical forms. We were bound, flesh and blood, to the Tree of Harmony. It became our prison, our blessing, our curse. We were able to transcend the Shadow's influence, for a time. But she evolved as well, corrupted us. The Bearers were our strength, our rock in the storm, our light shining in the darkness." She sighed. I looked back at Rarity, the frozen mare brilliant in the sun.

"There's a new bearer out there for you too, you know," I said. "You must have felt it. You can be with them. Give life back to Equestria. Be given that rock back."

"You're right. I can feel their presence out there," Generosity said.

"If Spark takes that away from you, this world is doomed," I said. "It will be as it once was, like Nightmare once tried to make it. You don't really want that. Equestria needs the Elements of Harmony." Generosity sighed, going silent. We sat there awkwardly for several moments before she spoke again.

"Fine. I will do what I can to aid you, but only because you've made a compelling case. I would not see Spark dead for her crimes, though," she said.

"I will do what I can to save her," I replied. Generosity smiled brightly as the memory began to fade to white.

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My eyes opened groggily, the memory fading from me as I stood over the prone form of Avarice. The white alicorn's eyes flared angrily as she shuffled back away from me. I noticed that trapping her in the memory hadn't disabled the crystal prison. It must have been one hell of a spell to survive its caster being disabled temporarily. Avarice snarled loudly as she stared me down.

"What did you do?!" She roared. "Insolent little bitch, who thinks that she can make us remember! I will destroy you!" Her horn ignited, the humming shards of crystal appearing in the air around her. I counted quickly. Twenty-five. I grinned.

"I gave you the opportunity to see the truth, Avarice," I said calmly. "Now... stop this madness and surrender. I promise I'll make your dispersal quick."

"Never!" Avarice said angrily, bringing the shards together in a brilliant blinding blade. "Meet my magical blade, you disgusting beast!" The shards split apart again, soaring through the air at me. I grunted as I jumped to dodge the first shard. The second hit me in the shoulder blade, setting my skin on fire as it tore away chunks of my flesh. I cringed through the pain, sending a blast of telekinesis that knocked the shard away. I needed to destroy the gem. Generosity's spirit could only give me so much time.

Avarice wasn't ready to go down without a fight, though. The white mare charged forward, bringing up her blade, the shards hurtling at me at speeds I didn't even know were possible. I yelped as another piece of crystal bit into my side, panting as I tried to come up with some way to fight back. Avarice was strong, no doubt about that. The alicorn's pent-up fury had released itself in a flare of malice.

"I will destroy you, Radiant Star!" Avarice roared as I scabbled backwards away from an errant shard that had nearly missed my hocks. "Your dead body will herald the new age! The age of Harmony for all ponykind! I will ensure of it!"

"You're ensuring nothing, Avarice! That's the corruption talking!" I shouted as I dodged another shard. "You're letting it get to you! Fight it! Turn the Nightmare away!" Avarice replied by sending three shards right at my head. I ducked to the side, grunting as I hit the ground. There was no reasoning with her. Her anger was only fueling her skill with the strange splitting blade she wielded. I was barely keeping away from each strike. I growled, sticking up a shield, hoping to block any more

attacks, but it was destroyed just as easily by a battery of crystals.

Come on, Star... get it together! You're wasting too much time! The others could be dead, or worse! I thought as I flared my horn, pushing back with another wave of telekinesis. The shards were clearly receptive to the skill, but pushing them around was considerably more difficult. Was there something different about how she used them? I needed to know more, but there wasn't enough time to really analyze her talent. All I knew is that there was no way I could beat it unless... *Wait... that's it! I wonder if I can do this too!* I thought frantically.

My horn ignited, reaching into the magic required to make my own blade of solid magic. The purple sword appeared out of nowhere next to me. I scrunched my nose as I figured out what to do next. Was it just as easy as splitting it into pieces? It was worth a shot! I compressed harder with my magic, solidifying the blade until it appeared to be completely opaque and made of pure amethyst. I panted and began to separate the pieces off until I had five. Five shards floating in the air before me. I grunted as I caught Avarice's eyes. A sharp grin emerged upon her face, but something told me I'd clearly caught her by surprise.

"So... you think you can match my skill?" She said. "I'm sorry, darling, but five shards is nowhere close enough to defeat me."

"I can sure as fuck try," I deadpanned back, floating one of the shards up so that I could inspect it. It was pure and cold to the touch, tinged by the light purple that made up the amethyst's core. It responded to my telekinesis like it was an extension of myself, humming and buzzing while it waited for my command.

"Very well then," Avarice said. "We shall do this properly then. A true alicorn duel. You see, Radiant Star, my magic is rooted in the most ancient of skilled arts, the way of the blade. Every alicorn, every unicorn that can master this art has a blade of their own, much like a cutie mark." She gestured to the floating shards around her. "Mine is called *Vorpal*, named so for its destructive and dangerous properties. Fear it, for it shall be your doom."

"Well... for right now, mine's called 'fuck you'," I replied angrily. "And I don't put much stock in doom. So let's just see which of our little toys is better, alright?" I grinned, charging forward and flaring my horn. The first amethyst shard went soaring across the crystal prison, aimed for Avarice's shoulder. It was blocked by several of her own. I growled, whipping about with a second shard while she was concentrating on my first. Blocked. Third shard. Blocked. Avarice looked highly amused with herself as I held my fourth and fifth shard at the ready. I grimaced. Avarice was seriously the strongest I'd had to fight so far, and I wasn't sure how much time I had before Generosity could no longer allow me to disperse her.

I charged forward, floating along the final shards as I ran. Avarice's other shards were pinning down my three others, and I couldn't move them. I needed to somehow catch her off guard. Avarice merely grinned as I made my way at her. She was clearly unamused. I flared my horn, sending my last shards spiralling around each other towards the white alicorn, fully expecting her to block it. At the last minute I dispersed all of the shards, forcing them to disappear. Avarice's shards struck the crystal ground harmlessly. I leaped, spreading open my wings as I landed on the white alicorn.

"What the --?" She cried out. I stretched out a hoof, slamming right into her perfect little face. Immediately her shards dissipated, her horn sparking as I hit it. She growled loudly, but I gave her no

chance to get back up again. Using my full weight I pushed down, holding her still.

“You were too confident, Avarice,” I said, floating out Stargazer. “You tell Spark I’m coming for her. I’ll save her, and this whole thing will end.” Avarice’s eyes widened as I lowered the minigun to level with her chest crystal. Pushing off and landing roughly to the side, I squeezed the trigger, unleashing blast after blast of magical energy into the white mare. The beams struck the crystal, causing it to crack. I grimaced as I stood back up. The mare’s purple eyes were cracking up, the orbs furious with rage.

“You won’t win, Radiant Star!” She howled. “This world will be o--” Her words cut off sharply as the shard in her chest finally exploded, her body going still. A heavy rumbling began to emanate from all around me as the crystal prison I’d been trapped in began to dissolve. I blinked as I found myself back in the same clearing with the gate. A howling sound erupted from nearby, and I snapped to attention. Cerberus was on the run, charging away into the underbrush. My friends stood victorious, staring down Cruelty, who looked seriously pissed. My friends were okay! They weren’t dead!

“Star!” I heard Violet call out. I trotted up next to her.

“What in the heck happened here?” I asked. Sunshine grinned.

“Sent Cerberus packing,” she replied, motioning at Cruelty. “Turns out by distracting this crazy bitch, she loses control over him. Easy peasy lemon cabreze!” I smiled, looking up at Cruelty. Her eyes found me, and she scowled even more.

“You may have defeated Cerberus, but you can’t defeat me,” she boasted, snarling as her eyes widened. I felt my own eyes widen as she unleashed the Stare. My friends dropped their guard immediately. I stopped dead in my tracks, caught in Cruelty’s magic. She gazed woefully upon the ruins of the crystal prison that Avarice had created. “However... it seems you have defeated Avarice. How unfortunate. She would have liked to see your demise.” Her eyes closed and I felt the Stare lift. I was able to move again! “Now... witness the true power of Cruelty.” The yellow mare opened her mouth and a low tone began to emanate from it.

The gate hummed loudly from behind us. I spun about, watching as a crackling energy poured forth from the stonework. The shard at the top was flickering, powering the portal that had appeared there. Cruelty’s eyes opened and she continued her haunting tune. My eyes widened as the first thing slid through the doorway. It was... inequine, massive and glistening with some sort of oily substance. It howled as it saw us.

“Come forth, creatures of Tartarus!” Cruelty shrieked. “Come forth to your new master! The gatekeeper, Cerberus, is no longer here!” *The creatures of Tartarus!* I thought, looking back at Cruelty. *Is she fucking insane?!* I grimaced, lifting Stargazer.

“This isn’t good,” Nixis said calmly. I shook my head in response. The monster lumbered across the clearing, propelled along by two twisted legs. Its eyes were a deep red, pulsing and gleaming as it lunged across the clearing. I took the first shot, sending a barrage of blue light at the monster. It cried out as it hit the ground, steam pouring from where I’d managed to hit it. The portal shimmered, more of the oily beasts slithering out of it.

“Not good at all!” Violet exclaimed, lifting Thunder Flash. She took several shots of her own, hitting

the monsters hard and fast with beams of silver fire. The first of the creatures met us as Nixis leaped into the fray. He ripped apart the creatures with bare claws, snarling and snapping. Sunshine stood off to the side, surrounded by three of the beasts. Her horn flared, grabbing all three of them with vines that shot out of the ground. She smashed them together, piling them into a heap. Meanwhile, Cruelty stood above the scene, cackling madly. I brought up Stargazer, pumping a blast of magical energy into one of the approaching monsters. Five more poured out of the gate.

“There's too many of them!” I shouted above the roar of the mob. “I need to take down Cruelty! Her magic's fueling the gate!”

“Get to her!” Violet called back, firing another round with Thunder Flash. “We'll be fine! We can hold them off!” I grimaced, but finally nodded. I flapped my wings, lifting into the air and landing on the ruined section of the building across from Cruelty. The yellow alicorn's eyes were wild, the pink in them shimmering brightly.

“You can't stop it now, Ministry Mare!” She shouted. “It's too late! The gate is open, and without the gatekeeper, the beasts of Tartarus will come forth and ensure our victory!”

“You're fucking psycho, Cruelty,” I said calmly. I needed to distract her, get her to break her concentration. I took a step forward, pointing at her with a hoof. “It's time we ended this. Avarice is gone, and now it's your turn.” Cruelty narrowed her gaze at me.

“I don't think so,” she said. “I don't know how you destroyed Avarice, but I will kill you for that.” Her horn flared and I heard a massive groaning at the gate. I turned to see the gate begin to expand. Something very *very* big was attempting to force itself through the doorway. I growled, turning back to Cruelty. A shimmering yellow shield surrounded the mare, a wicked grin on her lips. Whatever was going to appear, it wouldn't be good.

“Cruelty!” I called out. “You have to stop this! You're going to cause worse things to happen!” I took another step forward, the roar of whatever was going to come through stopping me in my tracks. I glanced down at the others. They were holding against the oily creatures, but they were beginning to close in on them. The portal was opening wider and wider by the second, and there wasn't anything I could do to get through Cruelty's shield. I growled under my breath. I had to do something! I turned, lifting Stargazer and sending a blast of magical energy at the shield. It bounced away harmlessly, leaving the yellow alicorn unharmed.

“Star!” I heard Violet call out. I looked down, my eyes widening. The portal yawned widely, a massive red eyed beast with jaws bigger than my entire body poking out of it. I was about to teleport the others away when I heard it. The most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. The pitched whining of a weapon I'd missed.

“Stay the fuck away from my friends!” Lilith shouted, the pitched whining followed by the explosive impact of a missile striking the foot of the gate. The black mare soared down, grinning as she unleashed the full power of the Bitch at the portal, sending the monstrosity reeling back. Lilith crowed, the gate collapsing in on itself. Cruelty's shield dropped, the yellow mare's eyes widening at the failure of her spell. I grinned, taking the opportunity presented by her. I swung Stargazer like a club, smacking the alicorn upside the head with it. She fell backwards, hitting the ground hard.

“Huh... that was... a lot easier than I thought it was gonna be,” I mused, stepping forward and igniting

my horn. I lowered my head, sending the stream of magic from my horn to Cruelty's own. I touched the tip of mine to hers, the world falling away into nothingness.

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My eyes adjusted to the soft light and I spent a few moments trying to get my bearings. I was in some sort of Ministry of Peace hospital room. A pony rested at the far end of the room, laying just so I couldn't tell who it was. The door opened, revealing a butter yellow pegasus with a pink mane. She wore a simple doctor's coat, her silky smooth wings poking through the holes on each side. She trotted over to the pony's bedside, pulling up a chair to sit on.

"Good morning, Cloudchaser," Fluttershy said softly. The pony in the bed shifted, turning over slightly to gaze at the Ministry Mare. I gasped softly when I saw that the pegasus had been burned all along her side, bandages doing their best to cover the worst of the injuries. Her wing on the burned side was wrapped up, but it looked small and weak. Another set of bandages covered half the mare's face.

"Good morning, ma'am," the mare replied. Her voice was throaty, like she hadn't had water in ages.

"I understand that you had a small incident with the orderlies earlier this morning," Fluttershy said.

"I... I didn't mean to," Cloudchaser said weakly. "It was... it was too much." Fluttershy smiled warmly, reaching out to place a hoof on the mare's bed. Cloudchaser rested her own next to it, sighing.

"It's alright, Cloudchaser. No pony here blames you for it. War Time Stress Disorder gets to all of us," the yellow pegasus said. "I've spoken with your doctors. They feel that it's for the best if you remain here until you can be properly treated." Cloudchaser's eyes widened.

"But I... I was supposed to be discharged!" She cried, trying to push herself out of her bed. I cringed. "My sister was supposed to come pick me up! I can't have WTSD!!" Fluttershy remained calm, a grimace forming on her face.

"Cloudchaser," she said, instantly stopping the other mare in her tracks. "I am very sorry about this, but what's done is done. You need psychiatric help. Your sister has been informed already about the change in plans. She will be here this afternoon to visit you. I know what you've been through was traumatic... so please... lay down."

"You... you don't know what I've been through!!" Cloudchaser started to shout. "I could have died, Fluttershy! That dragon could have killed me! Instead I get to live the rest of my life like a fucking flightless bird!" She lowered her head. "Actually... you probably already know what *that* feels like." Fluttershy frowned.

"Now, Cloudchaser, we both know that was uncalled for," she said. "I know that you feel responsible for what happened during that mission, but you know that no pony involved blames you. Even Rainbow testified at your court martial."

"Yeah... and she said she wished she'd never put me in charge, that I was a newbie. That I didn't know what the fuck I was doing," Cloudchaser snorted. Her good eye was full of rage of pain. Fluttershy remained stoic, despite the fact that the other mare was shouting her in the face. Finally she reached out and grabbed the other pegasus in a hug, taking her by surprise.

"I'm sorry," she squeaked. "I'm so, so sorry..." Her squeaks devolved into sobs. Cloudchaser couldn't take it anymore. She too began to sob uncontrollably. Time slowed to a crawl as I noticed her. Kindness sat by the window, looking out upon the hospital grounds. She turned to regard me.

"Radiant Star," she said simply, glancing furtively at her hooves. "I wish that this meeting could have come about on... better terms."

"As do I," I said. "We both know why I'm here. I need your help in severing the link to Cruelty." Kindness nodded silently. I trotted over, slumping to my haunches next to her.

"I... I can do that," she said. "I want to do that. I'm afraid, Radiant Star. Spark is growing in strength. She's getting ready to cast her spell, but she needs you to do it." I cocked my head.

"Why me?" I said. "What makes me so special that she needs me?"

"I... I do not know," Kindness said. "I only know that she wants you. You were strong enough to reject her once. Maybe she believes your host body will give her the strength she needs to cast the spell to bring us into the physical world?" I grimaced slightly.

"I can't let that happen," I said. "You don't belong there. You belong with your Bearer. The world needs your Element, it needs Kindness. Not Cruelty." Kindness looked down at her hooves, nodding slightly.

"I wish... I wish that I could go back and be with her," she said, motioning at the silent Fluttershy. "She was such a wonderful pony. So loving, so kind. She loved the world more than anypony else I'd ever known."

"Until the war," I said casually.

"Naturally. War wasn't in Fluttershy's nature. It never was. Sure, she tried to do her best to end it, but in the end she ended it the only way she knew how, by killing everything," Kindness said. "I was saddened the day she gave the megaspells to the zebra. She was trying so hard to get everypony to cooperate, to work together. It just wouldn't work."

"But it can," I said softly, something finally clicking in the back of my mind that I'd worked so hard to understand. "We can learn from our mistakes. Learn from our past. Grow from it. The world isn't our fault, and neither are the little things that happen in it. We have to take responsibility for our own lives, and keep moving forward."

"A grand sentiment indeed," Kindness replied. "One I can only hope takes root in the Equestrian Wasteland, Radiant Star. Harmony is about caring for one another. This world desperately needs that." I smiled, nodding in reply.

"I promise, I will do my best," I said. "It's all I can do, but I promise to work towards that goal. Every day, working towards harmony. I will save Spark. I will. I don't know how yet, but I can't just destroy her. She's *Magic* for pony's sake! The world needs her to guide the new Bearers, whoever they may be." Kindness lifted her gaze to meet mine.

“Then go,” she said. “Go and defeat my physical form. I will not make it hard on you. She will be weak. Defenseless. Destroy the gem and disperse her.” I grinned widely as the memory began to fade to absolute white.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The memory spell faded and I opened my eyes. I was still standing over the prone form of Cruelty. The broken mare glared at me, but she made no attempt to stand to fight me. I glanced down at the others. Lilith's appearance had turned the tide of the fight against the oily creatures from the gate, which now lay in ruins. The keystone holding the shard lay several feet from the destroyed structure, still shining brightly in the darkness. Lilith hovered in the air next to the others, talking excitedly with them.

“Get it over with,” Cruelty said. I turned back to her, grimacing.

“You aren't going to fight back?” I said, feeling very confused. “The others at least tried to fight back.”

“There's no use,” Cruelty replied. “I could use my powers on you, but you have your friends. I'm outnumbered, and I know it.”

“You could run away,” I mused. Cruelty scowled.

“I could, but I'm not a fast flier,” she said. “To be honest... I'm done. Severing my ties with Kindness... I'm afraid I couldn't keep up with you in straight combat if I tried.”

“I see,” I said. I flared my horn, summoning my blade. The five segmented amethysts hung in the air around me, humming and buzzing, waiting for me to command them. I looked down at the yellow mare and grimaced. “I... I guess this is it then.” Cruelty nodded, closing her eyes. One of the amethyst shards soared down, slamming into the gem on her chest. It cracked and dissipated, Cruelty's body disappearing with it. I breathed a sigh of relief, slumping to my haunches. I dismissed the blade spell, grunting. I thought about what just had happened. I didn't feel bad about defeating Cruelty. She had nearly killed my friends and almost brought forth an army of monsters from Tartarus.

“Hey Star!” I heard from the ruins below, breaking me out of my thoughts. I craned my neck and glanced down, seeing Violet. She was waving. I groaned, sitting up. I flapped my wings, carrying myself down to the others. They rushed up to me as I landed.

“Are you alright?” Sunshine said. I nodded, smiling.

“I'm fine,” I replied, looking over at Lilith. “What are you doing here? What happened to Patch and Avira?” The black mare smiled softly.

“Patch and Avira are fine. They're back in Ponyville by now,” she said. “Turns out the mountain wasn't all that far from the edge of the forest. We got there in record time.”

“Well, I'm glad you made it back in time,” I said. “We really needed the help. Now if you'll excuse me for one second, I have something to do.” I turned to where the shard rested inside the keystone. My horn flared, lifting the shard out of the stone. I lifted Stargazer, opening its side and temporarily removing the star-crystal. The two merged together in a blaze of purple light. The crystal began to

glow brightly, firing a blast of light into the air that I knew only I could see. It pointed across the forest, and I knew just where. The Cathedral. Where Spark was.

I floated the crystal back into the power core of Stargazer, closing it up. I sighed.

“Everything alright, Star?” I heard Violet say from my side. I nodded.

“It's time,” I said. “The last shard. Spark has it already. We have to go there.”

“Where is 'there'?” Sunshine asked. I grimaced, pointing with a hoof to the north, where the light had been pointing.

“The old castle,” I said. “That's where Spark is. She's at the Cathedral.” Violet's eyes widened.

“Isn't that where Red Eye's slaver headquarters used to be?” She asked. I grimaced, nodding. “Well, that's great. Are you sure that's where Spark is?” I nodded again.

“I've seen it,” I said, putting a hoof to my chin. “At least I think I have. It was a bit of a dream, but I talked to Spark.” I began latching up my gear, attaching Stargazer to its harness.

“So this is all based on a dream you had where you talked to Spark?” Violet said, raising an eyebrow. “Are you sure you're alright?”

“I'm fine, Violet. Trust me on this,” I said. “I'm not crazy.”

“I never said you were, sweetheart,” Violet replied, smiling sweetly. “Alright, alright. We'll go there. We should get going then. We still have one more Element that hasn't shown up yet, too.”

“I know,” I said, grimacing. “Laughter. I have a bad feeling about that one.”

“Off to save the world then?” Lilith asked, grinning. She flexed her wings and I chuckled, nodding.

“Something like that, yeah,” I said, starting off into the underbrush.

We traveled deep into the forest for the better part of two hours, hearing nothing more than the insects and thankfully seeing nothing else that wanted to kill us. I kept gazing at the forest, wondering what was next. We were going to Spark. To finally end this journey that I had been on for what felt like so long. I didn't know how I felt about that exactly. I wondered what the others thought about all of this. There was still so much we didn't know, that I didn't know about the journey ahead.

What was going to happen to me? I didn't know. But I knew that I would have to make the journey as best as I could, and try my hardest to save Spark. Each encounter with the Elements proved that the world needed the virtues they represented. The world needed Magic, Kindness, Honesty, Loyalty, Generosity, and even Laughter. Laughter. That worried me. The final Element had yet to appear, and that frightened me to no end. I was worried that when she did, I wouldn't like it.

“So what's the deal with this Cathedral?” Lilith said while we walked.

“The Cathedral was the headquarters of a slaver named Red Eye. Well, at least that was where his headquarters was after he left Fillydelphia,” Violet explained. “It was supposed to have been destroyed after the Lightbringer paid him a visit.”

“Except that Spark rebuilt the most important part,” I said, cringing at the dream that I'd had with Spark. “The part where the taint vats were built.”

“Taint vats?” Sunshine asked. We pushed through another set of brush, revealing a ridge that looked down into a valley. There it was. The Cathedral. The structure was ruined, broken into hundreds of pieces of rock and rubble. Sitting on the far end of the valley was a giant ship, made partially out of clouds. It was overturned, pieces of its hull laying on the ground, its insides exposed to the air. I grimaced. The entrance to the place would be near that ship, I assumed.

“Yeah... taint vats,” I said. “Trust me. Taint is not good stuff.”

“I... I see,” Sunshine said. “I'll take your word for it.”

“We're going to need to go down there,” I said, pointing at the ship. “The entrance to the Cathedral will be there.” The others nodded. I started down the hill, keeping my eyes on the structure. Did Spark know we were this close? Did she know that I had defeated Avarice and Cruelty? I was sure that she had. She knew about Deceit and Obsession. She had to know that we were on our way.

The journey down the ridge only took about twenty minutes, putting us on level ground with the ruins of the Cathedral. As we made our way closer towards the ruined structure of the ship, I began to notice movement ahead. I tensed up, unlatching Stargazer instinctively. It floated up next to me and I narrowed my gaze at the ship.

“Star,” Violet said, placing a hoof on my shoulder. I looked down at her. She smiled. “It's okay. There's nothing there.”

“I saw something,” I said angrily. “There's movement up ahead.”

“Hello!” A voice said, cutting through our argument. I looked up, blinking as I noticed the other pony. It wasn't an alicorn, thankfully. It was... a unicorn? The stallion was a light blue in color with a dark blue mane. He wore what appeared to be simple rag-like clothing. A smile was on his face.

“Um, hello?” I replied, nudging Violet. “You can see this too, right?” She nodded, her expression blank.

“Welcome to our home, weary travelers,” the unicorn said. “My name is Silver Sage, mayor of this town.”

“Um, hi,” I said, latching Stargazer back onto its harness. “I wasn't aware that there were any ponies living out here.” Silver Sage nodded, smiling brightly.

“I'm sure,” he said. “Most ponies don't even know we are out here. If you'll follow me, I'll take you up into the town proper.” He motioned for us to follow him and turned back towards the ship. I blinked.

“You mean you live up there?” I asked, pointing at the ship.

“Yes, of course. The *Overcast* has provided a lovely home for us,” Sage replied. “It is where the Children of the Cathedral have made their home for some time now.” We made our way to the edge of the ship where Sage motioned for us to enter an elevator. The elevator took us up, depositing us onto a main deck. I blinked. Ponies of different colors and races fluttered to and fro, smiling and waving. I blinked again.

“The Children of the what?” Sunshine said. Sage chuckled.

“We are the Children of the Cathedral, of course, my friends,” he said, leading us to what appeared to be a conference room. “Please, take a seat and rest. I will send for some food.” My stomach growled, agreeing with that sentiment. Silver Sage spoke softly to one of the other ponies outside the hall, who promptly trotted off. The light blue unicorn turned back to us and smiled. “Now then, while we're waiting on that, what is a group of travelers such as yourselves doing this far out into the forest? It's not every day we get to see a hellhound.”

“I appreciate that you did not run away screaming at that,” Nixis said calmly. Silver Sage chuckled.

“Yes, well... we are all taught to accept anyone, regardless of race,” he said. “It is one of the tenets we try to adhere to. We are a peaceful society, born out of the slaves that Red Eye once imprisoned here.”

“You were once slaves?” I said, cocking my head. Silver Sage nodded.

“And slavers,” he said. “Once Red Eye was gone, we really had nopony to tell us what to do. We learned quickly that out here we couldn't fall into the slaver versus slave operation. We had to help each other in order to survive.”

“I see. Well, we are only here to deal with some business, so we'll be out of your manes soon,” I said. “Although we do appreciate the hospitality.”

“It is our pleasure,” Silver Sage replied. The pony from before opened the door to the conference room, entering with plates of sandwiches floating in their magic. I took mine and began to devour it greedily. It had been so long since I'd had anything absolutely substantial that I couldn't help myself.

“Thank you for the food,” Violet said after she had also cleaned off her plate.

“Of course. Now then, you said you would be moving on soon,” Silver Sage said. “Where are you going that is so important?” I grimaced, knowing what my answer would be.

“The Cathedral itself,” I said. “We need to get in there.” Silver Sage's eyes widened.

“But... nopony has entered there in quite a long time,” he said. “It's desperately dangerous.” I nodded.

“I know, but there is somepony there that I need to see,” I said. “I had hoped that you might be able to show us the best entrance.”

“I... I know of an entrance,” Sage replied. “You must understand though, the Cathedral is regarded as holy by our community. It is sacrilegious to enter it.” I narrowed my gaze at him.

“Regardless, we still need to enter,” I said, sighing. Sage looked apprehensive at this. “Look. Let me level with you. There's another alicorn inside the Cathedral, probably way deep. She's planning on casting a spell that will grant her ultimate power and bring to life the Elements of Harmony in physical form. From there, they'll subjugate the Wasteland into forced harmony. If I don't get in there and stop her, we'll all be mindless slaves to dangerous spirits. Make sense?” Silver Sage's eyes twitched. He finally nodded.

“I... I see,” he said. “I will... I will show you where to enter. However, the others must not know of this. If they were to find out... well... I would not be looked upon favorably. Which is a nice way of saying that I'd be branded a religious heretic and most likely murdered.” I smiled. I knew I had a way with words and I had just secured us an entrance into the Cathedral! I was doing so well. Still, something about how friendly these ponies were being felt a little off to me.

“Don't worry. Just tell us where the entrance is, and we'll be out of your mane. You won't even have to show us where it is,” I said. “No pony will have to even know that you told us.” Silver Sage paused for a moment but finally nodded, grimacing.

“Okay. The entrance is near the lowest level of the *Overcast's* decks. You can reach it by taking the elevator down and exiting via the ruined hull,” he said. “The elevator is just down the end of this hallway.” I pushed myself to my hooves, smiling.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Silver Sage,” I said. “I am afraid however, that we should be going. We have no time to waste.” I motioned for the others to follow. We left the conference room, Silver Sage looking on from the hallway as we made our way to the elevator. I looked back at him. The stallion had a fierce expression on his face. *I've got a bad feeling about this*, I thought, opening up the elevator door. I nudged Violet, watching warily as the elevator door closed.

“Heretics!!” I heard a shout. “They attacked me and forced me to reveal the location of the holy place! They intend to breach it!” I facehoofed. Silver Sage was selling us out, of course. The stallion's shout was followed by the shouting of other ponies as they rushed to stop the elevator. Fortunately for us, the elevator began to descend just as they reached it. I flared my horn, using my magic to accelerate our downward journey.

“As soon as we hit bottom, everyone run until we hit the entrance,” I said, grunting under the force of the elevator's weight.

“Are we even sure he gave us the right location?” Violet asked. I shrugged.

“Regardless, run. We'll find an entrance and get inside,” I said, grinning. The elevator slowed to a crawl, opening up into a ruined section of the *Overcast*. At the far end of the hallway was a gaping hole, leading out into a burned patch of land. Several feet away from the edge of the hull was a bridge, half broken but still useable. Beyond that was a set of double doors that led into the ruined Cathedral.

“There!” Sunshine called out. We began running, hearing the pounding of hooves as the crazy religious ponies gave chase. I had to slightly question myself on how fast this whole deal had gone south, but chalked it up to crazy being crazy. Ponies living all the way out in the middle of nowhere without any other social contact had to be batshit crazy.

We made it out of the ship proper as the first of the Children of the Cathedral appeared on the deck. Two unicorns, each brandishing magical energy rifles. They took aim and fired, missing us completely. I found myself being thankful for bad aim. Eventually, we found ourselves close to the edge of the bridge.

“Keep going!” I shouted. I took a step onto the bridge and stopped dead in my tracks. Standing in the center of the ruined bridge was a pink alicorn. Her mane was a rat's nest of insanity, her eyes a blazing blue. The gem that sat in her chest was also a brilliant blue. I looked back behind us. The Children of the Cathedral had also stopped as they too noticed the other mare. The pink alicorn grinned widely, bouncing in place.

“Ooh! New friends! I like new friends! Who wants to play a game? I know I do, and I know just the game! It's the one where you die!”

Footnotes:

Radiant Star: Maximum Level Reached!

New Spell! Bladecaster – You now have the capability of summoning a special crystal blade, that you can split into multiple pieces. It's going to take some time for you to get how to use it though!

Violet Iris: Maximum Level Reached!

Lilith: Maximum Level Reached!

Patch: Maximum Level Reached!

Chapter 35: Endgame, Part 1

You see, Nightmare Moon, when those Elements are ignited by the... the spark, that resides in the heart of us all, it creates the sixth element: the element of... magic!

Truth. The coldest and most difficult of all things. Truth is the end, the beginning, the middle. Truth is all. All is truth. There is nothing more. The cold, hard, truth of it is... we all fail.

Failure is inevitable. It is *expected*. I have failed more times than I can count. That is the honest truth. The truth we tell ourselves when we are alone. The truth we hide behind falsehood for the sake of others.

In the very end of things, we all face the truth. That we are not as strong as we think we are, that the cold grasp of death eventually takes us all. That no matter our successes, in the end we are failures.

What comes next is my ultimate testament to failure. My hidden truth. The truth that I can never accept, that I turn away from even when I wake alone in the middle of the night. That I am merely a vessel, a soul without guidance.

That I am not a pony.

“Ooh! New friends, new friends!” The pink alicorn exclaimed bubbly. I grimaced. Of course she would have to show up. Laughter. The bad feel tingling at the base of my spine only intensified as I heard the pounding of hooves behind us. Something truly awful was about to happen, not just to me, but to the ponies from the *Overcast* as well.

“Heretics!” I heard Silver Sage shout, causing me to wince. “Defiling the holy place!”

“Silver Sage!” I called back, looking everywhere for Laughter’s pink form. “Take your ponies and run! It isn’t safe here!” The unicorn stomped a hoof indignantly.

“No, heathen witch! You cast your mind magic on me! I will not succumb to your – URK,” the stallion began to shout back. My eyes widened and I turned. The pink alicorn stood next to him, her tail embedded in his chest like a blade. It withdrew slowly, the wound gushing blood as she gleefully grinned. I hadn’t even seen her move, let alone cross the clearing. The Children of the Cathedral who had been behind their leader were visibly frightened by the deadly mare.

“You talk far too much, silly pony,” the alicorn said. She placed a hoof on the dying pony’s shoulder, sending him to the ground in a heap. The pink mare turned to face the crowd of ponies that had gathered. “Now then... anypony else feel like talking up a storm at me?” Silence. The pink alicorn grinned. “Good. Now then, unless you want to be one of my new friends, you can get LOST!” If the assemblage of ponies weren’t scared before, they certainly were scared shitless after that. They scrambled to run away under the steely gaze of the demonic pink alicorn, who merely grinned and turned back to face us. Silver Sage lay next to her, gasping for breath.

"Please... help... help me..." I heard him say. I took a step forward, brandishing Stargazer.

"Let him go," I said angrily. "It's me you want." The pink alicorn grinned widely, revealing far too many pearly white teeth. It was highly unnerving.

"Oh, but I was having so much fun making a new friend! He just needed to stop talking so much! I don't really like ponies who talk too much. They're just not as fun as those that stay DEAD," she said. Her tail whipped around again, drawing its tip along Sage's neck, which sliced wide open. Sage jerked once and went still in a spreading pool of blood.

"You... you fucking killed him," I growled.

"Why?" Violet said from beside me. "Why couldn't you just let him go? He wasn't harming you." The pink alicorn purred.

"Maybe because I like to have fun," she said, her voice dropping from a squeak to a menacing growl. "And that's exactly what we're going to do now. Have fun. Because having fun is a part of life, Radiant Star. And you and I, we're going to have lots and lots of fun. I'm Sorrow, and I'm the worst pony you'll ever meet."

"Oh, we'll have fun alright," I replied. "Let's see how you do against the five of us." I lifted Stargazer and fired. Violet took the hint and did the same with Thunder Flash. The shrieking whine of the Bitch joined the chorus. Magical energy fire and explosives merged together in a brilliant flash where Sorrow had been standing. When the dust cleared, there was nothing remaining.

"Woohoo!" Lilith shouted. "Got her!"

"Ooh that was fun!" A voice from my left said. I looked to the side to see Sorrow standing next to me brandishing a stick like a zebra sniper rifle. "Let's do that again!" I jumped back, growling. Nixis and Sunshine leaped back as well, having also been next to the pink mare.

"How in the hell did you...?" I said. Sorrow grinned her eerie grin again, baring her teeth. When nopony said anything, she frowned.

"Oh come on! You made all sorts of flashy lights and big bangs! It just looked sooo pretty!" She said.

"I can oblige," I said, lifting Stargazer again. I fired, only to hit dead air. Sorrow was now standing back on the center of the bridge.

"Whee! Can't catch me!" She chirped, bouncing in place. I growled loudly, firing again. Sorrow leaped into the air over the blast and bounded across the bridge.

"Stay still!" I shouted, trying to track the mare's erratic movements, but finding myself unable to do so. I tried to activate E.S.A.T.S., but it wouldn't lock onto the pink terror.

"No can do! Gotta catch me first!" Sorrow replied happily. She bounced past me with a grin on her face, whipping about her tail. It smacked me in the face, bashing me to the ground. I grunted, feeling like I'd somehow been hit by a skywagon. Sorrow gleefully continued on, bouncing between blasts of silver fire and dodging vines from Sunshine Sky. Nothing seemed to touch her.

I pushed myself to my hooves, turning to get some sort of bead on the pink alicorn, but her movements were far too chaotic to even begin to try. Latching Stargazer, I opted instead to try and face her in melee combat. I lifted a hoof to strike and before I knew it a shiny red balloon was tied around my leg instead.

“What the...?” I said. Sorrow giggled as she stopped moving, well... almost. She bounced in place, somehow avoiding even sure shots! My brain was questioning every logical law of physical existence!

“Ooh! Balloons! Don't you just love them! You'll really like that one! It's special!” The pink mare said, her voice incredibly chipper. I blinked as the balloon began tugging my leg upwards, my body following along.

“Star!” Violet shouted. I growled under my breath as the balloon accelerated. Flaring my horn, I attempted to deflate the balloon with my telekinesis. The round red orb stayed firmly in place, however, not even making a sound as it sped ever upwards. It wouldn't deflate! I summoned my amethyst blade with my magic and tried to slash at the balloon with it. Nothing!

“Viiiiioleeeeeett!” I cried out as the world below me began to get smaller and smaller. Despite all that, I could still see the grin on Sorrow's face. Most likely because she was right next to me. I blinked. *Wait... what?! I thought.*

“Oooh you were so surprised! Were you surprised? Huh? Were ya?” She said, giggling. She danced up the air next to me, her wings pinned tightly to her side as she pranced on nothing. “I figured the best way to get rid of you was with an impenetrable balloon and I was right! Now you'll pass out and I'll go take you right to Spark!” I growled.

“Let me down!” I shouted, igniting my horn to send a blast of a telekinesis at her. Sorrow pirouetted aside, gesturing the blast past her like a friendly passerby. She giggled.

“Silly Star,” she replied. “It doesn't quite work like that! Sparky-poo wants you bad, and I have to get you for her. That's just the way it works!” I growled, trying to kick at the mare, missing completely with every kick. I had to be calm. There had to be some way to get loose from this thing! I blinked. *Oh, Star... you really are stupid sometimes. Teleportation, duh!* I thought, rolling my eyes. My horn flared again and I cast the spell, focusing on everything except for the balloon. I disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the pink alicorn, without the pesky balloon. The balloon went up, soaring into the stratosphere, and I grinned widely as I dropped out of the sky like a stone. I landed near the others, nearly scaring the wits out of Violet as I hit the ground next to her.

“Star!” She cried out. “Are you alright?” I groaned.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I said, pushing myself to all four hooves. “I managed to get free of the balloon.”

“Cheater.” I blinked, looking up. Sorrow was standing back on the center of the bridge. I blinked several more times. How in the hell had she done that without anypony seeing it?! It was like this pony defied all natural laws of the world! Sorrow's eyes were blazing with fury and she had a very distinct frown on her face.

“It's not fun when you cheat, you know,” she said frumpily. “Looks like we're gonna have to play one

of my more fun games! I know you'll just love them. They're the good kind that when you lose the game, you die." Her horn ignited, and before I could call out to the others the world around us began to change and shift. Violet and my friends disappeared before my eyes, as did Sorrow.

The bridge and surroundings were replaced by... a carnival? Lights and the sounds of circus music assaulted my senses as I tried to take in what had just happened. There was nopony in sight except for me, standing in the center of the carnival's main square. Booths devoted to various games surrounded the open area, brightly colored under flapping red awnings. At the far end of the lot, a massive circus tent sat waiting. Balloons lined the stalls, each one bearing a different cutie mark. It was downright creepy.

"What the fuck...?" I said aloud. "Hello? Is anypony out there?" No response. I grimaced, taking a step forward. "Hello?" Again, no response. Sorrow said this was one of her games. She'd said it was a deadly game, so I needed to be careful. Several more steps forward, I found myself near one of the game stalls. It was a simple game, where a pony would throw darts at balloons on a wallboard at the back of the stall.

"Ooh I just love balloon games!" A voice from beside me exclaimed. I turned my head, seeing Sorrow standing next to me. I jumped back, hefting Stargazer into the air. Sorrow rolled her eyes. "Silly filly, you shouldn't be playing with guns like that, you'll shoot somepony's eye out! Here, let me fix that for you." Her horn flared, and Stargazer disappeared in a flash of pink light.

"Hey!" I cried indignantly. "Give that back!"

"No can do, cranky Star! You're in my world now! We play the games by my rules!" Sorrow said, grinning widely. "I have to go check on your friends. Play some games, Radiant Star. I'll be back to play with you real soon, cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." She even made the hoof motions. I blinked as she disappeared before my eyes.

"Sorrow!" I shouted. "Get back here!!! Leave my friends alone!!!" No response. Of course not. What game was she playing? All she was doing was delaying us. Was that her intent? I wasn't sure. I turned. What was she doing to my friends? Were they stuck in this place too? I silently vowed to find out and break out of this illusion. I started trotting away from the balloon game stall, heading towards the largest structure I could see, which was the circus tent at the far end of the carnival. It loomed over everything, so obviously it had to be important, right?

I found myself at the entrance to the tent a lot faster than my gait could account for. I pushed aside the drapes covering the opening, grimacing. The inside of the circus tent was set up like a typical three ring circus. Large animal cages sat at the back of the tent, empty and cold. The bleachers were about the same, nopony sitting in them. A thin layer of dust covered everything, like it hadn't been touched in centuries. I was about to leave when a spotlight flared to life, highlighting something in the middle of the tent. It gleamed brightly in the center ring. *It couldn't be...* I thought as I edged closer. It looked like the last piece of the shard, but why would Sorrow have it? Isn't it supposed to be with Spark? My mind reeled trying to process this as I got closer to the ring.

In the center ring was a pedestal, a glass case sitting on the top. Inside of it was a pulsing purple shard of crystal. It was the final piece of the shard! I moved to pull the case away to take it. Despite the fact

that Stargazer was sent... somewhere, I could still recover the shard and hope for the best. As I was reaching for the case, a surge of alarm in the back of my mind urged me to move. I ducked and rolled just as a pink form slammed down into the ground where I had been standing. Sorrow's eyes flared as the poofy mass of her hair collapsed to hang limply from her head.

"You didn't even try any of the fun games, did you?" She snarled. "Just had to go and ruin the fun. Your friends are all enjoying their games, but not you. I should have known you'd fuck everything up!!" I glared back at her, pushing myself to my hooves.

"I'm sorry, but you have something that belongs to me," I said. "Now get out of my way, release my friends, and get bent!" Sorrow sneered.

"I don't think so," she replied. Her horn flared and a spotlight crashed into the pedestal behind her, crushing it into flinders. "We still have so much more fun things to do." She cocked her head, a sick and twisted grin appearing on her face. "I know! We're in a circus, so you're gonna put on a show! You're the main attraction!" I blinked.

"What," I said flatly. Sorrow grinned, igniting her horn. She teleported away, reappearing in a flash of light on the ringleader's podium. Strangely enough, she wore a top hat, a cloak, and a fake mustache. She cackled with glee as she reared up on her back legs.

"Fillies and gentlecolts! I give to you the Scourge of Chicacolt, the Mauler of Manehattan, the one, the only Ministry Mare!!!" She called out. A spotlight appeared out of nowhere centered on me. I heard cheering and boos. I blinked again. Sitting on the bleachers now were large groups of shadowy creatures. Each one had dotted red eyes, all staring at me. Sorrow grinned, waving a hoof. "And performing tonight with our lovely assistant is a menagerie of mischief-making mammals! And to be clear, there's no escaping, so if you would maestro... lower the cage please!" A massive energy cage appeared out of nowhere, encasing the entire set of rings. My eyes widened as Sorrow disappeared again in a flash of pink light.

"Sorrow!" I roared. "Get back here and face me!"

"Sorry, Ministry Mare," the alicorn's voice echoed from all around me. "But this will be fun, you'll see! Now... let the games... begin!!!" A roar drew my attention back to my surroundings. At the far end of the last ring stood what appeared to some form of large feline, except it was... wrong. Its body was distorted, its eyes a deep red, and its coat a dark shadowy black. It opened its mouth, revealing a shiny row of gleaming teeth. It jumped off of its podium, stalking forward at me. I grimaced, flaring my horn to call my amethyst blade into existence.

"Alright then," I said. "If that's the way you want to play, let's play." The feline creature responded by leaping at me, its teeth bared and claws extended. I jumped to the side, dodging as best as I could while slashing wildly with my blade. I struck the beast, the amethyst sinking into its hide as it hit the ground. It snarled loudly, turning to face me. It was like my attack hadn't even fazed it. I grumbled, recalling the shard, which erupted from the monster's side with a loud ***slorp***. I blinked. The feline beast, giving me no warning whatsoever, charged forward.

"Um... shit," I said, turning tail and running from the giant shadow feline. "Um... shit shit shit! Good kitty?!" I ran as hard as I could before I realized that I didn't have much space to really run in. The wall of energy that was surrounding the rings was *shrinking*! I grimaced as I stopped in my tracks. I

turned back to see the shadow feline continuing to chase after me. I flared my horn, coming up with the only spell I could think of. In a flash of light, I disappeared and reappeared on the far end of the ring just as the shadowy creature leaped into the air. It struck the wall with a blaze of fire, disintegrating instantly. I blinked.

“Really don't want to touch that,” I said, before realizing that despite the apparent death of the shadow cat, the walls were still shrinking. I wouldn't have much choice sooner or later. *Teleportation works here*, I thought. *That must mean that Sorrow hadn't anticipated my abilities too well, either that or she's actively toying with me. I wonder if I can teleport beyond the walls.* I ignited my horn, hoping for the best. I cast the spell, disappearing again and reappearing outside the circus tent. I grinned widely. I'd done it! Of course, I still needed to...

“Hold it,” a voice said, cutting through my inner monologue. My eyes lifted to see Sorrow, standing down the far end of the aisles leading up to the circus tent. She looked *pissed*. “You're not playing the games right, Radiant Star.” I smiled coyly, sticking my tongue out.

“Don't care,” I said. “I'm through playing your stupid games, Sorrow. Come here and fight me like an alicorn.” I summoned my blade once more, the amethyst shards floating in the air around me. “Or are you that much of a chicken?”

“I'm NOT A CHICKEN!!” Sorrow roared. Her eyes glowed brightly for a brief moment before returning to their normal dull blue color. She grunted. Something was really off with her. What was it? When she'd first appeared she had been slightly insane, bouncy and bubbly. Now... I couldn't place a hoof on it. It was almost like she really was upset that we weren't playing the games. After several awkward moments of silence, she finally spoke. “Fine. You want to play with Sorrow? We'll play. I would have liked to have played the more fun games first, but I guess we can progress right to the fighty one. I warn you, Radiant Star... I'm a lot stronger than the others.”

“The others all said that,” I mused. “And I beat them all just the same. You're the only one that's left. So let's do this already. I've got places to be and a Wasteland to save.” Sorrow chuckled, her mane suddenly deflating from the insane mess it was to a limp noodle-y like manner. Her eyes flashed and suddenly she was gone. I blinked as she reappeared next to me, her tail whipping around like it had a mind of its own. She drew the tip of it along my side, lacerating my flesh and catching on the bone of my shoulder. I screamed, pain shooting through my side as the tip of her tail dug in. I jumped back, twirling one of the shards of my blade around to slash back at Sorrow, but she wasn't there.

“Going to have to do better than that to catch me!” The pink alicorn echoed cheerfully, her voice sounding all around me. I growled, feeling the blood trickling down my shoulder. It burned like wildfire, but I didn't have much time to consider just how much it hurt before Sorrow reappeared behind me. I ducked, barely missing a strike from her deadly tail. I pushed myself into a roll as the other alicorn struck again, hitting the ground hard. I stopped, blinking when I got back to my hooves and found myself staring into a cannon painted an incongruous powder blue.

“What the...” I started to say before the device lit off and sent a blast of fire right at me. It struck me in the chest, sending me flying right through several of the game stalls and into a foal-sized pool that had been set up for some sort of fishing game. I groaned as I pushed myself out of the pool, feeling wet and pained. I looked down at my chest, my coat marred and blackened slightly from the explosive blast.

“Party cannon, kaboom!” Sorrow snarled as she appeared in front of me. Two more of the cannon devices slammed into the ground on each side of her, pointed straight at me. I jumped back and raised my alicorn shield as they fired. The cannon fire slammed into the purple barrier, rocking me into the back of the stall and over into the next one. Dismissing the shield, I jumped up to my hooves and re-summoned my blade. I swung wildly with the full blade, striking at Sorrow... or what I thought was Sorrow. The form of the pink alicorn deflated instantly after being hit. I growled loudly. Sorrow bounced in place just outside the game stall, beaming. I turned towards her, glaring.

“This is fun!” She said. “More fun than I’ve had in a long time! You’re funny, Radiant Star!”

“And you’re sick in the head,” I snarled, readying my blade. “Now hold still!” I hurtled the shards across the aisle at her.

“Nope!” Sorrow chortled, dodging my attacks with practiced ease. She giggled loudly as she landed on top of one of the game stalls. “Besides... I’m not sick. Or am I? Ohmygosh am I sick? I don’t feel sick. I’m not all green and bleeeehhhh.” I blinked.

“It was an expression,” I deadpanned. “You’re mentally sick... or something. I don’t know what yet.”

“Silly filly. I’m not mentally sick,” Sorrow replied. “Those ponies that wanted to see graphic depictions of foalbirth... now those ponies are sick!” I blinked again.

“I... What...?” I replied, feeling very confused at what was going on. Sorrow took the opportunity to leap off the stall at me, her tail whipping around to strike me again. I yelped as I jumped back, bringing up my blade to try and block. The shards and Sorrow’s tail met in a clash of sparks, forcing me back up the path. I didn’t even want to begin to figure out how her tail had sparked. In fact, I didn’t want to try and figure out how she did half the things she was capable of doing, I just needed to get her off guard long enough to cast my memory spell.

“Look out below!” I heard Sorrow shout, her horn flaring with wild, unbridled magic. She cackled madly. I looked up to see a giant confetti bomb falling from the sky. My eyes widened.

“What the fuck?!” I cried out, leaping sideways into a nearby food stall, one appropriately titled ‘Gummy Shakes’. Images of vacant eyed toothless alligators peered out at me from every surface. I scrambled to my hooves to push over to the next stall, using my blade to cut through the tarps that separated them. I pushed through as the bomb struck the ground and exploded. I was thrown forward, landing on my rump in the next aisle over. I grunted loudly in pain as I flopped over. Every inch of my body screamed in pain, every muscle fighting to keep moving.

I stood, feeling my bones cry out in protest. Sorrow’s laughter came from all around me. She was everywhere! This world, whatever it was... it was her making, just like Avarice had created her own little crystal prison. There had to be a way out! I had to find it if I had any hope of surviving against Sorrow. She was simply far too powerful and unpredictable here. I flared my horn, gathering the magic needed for a teleport. I reappeared back in the main square of the carnival. Sorrow was nowhere to be seen, but I could still hear her laughing. I didn’t have much time.

“Now... there has to be a way out of here,” I mused to myself. “This place had an entrance, it’s gotta have an exit.” I frantically looked up and down each aisle I could see, finally resting my gaze on a massive gate sitting at the opposite end of the carnival from the circus tent. *There!* I thought, charging

down the aisle towards it. I cleared the carnival stalls, screeching to a halt as Sorrow appeared in front of the gate. She looked less than thrilled.

“Trying to leave already?” She snarled under her breath.

“Sorry, Sorrow,” I growled. “But it's time for the party to be over.” Sorrow roared loudly at the top of her lungs.

“The party is NEVER over!!” She cried out angrily, stomping her hooves like a filly throwing a tantrum. “And once Sparky-warky has her way, it'll never end! I'll be able to throw parties for everypony in Equestria! And they'll all be happy FOREVER!!!”

“No, Sorrow. They won't,” I said calmly. “If Spark wins, we all lose. You know that. I know that. Let this go, and we'll stop Spark.”

“No!” Sorrow barked. “I won't let you ruin this!” She leaped into the air, bringing her scary as hell tail to bear. I two-stepped to the side, doing my best to try and keep away from the deadly appendage. Sorrow responded to my dodge by pulling another one of those cannons from her mane and firing it at me. I yelped loudly as I threw up another alicorn shield. The blast rocked me back, but thankfully the shield held. I dropped the shield, using the explosion-y mist as cover to break for the gate. I knew if I made it through that I could get out of here and stop Sorrow on my terms, not hers. The pink alicorn charged through the fog left by the cannon blast, snarling loudly as I made it to the gate. I pushed my telekinesis into overdrive, shattering the gate completely. I leaped through, hoping it would lead me back to where I was before.

I landed in sunlight. I blinked, looking back. The world that Sorrow had created was neatly contained in a black sphere hovering over the bridge. My friends were nowhere to be seen, presumably still contained in their own little world. Luckily for me, Stargazer lay just beyond the sphere. I grimaced, formulating a plan to counterattack. I knew I had to be fast, to catch Sorrow off guard.

I barely had a moment to preapre before Sorrow came barreling out of the sphere herself, her rage beginning to clearly show in her appearance. It was something that struck me as odd about her, but the angrier she became, the more feral she looked. I wrote this off as one more thing that would forever confuse me about Laughter.

I jumped back, ready for the pink mare as she touched ground. I made my move, launching into a charge. Sorrow's eyes widened as I slammed into her, rocking her off her hooves and to the ground. She yelped, hitting the ground hard. Without even thinking, I lowered my head, feeling the magic surging off of it to cast the memory spell. The tips of our horns touched, and the world fell away into oblivion.

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I blinked, taking in the soft light of the room I was sitting in. The sounds of raucous laughter and foals playing filled my ears as I took in my surroundings. Lightly blue painted walls, signs with words on them like **WTSD Victims** and **Burn Ward** caught my attention. I finally looked down, seeing the foals that were playing before me. They were barely old enough to be out of diapers, but every one of them had something wrong with them. A bandage here, a cast there. There was even one filly with bandages obscuring what looked like harsh burns all over her body. It was... scary to witness something so

innocent be hurt in such a way. It reminded me of Starry Night and Lightning Chaser. I almost cried.

And yet... none of these youngsters were crying. None of them were lamenting their bad fortune, or angry over the state of their lives. They were *laughing, playing, and loving* life. And at the center of it all, a platter of cupcakes precariously balanced on her nose, was Pinkie Pie.

“Alright, kids! It's time for Auntie Pinkie's Super Special Cupcake Surprise!” She called out as she bounced the platter of cupcakes onto a nearby table. They landed with impeccable precision, not even jarring a single one of the tasty treats. The kids shouted happily, swarming over to the pink mare to get a cupcake. Pinkie giggled profusely as she passed them out. A glance at the back of the room revealed two other ponies in the room, both wearing uniforms that marked them as Ministry employees for the Ministry of Morale. Unicorn mare and pegasus stallion. Huh. Interesting.

“Thanks, Auntie Pinkie!”

“Yeah, you're the best!”

“I love this cupcake!”

The foals continued to lavish the pink mare with praise. Pinkie grinned widely, taking in the foal's appreciation with glee. She broke out a trombone, playing loudly for the kids while they bounced around in time with the beat. It was amazing to see how much happiness existed in that room of broken dreams. I couldn't imagine actually having been there. Finally, the unicorn mare in the back of the room trotted through the sea of foals, stopping by her boss' side.

“We just got word, Miss Pinkie,” the mare said. “We need to go.” Pinkie nodded silently before turning to the foals.

“Auntie Pinkie has to go now, my little ponies!” She chirped happily, instantly capturing the attention of every pony in the room. “Now I know things seem bad, but your mommies and daddies all love you very much, and you're gonna get to see them soon! That's a Pinkie Promise from yours truly!” She did the motions of the Pinkie Promise. “All of you be real good and remember what I always say!”

“Smile, smile, smile!” The assembled crowd of foals replied in unison. Pinkie grinned again.

“That's right! Because all we really ever need is smile from our happy friends!” She said. “Bye now, kids! Bye!” She began trotting after the unicorn mare towards the door. I followed, certain that there was more to this than what I had just seen. The pegasus stallion propped open the door and the three ponies stepped out into the hall. As soon as she was out of the children's view, Pinkie's mane deflated and her eyes became cold and serious.

“Ma'am,” the unicorn mare said. “The transmission came in a few seconds ago. One of the ponies we implanted at Four Stars was found dead in his apartment this morning. It's a safe bet to say that they were involved in it. They're on to us.”

“Thank you, Pumpkin,” Pinkie replied coolly as they made their way to the elevator. “It's just as I predicted. Those Four Stars ponies are up to no good. We're going to need to put together a raid. Contact Bon Bon at the home office. She'll know what to do.”

“You want to raid Four Stars?” The stallion replied incredulously. Pinkie nodded, stepping into the elevator and pressing the buttons to make it go down.

“They're bad ponies,” she said. “We need to stop them from hurting Equestria. I have to... I have to try...”

“Try to do what?” The stallion asked. Pinkie opened her mouth to reply, but closed it without saying a word. The elevator stopped with a lurch.

“You two go on ahead and get the skywagon ready,” Pinkie said. “I have something else to do here before I leave.”

“But ma'am, we're supposed to be your security detail,” the mare said. “What if something were to happen to you? Pinkie... I just don't want you...”

“I'll be fine, Pumpkin. This is personal business,” Pinkie replied venomously. The unicorn mare gulped loudly, but nodded. She motioned to the stallion and they trotted on ahead. Pinkie Pie stopped in the hallway, turned right at me and smiled. Her mane bubbled back up into its normal poofiness. I blinked.

“Don't tell me...” I said aloud. “You can see me.”

“Yup!” Pinkie Pie chirped. I groaned. “I remember you too. You showed up in my mirror once!” I sighed, remembering that strange memory orb that Pinkie had been able to see me in. I really, really would never understand how she did things like this.

“It's because Pinkie is more in tune with her Element,” a voice said, almost reading my mind. I looked up to see a gorgeous pink alicorn standing next to her. “Hello, Pinkie dear. It's so wonderful to see you.”

“Laffy!” Pinkie cried out, jumping up to give the spirit of Laughter a great big hug.

“Laffy?” I replied, holding a hoof in front of my face to hide a giggle. I earned myself a sharp glare from the spirit.

“As I was saying,” she said. “Pinkie here is more in tune with her Element because she understands Laughter like no pony else. She was... special to me.”

“Aww thanks Laffy!” Pinkie said. She grinned widely and then suddenly frowned. “If you're here... that means...”

“Yes, Pinkie. It means exactly what you think,” Laughter said. “I'm so sorry, my dear.”

“What is she talking about?” I asked. Laughter grimaced.

“Pinkie, I need you to freeze for a moment. You mustn't hear what I am to tell this mare,” she said. Pinkie Pie saluted, suddenly freezing in place. Laughter turned to me. “Tomorrow is the day the world ends. The day that my bearer dies, and I become a dormant spirit. Waiting to be awakened.”

“And you can't tell her?” I said. “Warn her?”

“Pinkie... already knows enough, I think. For me to warn her in such a fashion would be to break several laws of time and space,” Laughter said. “The war, the end of the war, no matter how violent it was, had to happen. It always did, it always will. There is no changing that.”

“So you just have to... watch your bearer die?” I said, suddenly feeling very small in this conversation.

“The pain that it will cause to me is greater than any amount of pain I've ever endured, Radiant Star. Part of the joy of Laughter is learning to share it with others. Pinkie shared it with everyone, no matter who they were,” she said. “But Pinkie's legacy lives on in the hearts of ponies everywhere. I can see it even in the hearts of those living in the Wasteland. The virtues are there, they only need stoked by a fire, by the spark that ignites the passion to live by their rules.”

“The Elements of Harmony,” I said. Laughter nodded.

“Do you know why the Elements of Harmony are so important, Radiant Star?” She asked. I shook my head. “They're not important because of some fancy pieces of jewelry, or the stones set inside them. They're important because of what they represent. Friendship. Giving of one's self. Being honest and true. Being kind and loving. Loyal to the very end. Laughing and living, loving and laughing some more. These are the tenets that all ponies seek in their hearts, whether they know it or not. All that remains is to give them a chance to find them. To find the spark that lies deep down inside their soul.”

“Like Spark,” I said. Laughter nodded.

“Like Spark,” she said. “She thought she could control the Elements, force her will upon them, damage them as she was damaged. I warn you, Star. Her corruption runs deep. You will have to reach very far down to find the mare beneath the hate and rage to save her.”

“I'll do it. I'll do whatever it takes to save her,” I said. Laughter chuckled.

“I hope that you succeed,” she said. “However, as Honesty told you... you will need to seal Spark in order to reach that mare. In order to save her. I know that you know what that entails, right?” I grimaced.

“I... I do,” I said. “I don't agree with it though. There has to be another way.”

“I wish that there was,” Laughter replied. “There very well may be. I do not know for sure.”

“So... you'll help me, right? Disperse your physical form?” I said, narrowing my gaze at the pink mare.

“Of course,” Laughter said. “I will do what I can. You will still need to face my physical form, but I think you'll find that she'll be a lot more amenable to your demands.”

“What does that mean?” I said, cocking my head.

“It means that you shouldn't run into too many problems defeating her,” Laughter said. “Once you disperse me, it will be over. Spark's hold on the Elements will not remain. All that will be left is dealing with Spark herself.”

“And what about you?” I asked. “What will you do?”

“There is... another Bearer out there for me. She is smart, and joyful, and while she cannot replace Pinkie Pie in my heart, she will do great things for the Wasteland. In fact she already has,” Laughter said. I blinked.

“It sounds like you know who it is already,” I said. “None of the others seemed to even know that much, only that there was a new Bearer.” Laughter nodded. “Who...? Who is it?”

“I believe her name is Ditzzy Doo,” Laughter said, putting a hoof up to her chin. My eyes widened.

“Wait... Ditzzy Doo, as in the author of the *Wasteland Survival Guide* Ditzzy Doo?” I asked. Laughter nodded again. “Wow... she's the new Element of Laughter? That's...”

“A great tide of change is coming upon this world, Radiant Star. The new Bearers of Harmony will usher in an age of peace and serenity, free from the oppression of the Wasteland, and free of the radiation that has plagued the land so,” Laughter replied. I grimaced, and then my eyes widened.

“Spark doesn't know about the new Bearers does she?” I said. Laughter's gaze narrowed at me.

“No, she doesn't,” she said. “She's become blinded, thinking only of herself. Her corruption has become compulsion. When she took control of us, we were unable to even talk about the Bearers. Spark prohibited any discussion of Bearers, new or old. Twilight was her Bearer, and Twilight betrayed her. That's all she cared about.”

“Twilight sealed her away because she became dangerous, but even Twilight must have known the Elements could select new Bearers,” I said, mostly aloud to myself than to anyone else. “Wait... if you know about Ditzzy, why don't you get her involved? Or the other Bearers for that matter?”

“The others are not Bearers yet,” Laughter said. “They are going to be, but in order for the magic of Harmony to function, all six must be present.”

“They don't know who all the Bearers are?” I said, cocking my head. Laughter nodded.

“Generosity and Magic are unaccounted for,” she replied. “Until all six join together, we cannot go to them.”

“And if Spark's plan succeeds...” I started to say, my eyes widening.

“Exactly,” Laughter said, a grimace on her face.

“-- and then I said, oatmeal, are you crazy?!” Pinkie Pie suddenly blurted out before I could say anything else. She looked up at us and her eyes widened. She grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, I got bored being all frozen so I told myself a story that I finished right when I unfroze!” Laughter chuckled softly.

“Oh, Pinkie,” she said. “I am certainly going to miss you greatly.”

“Oh? Where are you going?” Pinkie said happily.

"Somewhere far, my old friend," Laughter said. "But not too far. I will always be with you, Pinkie Pie. In my heart, you will always remain. As it is for all of our friends." She looked back up at me, narrowing her gaze. "It is time for you to go now. Find Spark. Save her. Return the wayward spirit of Magic to her senses. Her time to shine is coming soon, and she will be needed for the change to come ahead." I nodded slowly as the world around me faded to black.

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My eyes opened, a groan escaping from my mouth as I forced myself to a standing position. Across from me was the stirring form of Sorrow. Beyond her, the sphere that led to that strange nonsensical carnival world. There was no sign of my friends, but deep down I knew they had to be okay. Sorrow's eyes finally opened and she stood. Her mane was no longer a rat's nest. It now hung limply along her neck. The color of her coat, mane, and tail were all muted, the glow of the crystal on her chest diminished slightly. Her gaze narrowed at me.

"You severed the connection," she said. I blinked. Of course she would know about what I did. I had expected it. "I can no longer feel the spirit of Laughter."

"So what are you now, then?" I asked, smiling smugly at the broken spirit-golem. Sorrow glared at me.

"I am perfection. A slice of the perfection that was part of the Element of Laughter," she said. I noticed that her voice had changed too. It no longer held the bubbly quality that she had before I cast the memory spell. "Perfection that will hold the Wasteland in awe as they serve their new queens."

"I don't think so, Sorrow," I replied. "You won't be the queen of anything. Now... let's release my friends. I have a feeling I can free them now." I flared my horn, sending a telekinetic blast past the pink alicorn. It landed squarely on the sphere sitting on the center of the bridge, the black sphere glowing with purple energy. It dissipated into nothingness, revealing my friends. They were sitting in the middle of the bridge, looking very confused. I fought the urge to snicker at Violet. My marefriend was wearing a rainbow colored wig and had clown makeup on. She was on her hooves immediately, eyes wide.

"Star? What the hell happened?" She said. I grinned.

"You were all stuck in Sorrow's little mind-fuck game," I said, motioning at the pink alicorn, who was glaring at me silently. "Don't worry though, I've got this." Sorrow snarled, igniting her horn, sending a blast of energy at me. I jumped to the side, dodging the blast with ease. Sorrow responded by charging at me. I had expected her to be right next to me with her insane speed, but instead she moved at a normal speed. I blinked. Something *had* happened to her when I'd severed her connection.

"I'm going to get you for that!" Sorrow roared, her tail whipping about in a furious strike. I jumped back, barely missing getting sliced by the dangerous appendage. I grinned. With her speed reduced, I had the upper hoof in the battle now. I summoned my magical blade, splitting it into five whirling shards. Sorrow swung her tail around again, meeting the hard amethyst of one of the shards in a crude block.

"What's the matter, Sorrow? You're not moving so fast now," I teased, further enraging the pink alicorn.

“Shut up!” She shouted, her horn pushing out enough energy to knock me flying with another telekinetic blast. I threw up my alicorn shield, easily dissipating the energy.

“Why? This is so much more fun, don't you think?” I said, adding a light chuckle to the mix. Sorrow's face exploded with anger. *Good, keep goading her into giving herself up*, I thought. *I just have to get Stargazer and then I can end this*. The pink alicorn launched across the distance between us, resorting to hoof strikes and attempts at biting, all of which fell short of my dodging. I kept moving away from her, keeping her at hoof's length at all times.

“STOP FUCKING MOVING!!!” Sorrow screeched. I grinned, flaring my horn. I grabbed Stargazer from just below me and laughed as it floated up into the air.

“Okay, I'll stop,” I said, dropping into E.S.A.T.S., hoping and praying to Luna that this would work. I was elated when the targeting spell came up and was able to actually target her. I queued up every shot available and released the spell. Stargazer's barrels flared to life and blue light poured from it, slamming into the alicorn with intense force. Sorrow went flying back, hitting the ground hard with a ***thud***. As she struggled to get up, I noticed the crystal on her chest was pulsing. The gem exploded, incinerating the alicorn's body in a flash of blue. I blinked. I'd done it! I beat her!

“Hmm... it's too bad that party ended like it did, I was hoping to have a little more fun,” a voice whispered in my ear. I whirled around, seeing nothing. I blinked. “Good luck, Radiant Star... you're gonna need it.” The voice stopped, and I stood there, jaw open.

“Star...?” I heard a voice from behind me say. I turned to see Violet standing there. The others were behind her, looking equally confused. I again fought back the urge to laugh once I got a better look at them. In addition to Violet's rainbow wig, Nixis had a balloon animal hat, Lilith's wing blades were painted a bright pink, much to her chagrin, and Sunshine Sky's horn had a blinking light up attachment on it. I slumped to my haunches, the urge to guffaw winning over everything else at that moment.

“Pffftwahahahaaha!” I chortled. “Look... Look at you guys!!” Violet grimaced.

“We know,” she said, rolling her eyes. “We look ridiculous.” Tears of laughter in my eyes, I finally fought down the urge to continue laughing.

“And here I was worried you'd die or something in there!” I laughed.

“I don't get it. What's so funny?” Nixis asked. I snickered.

“Star! Cut it out! We've got someplace to be, remember?” Violet snarled. I sighed happily, picking myself up from my haunches.

“I know, I know,” I said, clearing the last of my laughter tears from my eyes with a fetlock. “First things first, though.” I trotted over to the center of the bridge where Sorrow's carnival prison sphere had been. I grinned at what I saw. Lying in the center was the final piece of the shard, the one that Spark had been assumed she already had. I lifted it, opening up the casing on Stargazer where the star-crystal was mounted. In a flash of purple light it absorbed the rest of the shard, looking finally complete. The crystal itself mirrored Twilight's cutie mark, it's six-pointed star containing five colored six-pointed stars on it's inner radius. Each smaller star was a color that represented that Element of

Harmony.

“Wow...” Violet said, trotting up next to me. “Sorrow had the final piece?” I nodded.

“Yes... I wonder if Spark intentionally gave it to her or not,” I said aloud. “Regardless, it's mine now. There's just one more thing left to do before we get going.”

“What's that?” Violet asked. I smiled softly, trotting back to the other side of the bridge where Silver Sage's body lay. I picked up the body in my magic and began walking over to the remains of the *Overcast*. There was nopony in sight, but I was certain we were still being watched by the Children of the Cathedral. I lifted a hoof and knocked on the open hull, making a loud banging sound. A unicorn mare and a stallion appeared, looking deathly frightened of me.

“Go away!”

“Yeah, go away. You can do whatever you want!” I lifted a hoof slowly.

“I've come to return Silver Sage's body to you. He deserves to be buried amongst his own,” I said. “I would not be who I am if I did not do at least that much. We apologize for the trouble we've brought you. I will leave him right here and we will be on our way.” I stepped back, allowing the two ponies room to step out and collect Silver Sage. As expected, the mare and stallion popped out, their horns lighting up as they picked up the dead unicorn's body. They just as quickly retreated inside. I turned back to the others and trotted back to Violet. I smiled softly, pulling out a scrap of cloth. I wiped the makeup away from her face and removed the rainbow wig with a flash of my horn.

“Thanks,” she said.

“No problem, sweetie. It looked lovely, though,” I replied. “Now then. Let's get going. We've got a world to save.”

“Sounds... epic when you say it like that,” Lilith said, grinning. I trotted back onto the bridge, staring down the double doors that sat at the end. The others filed up on each side of me. I started forward, determined and ready. Somewhere ahead, lay Spark and Lucky and the end of all of this. I had to be ready. The crystal shard power source was finished. Twilight had said I would need it to defeat Spark. I had to wonder just what she meant by that. Would I have to perform that spell?

I pulled away from my meandering thoughts long enough to ignite my horn and force open the double doors. The hallway that lay ahead was dusty and dank, filled with rubble and debris. It extended deep inside the Cathedral. It was hard to believe that this place had once been the center of a major slaver organization. I took a step inside, the musky scent of wet assaulting my senses as I continued forward. The hallway continued for quite a while, the crunch of rocks beneath our hooves and feet the only noises we could hear.

The end of the hall opened up into a massive open room. I realized that I'd seen the hall before. It was the old throne room that Twilight had cast the original sealing spell in. Torn banners lined the walls, not those belonging to old Equestria but the symbols of Red Eye. Pillars lay haphazardly all over the room, broken and dusted. Several tunnels extended off from the sides and back of the hall. I had expected to see Spark lounging on the throne, but she wasn't there.

She'll be down in the deepest parts of the Cathedral, not the throne room, a voice in the back of my mind piped up. I blinked. It sounded like...

Twilight? I thought, looking up and down the debris. *Is that you?*

Yes, Star. It's me, she replied. I blinked again.

How... how am I hearing you? I thought. Why was Twilight so loud in the back of my mind? I thought I had to go to the library to hear her, so why could I hear her clear as day? It didn't make any sense.

It's the proximity to Spark. The connection between us is strengthening thanks to her, Twilight said. *I thought that you might need a little help.*

Well... I certainly appreciate it, I thought back. I smiled. I was pleased for some reason, to have Twilight there with me. I was going to need all the help I could get against Spark.

Star... we need to talk, Twilight said. *You're so close now to her. You need to consider what you are going to do about Spark.*

I know what I'm going to do, Twilight, I thought. *I'm going to save her. We've discussed this already.*

Star, you have to at least consider the prospect that Spark might not be worth saving, Twilight replied. I grimaced, ignoring Twilight. I needed to do this my way. Doubt crept into the back of my mind. What if Twilight was right? What if the only option I had was to seal Spark?

"What are we looking for exactly?" Sunshine interjected into my conversation, her eyes wide as she looked around. Nixis loped past her, placing two paws on the ground and closing his eyes.

"Stairs. Some way to go down," I said. "Spark's down below us somewhere, I just know it."

"I'm not seeing any stairs around this room, Star," Violet said. I grimaced, trotting up to the two ancient thrones that made up the majority of the room. Red Eye's symbol had been painted over them, or rather what was left of them. Half of the second throne was destroyed, the rubble laying on the ground next to it. I sighed in frustration.

"Well, looks like we just need to keep moving then," I said finally. "There's gotta be some stairs around here somewhere."

"Agreed," Nixis replied. "I'm definitely getting the sense that there is a large expanse of tunnels below us, but the stone won't tell me much more than that."

"Uhh, guys?" Lilith said as she pointed down at tunnels that branched out from the throne room. "Not to burst our bubble or anything, but which way do we go?" I trotted back down the steps from the two thrones, a frown on my face.

The tunnel at the back, Star... I can feel Spark, Twilight responded in the back of my mind.

"I have a strong feeling we need to head forward," I said, pointing at the tunnel that was sitting just

beyond the thrones. It was the same one Twilight had pointed out. "That one." The others nodded and we made our way over to the tunnel. The inside of it was just like the previous tunnel, dank and smelly. The walls had been covered in metal, bent and twisted by the damage that had been done to the place. The tunnel wound along for several feet before opening up into a slightly wider hall. Suits of pony armor lined the walls, looking as pristine as they were on the day they were first placed there. I narrowed my gaze at them as we passed by.

"Somepony's been busy," Violet whispered.

"Yeah," Sunshine added. "Still kind of creepy."

"Very creepy," Lilith chimed in. I grimaced.

"Shh," I whispered. "Everypony calm down. There's nothing here. Just a bunch of old pieces of armor on display." A clanking sound stopped me in my tracks. My head turned back to see one of the suits of armor stepping off its pedestal. Red eyes glared out from underneath its helmet. My eyes widened as lights began to appear on my E.F.S.

"Umm... Star, I'm pretty sure that pieces of armor don't just get up like that," Lilith said. I gulped, nodding. Another suit of armor joined the one behind us, and then another. Clanking sounds rang out down the hallway from in front of me as well as three more of the suits of armor appeared. Violet floated out Thunder Flash, sending a blast of silver fire down the hall at the first of the suits. It struck it squarely on the head, the helmet exploding in a shower of sparks. The suit of armor fell limply to the ground, revealing that its body was robotic. One of the robots behind its fallen brethren lifted its hoof, firing a stream of red that would have cut us in two, if not for Lilith's armor. The black mare shielded us with a wing, deflecting the red beam away into the cold metalwork of the hallway.

"Robots. Why did it have to be robots?" I mused as I lifted Stargazer, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. Releasing the spell, my queued shots exploded in the tiny hallway, tearing the robotic suits of armor in front of me to pieces. They sparked and shorted as I started to move forward. "Everypony, keep moving forward! Don't let them surround you!"

"Star!" Violet shouted, pointing with her hoof. I looked forward, glowering. The tunnel was narrowing down some, putting us dangerously close together. All around us the robotic suits of armor were coming to life, stepping off their pedestals to attack. I grunted as several of them tried to restrain me. My horn flared, sending them flying back into the walls, shattering them into pieces. More of the things were attempting to hold down Lilith, but a flurry of the black mare's wings swiftly sliced them in half. Nixis used his bulk to block the attacks of robot suits, while Sunshine and Violet fired back at the ones to our rear. I moved forward, keeping my horn lit to smash apart any of the suits in front of us. After several agonizing minutes of chaotic battle, I pushed out into the next room. The others flopped next to me.

My eyes widened as I took in the size of the next room. The room itself was huge, appearing to be some sort of hangar-like structure. Ponequins lay overturned on the ground on each side of the room. It looked like it may have been used for the slaver's troops to train in or something. Banners bearing Red Eye's symbol adorned the walls, while the floor in the middle of it was completely gone. A massive hole instead sat in the center of the room, punching down all the way to the next level. I could see tunnel entrances down in the darkness, made accessible by the gaping maw above them. Everything was covered in a white flimsy dust, including the ceiling. My E.F.S. showed red

everywhere, but I'd become pretty accustomed to that since being in Everfree.

“Wow... talk about your ancient history,” Sunshine mused. “This place is nuts.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, pointing to the hole in the center of the room. “Looks like we found our way down, though. Sunshine, see what you can do about making a way for us to get down there. Violet, you're with me. Nixis, you and Lilith watch our back. I've got a very bad feeling about this place, and I can't seem to shake it.” Sunshine nodded, trotting over to the edge of the hole. Her horn flashed as she started to cast spell after spell, weaving a staircase of vines that extended deep down into the chasm.

I trotted off to the side, inspecting one of the ponequins. I placed my hoof on it, trying to wipe away the dust. Instead, my hoof stuck to it. I blinked, trying to pull my hoof away. I was stuck! My eyes narrowed at the ponequin and my horn flared, ripping the thing away from me as hard as I could. The white flimsy dust that everything had been covered in came away on my hoof instead, draped over like threads of fabric. I blinked.

“Umm... guys, this isn't dust,” I said, backing up next to Violet. A chittering sound came from the ponequin as its neck burst open, revealing a large creature I'd definitely seen before. A star spider, a really big one too. It had twelve legs and was drooling rainbow spittle as it popped out of the ponequin, leaving a shattered shell behind it.

“Star spiders!” Violet cried out, lifting Thunder Flash. The star spider hissed, leaping into the air at my marefriend. I growled.

“Oh no, not today, buster!” I shouted, flaring my horn. Stargazer came up in a flash, searing the engorged beast with a blast of blue light. More hissing noises revealed several more of the creatures hiding amidst the fallen ponequin dolls. I grimaced. We didn't have any more of that silly plant to lure them away again. We needed to run, get below ground where we could hopefully block off a tunnel or something.

Nixis roared, slicing open three of the spiders that had appeared behind him and Lilith, while the black mare herself was using her wing blades to kill two more. Violet fired wildly at the walls, screeching noises resulting from the beam rifle's blasts. Five really big ones skittered along towards Sunshine, the pink unicorn yelping loudly as they spat rainbow goop at her. I growled, flaring my horn and putting up a shield that was instantly dissolved by the goop, but thankfully prevented it from hitting Sunshine.

“Sunshine, get us down, now!” I shouted. “Everypony else, follow her! I'm going to hold them off!” I lifted Stargazer, dropping into E.S.A.T.S. I queued up every shot I could, letting the spell release as my gun's barrels sped up. Blazing blue light struck the five large taint spiders, disintegrating them into nothingness. Sunshine rushed back over to the hole, her horn flaring manically as she struggled to cast her vine spells. Lilith growled as she sliced into several more taint spiders.

“We don't have time for that! Nixis, you grab Violet. I got Sunshine!” She shouted, taking wing. She reached out, latching onto the pink mare while Nixis loped over and casually picked up Violet like she was a filly. I watched as Nixis dove down the side of the hole, Violet clinging to his back like a cape as he used his claws to slow their descent. I swore I could hear her screaming all the way down. I growled, lifting Stargazer and sending blasts of blue into three more of the spider-things. Not only were the ones here bigger, but there were more of the damn things too!

I edged closer to the hole and jumped back into the air, spreading my wings slightly enough to glide down. As I lowered into the hole I fired dozens of times at the rock and metal that comprised the sides of the chasm. Debris went flying everywhere, causing whatever was holding everything up to shake loudly. Pieces of rock fell from above, hitting star spiders and turning them into rainbow paste. I landed on the ground below, grunting loudly. Nixis stood at the entrance to another tunnel, his claws pressed against the stone. Violet and Sunshine stood next to him, while Lilith watched their backs. I galloped up to join them.

"I think perhaps now is the time for a tactical retreat," I said urgently. Nixis nodded and pointed down the hall.

"This way, then. We'll collapse the tunnel behind us," he said. Violet's eyes widened.

"What?! That's crazy! How are we supposed to get back out of there?" She said.

"There is another way out," Nixis replied.

"How do you know that?!" Violet shouted.

"The stone is finally giving up some secrets," Nixis said. "Trust me." We shared a glance for a moment and I nodded. Nixis was right. His knowledge of the stonework of this place was proving to be highly valuable. I did trust him.

"Nixis is right," I said. "We don't have the time to argue about this. Those things will be down here any minute." Violet grunted, but sighed and trotted down the tunnel after Sunshine and Lilith. I looked back at Nixis. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'm confident, Star," he said. "I'll bring down the tunnel once I'm inside. You go on and catch up to the others." I grimaced, nodding. I charged into the tunnel, followed closely by the hellhound. Nixis stopped and reached out with both claws, embedding them into the sides of the tunnel. He roared loudly, bringing rocks and debris down in front of him with practiced ease. Dust reached my nostrils, forcing me to sneeze. Nixis smiled as he admired his work, the tunnel now closed off from any outside interference.

"Wow," I said. Nixis loped up to me, a toothy grin on his face.

"I thought I told you to catch up to the others," he said. I shrugged lightly.

"I wanted to make sure you'd be alright," I replied. Nixis nodded, passing by me. I walked behind him, stuck in my thoughts for a moment. Every second I was getting closer to Spark. Every second was one fewer until I was going to be in her presence, and I still had no real clue on how I was going to get through to her once I saw her. Shaking my thoughts away, I continued forward.

Eventually we caught up with the others. They hadn't gone far. The tunnel we found ourselves went on for quite a while, and we were forced to light our horns up to be able to see. The tunnel wound downwards, depositing us into a maintenance shaft that held metal stairs. I looked up, seeing that the stairs thankfully kept going.

Twilight? I said in the back of my mind.

Star, I heard Twilight's voice reply. *You're going to want to go down. Spark's close. I can feel her now. She knows you're here... I'm sure of it. Hurry...*

"Looks like down," I said aloud. The others nodded and I took the first step down onto the stairs. Cautiously we made our way down, deeper and deeper. The stairs ended at a landing that led us into a much larger hallway that looked to be in far better shape than the tunnels above us had been. It seemed that not everything had been completely destroyed during the battle with the Enclave. As we walked, my PipBuck chimed, indicating that we had found **Stable 101**. At the far end of the hall and down a large set of stairs was the traditional massive gear shaped door. The numbers **101** were faded, but still visible. The door was slid to the side of the opening, revealing another tunnel beyond.

"Is this it?" Violet pondered. "Is this where Spark is?"

"I don't know for sure, but we're going to find out," I said, stepping inside the Stable. The musky scent of rotting flesh assaulted my nose as I moved forward. The main hallway had become decrepit in its disuse since Red Eye's forces had been cleared out of here. The walls were a mottled brown, instead of gray, which gave me great concern. The floor was grated and I could hear the plinking of water below us. At the intersection we stopped. To our left was what appeared to be biological refuse. A sign above a door at the far end of that hall had the words **RESEARCH** on it, but I couldn't read the rest of it through a thick coat of gore and chunks. I grimaced.

"I really don't like this place," Sunshine said softly. "It's really creepy."

"I agree with Sunshine," Lilith replied. "Something about this place is really off... aside from the Raider Chic decoration."

"Just stick together," I said. "We're getting closer, I can... I can feel it." I realized that I could. Spark was here, somewhere. I could feel her. We were nearing her location. I trotted down the hall aimlessly, looking for anything that would tell us where to go next. The walls began to get worse as I made my way closer to the Research doors. They were now a dark brown. I could see and smell foul smelling liquids staining the floor in the corners.

"Ugh... Luna, what is that smell?" Violet gagged. I crinkled my nose as well. Lilith was right about one thing. Something was way off about this place. The door beyond the next one was open already. Whatever had been in the next room had left it in hellish conditions. I nearly retched. Pieces of body parts were scattered about the room, along with massive glass tubes that contained floating bodies. They were misshapen, deformed, and most certainly dead. Some of the tubes were broken open, their liquids spilled onto the floor below and the helpless occupant dangling outwards. My eyes widened as I recognized the fluid. It was shimmering with a rainbow color I knew all too well.

Get out, now, Star! Twilight screamed in the back of my head. *Get out of this place!*

"What the fuck...?" Lilith said as she trotted past me inside. She stepped up next to one of the sealed tubes. "What the hell is this shit?"

"Lilith, step back right now please," I said urgently. Lilith grimaced.

"It's fine, Star. I'm not gonna go near any of that stuff. I know what taint is now, remember?" She said. I glared at her. There was something seriously wrong with this place. Twilight's panic aside, we needed to get out of here!

"Lilith, I don't think this is the time," I said. "This is clearly not the place for us to be. We should go. Something isn't right here." Lilith rolled her eyes.

"Fine, alright alright," she said, trotting back over to me. The room shook as she stopped next to me, a groan and a grunt echoing from deep inside the room. I lifted Stargazer as something big and dripping with taint burst out of one of the dead bodies in the room. It was bipedal and not even pony-like in nature. In fact I think it might have been a minotaur or a griffon once. It had no eyes, and yet I felt its glare of hatred upon me. It roared, flinging a pile of the stuff my way. I growled, lifting my shield and trying to force the door closed. It wouldn't close properly! The ball of tainted rubble shattered on my shield, sizzling loudly.

"Everyone, back the way we came!" I shouted. I fired a blast from Stargazer at the monster, hitting it square in the face. It roared loudly, charging through the blast like it was nothing. It struck my shield hard, rocking me back. I hit the ground with a grunt, my shield spell dropping in a flash. Violet fired a stream of silver at the taint-dripping monster from behind me, hitting it in the chest. It fell backwards to the ground.

"Star!" She cried out. I scrambled to my hooves as a ball of taint hit the ground in front of me. I jumped back, lifting Stargazer again. Before I could get another shot off, I felt myself yanked back, a soft green glow surrounding me. I realized why a second later when another monster shot up through the grated floor, roaring loudly. Rainbow colored liquid seeped up from where the creature had appeared.

"Shit!" I shouted as Violet pulled me along. The others were ahead of her. More and more of the rainbow colored liquid bubbled up from the grates. Several more of the taint-dripping beasts burst out of the walls, roaring and snarling. Violet dropped me to my hooves, looking up at me for guidance. I grimaced, flaring my horn and sending a wave of telekinesis down the hall, knocking back the taint beasts for a brief moment. It didn't take them long to get back up.

"We need to find a way out of here," Violet said. I growled, nodding. I stomped a hoof, lifting Stargazer.

"Hurry up and head down the central hall. There's gotta be a set of stairs or something," I said, blasting another one of the taint monsters down. "Sunshine! Can you slow these things down any?"

"I can try," the pink mare replied, her horn igniting as she tried to summon her magical vines. As soon as they touched the rainbow colored liquid however, the vines withered and died. Sunshine frowned. "No can do. The taint is killing them."

"Best option is to run, and run fast," Lilith said, a killer gleam in her eye. The Bitch whined at her side, and she turned to throw Nixis a wink. "I'm gonna take down *this* tunnel!" My eyes widened and I nodded.

"Everypony keep going!" I called back. Nixis and Sunshine pushed onward, making it to the intersection while Violet and I stuck close behind Lilith. The black pegasus grinned widely as she

aimed.

“Eat this!” She shouted, unleashing a missile from the Bitch. The projectile hit the ceiling above the taint monsters, exploding in shards of flaming stone wreckage. I quickly lifted my shield, preventing any of the debris from hitting us. The ceiling itself caved in, landing on the taint beasts. Rainbow liquid splashed everywhere. I was thanking my lucky stars that nopony had been hit by it.

“Star!” I heard Sunshine shout. I turned, my eyes going wide in horror. More of the taint things were at the other end of the hallway. They were closing in to where Nixis stood. The hellhound pulled in a massive breath and snarled, roaring a challenge at them. I galloped towards the intersection, followed by Violet and Lilith. Nixis, placed his claws on each side of the tunnel, intending to try and bring this one down as well.

He never got that far. One of the monsters, a griffon thing with bladed arms, burst out from the wall next to the hellhound. With a gurgling shriek the thing brought down one of its arm blades down on Nixis. Nixis tried to dodge, but didn’t make it clear. He screamed as his left arm was separated at the elbow. I shouted, reaching out with my magic to yank him back away from a second attack. The bladed monster was met by the combined firepower of Stargazer and Thunder Flash, sending it flying back into its brethren.

“Nixis!” Violet called out, dropping her fire and letting her horn’s magic doing its best to scan the hellhound’s arm. Nixis howled in pain, blood streaming from his stump. A set of bandages worked its way out from Violet’s saddelbags, wrapping cleanly around the wound. A syringe of Med-X floated out as well, calming Nixis’ cries for the moment.

I grimaced. On either side of us, more of the taint monsters appeared, despite being blocked off from one side. They simply siphoned through the cracks and reformed on the other side! I growled under my breath. There was little in the way out of this. I blinked, realizing something.

“It’s all one creature,” I said aloud. The taint monsters weren’t individual creatures, they were all connected by the taint itself. This whole floor was the home of one massive beastie, one that was hungry for pony (and now hellhound) blood. The area around us roared, and I grimaced. “Everyone, stay calm. We need to keep moving. If we stay here, we’ll die.”

“But what about Nixis?” Violet said angrily. Her eyes were red and puffy.

“Carry him along, we’re not leaving him behind!” I replied. Violet responded by flaring her horn, lifting the hellhound in the air. We pushed down the hallway, the very floor beneath us churning and rumbling as we ran. Reaching out with my magic, I cast Shining Armor’s shield spell just as a claw made of taint emerged from below. It hit the shield with a sizzle and a pop, splashing against the wall. “Everyone stay in the shield and look for an exit!”

“Over here!” I heard Sunshine shout. I followed her waving motions, seeing a pair of blue bars of light framing a massive set of stairs that led further down. We barreled down them, the rusted steps groaning under our weight. We hit the first landing and I stopped, looking back up. Another claw, this time much bigger, had formed out of the taint and was getting closer to the stairwell. I heard the thing roar and howl as it tried to reach outside of the hallway.

It stopped. A sizzling sound echoed down the stairwell, the taint splashing against some invisible

barrier at the top of the stairs. The creature, whatever it was, roared again in pain. Several times it tried to slam at the entrance to the stairwell, each time getting rebuffed by whatever was rejecting it. I blinked.

“What the...?” I said aloud. A tap on my shoulder told me I didn't have much time to process what was going on. We continued down the stairwell, only stopping again when we reached the bottom. A massive vault door sat off to the side from another hallway, this one thankfully constructed of solid stonework. Violet set Nixis down, frantically removing the filthy bandage from the injured hellhound. Nixis groaned slightly.

“Shit... this is bad,” Violet said. I sat down next to her while Sunshine and Lilith kept a close eye on the stairwell above.

“Is he alright?” I said, my eyes drawn to the wound. It was grossly black, despite the bleeding having stopped.

“Other than losing an arm and a lot of blood,” Violet said. “I'm not sure if there's any more —” Violet's sentence was cut off as Nixis' arm spasmed, a growth of flesh expelling from the blackened wound. It grew until it turned into a tentacle, wrapping around my marefriend.

“Violet!” I shouted. I reacted with my magic, grabbing a hold of the offending appendage and forcing it to let go of my love. There was only one reason for a reaction like that. Taint. It had seeped into the wound and was causing a mutation. Nixis howled as I held the tentacle out. There was only one pony here that may have any sort of clue what to do. “Sunshine! We need you here!”

“What's wrong – oh,” Sunshine said as she saw the slimy tentacle. “Umm... shit. That doesn't look so good.”

“He's got some taint in the wound,” I said. “I need you to cast a taint cleansing spell.” Sunshine's eyes widened.

“But I... I've never been able to really cast one of those! I failed most of my magic exams back at Tenpony!” She said. “All I'm good for is my earth magic!”

“Do you know the spell or don't you?!” I asked frantically. Sunshine nodded. “Then you've got to try. You can do it, I know you can!” Sunshine grimaced, but nodded. She trotted over to Nixis' side and ignited her horn. The tentacle writhed, pulling out of my magical grasp. It lashed out, slapping the pink mare across the face and knocking her back.

“Sunshine!” I shouted, turning back to Nixis, taking a hit to my chest from the slimy appendage. I fell back, grunting as I felt the tentacle wrap itself around my leg. It lifted me into the air as it grew larger. “Sunshine... little help here!” The pink mare was back on her hooves, her horn blasting with light.

“I'm trying! I can't do this!” She cried. I growled, trying to use my magic to grab the tentacle and free myself. It was resisting all of my attempts however, almost like the taint was increasing Nixis' resistance to magic in general.

“If you don't we're going to have to cut it off, and that won't be pretty,” Violet said. Nixis looked horrified at his own arm. I don't think he really even understood what was going on. Sunshine

furrowed her brow and nodded.

“A fair warning... this might be painful,” she said as she cast the spell. She grunted loudly, pouring more and more magic into the spell. Suddenly, a soft light washed over the hellhound's arm, rippling across his entire body. Nixis' eyes shot open, the canine howling in pain as the spell did its work. After several antagonizing moments, the light drifted away, revealing the stump of his arm. The tentacle lay writhing and dying below him. Sunshine grunted, slumping to her haunches. She panted hard.

“You... you did it,” I said, blinking. Sunshine nodded, smiling weakly. Violet was right there, using her magic to send a blaze of fire into the wound, cauterizing it. Nixis howled under the pain. Finally, Violet's horn cut off. The hellhound breathed a sigh of relief after the green mare injected another Med-X into him. Violet lifted a good set of bandages, wrapping them around the stump until it was completely covered. Several long minutes passed of silence as Nixis rested.

“Is he going to be okay?” I said. Violet nodded.

“It seems like Sunshine's spell got rid of all of the taint,” she said, her horn flaring as she scanned the arm. The hellhound lay there unconscious for the most part. “He should be alright now.”

“Do we have any Hydra?” Sunshine said quietly. “I mean... that might help regenerate the limb...” Her mane was ragged and her cheeks flushed from the intensity of the spell she had just cast. Violet shook her head, her expression grave.

“No. I generally don't use that stuff on principle,” she said. “Hydra's bad shit. Highly addictive. Besides... we don't have the other part of the arm to even try re-attaching it.” Sunshine nodded, sighing as she rested her head back.

“It wouldn't have been worth re-attaching anyways,” I said softly. “Not with that taint all over it. It would have been way worse.”

“What in the hell was that thing anyways?” Lilith said. “It's not following us, that's for damn sure.” I grimaced.

“I think it was some sort of giant creature,” I said. “A giant... taint monster.”

“So why isn't it coming after us? Pretty sure we pissed it off something fierce,” Sunshine asked, grunting as she rested on her side.

“I don't think it can,” I said. “It hit some sort of barrier when it tried to chase us into the stairwell. I think whatever testing was being done there was set up to prevent against anything getting loose.”

“I don't even want to know what they were testing up there,” Lilith said, turning to sit down next to Nixis. “What about this old dog? Is he going to be okay?”

“I'm confident he'll be fine,” Violet said. “It's all up to him now.”

So, we waited and watched. Sunshine rested near the sleeping hellhound, sipping down a potion to regain her strength. The taint removal spell had been taxing on the pink mare, I could tell. Lilith got back up and kept a close eye on the stairwell, but nothing ever came down it. Whatever had been up in

that room was stuck there. I was suddenly very glad for the Wasteland overall that whoever had been up there testing with taint had the capacity to install such safeguards. After what felt like eternity, but was just twenty minutes according to my PipBuck, a grunt emitted from Nixis' mouth. His eyes fluttered open silently and he groaned.

“What... what happened...?” Nixis finally managed to whisper. His voice sounded pained, but getting stronger with each word.

“You almost lost a lot more than your arm,” I said. Nixis blanched white, groaning as he lifted his other arm. He touched the bandages cautiously and growled.

“My... arm,” he said softly. I hung my head, closing my eyes. Nixis panted, but nodded, pushing into a sitting position. Violet lifted a healing potion to his lips, the canine drinking deeply.

“Feeling better?” My green mare asked.

“I’ll be alright. Can’t count me out yet,” he said. I stood, shaking my wings out. I trotted over to the overturned vault door, a sharp breath escaping my mouth as I looked inside. The hallway was pure stone, several torches lining the walls. It went on for quite a while. I looked up and saw that the stairwell went far up past where we had escaped from the taint beast. This place was huge! Stone and metalwork ran all the way up the shaft. I looked back to the hallway. Something... something was in the middle of it. A pony?

I felt a stirring in the back of my mind. This was familiar. Why? Why was this familiar? The pony in the hallway grinned, and my eyes widened. The black mane, the green coat. It was... it was *her*. Spark. I closed my eyes and opened them again. The pony was gone.

You saw her too, Twilight said. I grimaced.

Spark? I thought.

Of course. Star, have you thought about what we’ve talked about? You need to seal Spark away for good, Twilight said.

I’m still going to save her, Twilight. Sealing her away is not an option, I thought.

Star, you’re blind. Spark is dangerous. She’s going to destroy everything, Twilight replied.. I frowned.

I don’t know... I still need to try, Twilight, I thought. Twilight fell silent. I felt a hoof on my shoulder.

“Star?” Violet said. I looked down. “Are you alright?”

“I... I thought I saw something,” I said. “I don’t... I don’t know. I think we’re close to her. I keep getting these feelings, like I’ve been here before.”

“We need to rest for a bit,” Violet said. “Especially you. You’ve been pushing yourself really hard ever since Patch had the foals.”

“I know,” I said, sighing. “But I don’t have much of a choice, Violet. If Spark gets her way... she’s

going to destroy the world.” Violet grimaced.

“Ten more minutes, then,” she said, turning back to the others. “Ten minutes, and then we'll get going. Nixis, are you okay to walk on your own?”

“I believe I will be alright,” the hellhound said. “Thanks to your expert care, Violet.” Violet blushed.

“You're welcome,” she said, slumping to her haunches. I trotted over and sat next to her, extending a wing over her back. She looked up and smiled. “Thanks...”

“No problem,” I replied, catching Nixis' glance. He nodded, and although his expression was pained, he was smiling. I didn't even know how he'd managed to do it. Despite everything that had happened, he was still maintaining a positive disposition.

“It's not your fault, you know,” the hellhound said before I could even think it. I chuckled softly.

“Somehow... I know you're right about that,” I said softly. “Doesn't make me worry about you any less, though.”

“I know,” Nixis said. “I know.”

“This hall is creepy,” Lilith said from behind Sunshine. After resting for several minutes, we started to make our way down the hallway. The only logical way to go was forward. Nixis was up on his feet and moving, the stump on his arm bandaged all up. He seemed to be... normal, but I knew that he was still hurting. Med-X could only do so much for the pain after all.

Sunshine appeared to be in much better condition. Her mane was straightened back out, and her eyes no longer held that hollow magical burnout sign that usually accompanied the condition. Her ears were perked forward and alert as she trotted behind me and Violet.

I grimaced, agreeing with the black mare silently. Every hoof step I took was a pounding in my chest. Every little breath was like a freight train. The tunnel went on for what felt like forever, and yet I felt like I was coming closer and closer to the end.

“It's definitely... freaky,” Sunshine interjected. I kept moving, pushing their words out of my mind. I wasn't about to let this place get to me. I had a mission. I had to stop Spark. I was confident, I was calm... so why did it feel like that I was going to fall apart any second? What was giving me that strange feeling in my gut? What was I missing?

“Star,” Violet said softly. “This tunnel...”

“Yeah...” I said. I knew exactly where this tunnel would go. Carvings in the stonework along the walls told me all I needed to know. Red Eye was clever, but he was also grandiose. This tunnel led to his haven, to his nadir, his altar. The place that I'd been dreading seeing. “Yeah, Violet... it's that.”

“You really think so?” She said. I nodded silently. My heart was now pounding loudly, drowning out my thoughts. A soft light appeared in the distance, heralding the end of the tunnel. Within minutes we

pushed through its exit, stepping out from stonework tunnel onto metal catwalk. My eyes widened.

Vats. Vats filled with rainbow colored liquid. Taint. Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. I.M.P. Vats swirling with color. Metal catwalks going back and forth above them. A massive stone floor next to the vats, clean and clear of any residue.

It was just like Maripony. Just like where I'd come from. I stopped dead in my tracks, shaking violently. It was too much. Memories of Unity came rushing back. Memories of the pony I had been... no... of the thing I had been. I couldn't do it. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. I just stopped, feeling Violet's hoof on my shoulder. She was trying to comfort me but I couldn't hear her. All I could do was take in the memories and stare.

And right in the center of the insanity... was her. Spark sat calmly on the stone floor. The dark green and black alicorn looked... almost serene. Across from her was six stone tables arranged perfectly in a circle. Each table save for one had a body on it. An alicorn body. Five alicorn bodies, neatly laying under white linen sheets. In the middle of the circle was another stone table, containing several sets of glowing beakers and items.

Spark stood. My heart froze. I couldn't do this! I wasn't ready!

Star! You have to be ready! Twilight shouted in the back of my mind. She was much louder than she'd been before.

Twilight? I thought.

Star, you need to move! She's been waiting for you, Star. You need to end this, now! Twilight's voice pounded in the back of my brain. It was like... like I was back in Unity again. My Goddess giving me instructions... and I really wanted to please her. I took a step forward, ignoring Violet's concerned voice. I wanted to stop Spark. I wanted to end it. Why did I want to end it? I was supposed to be saving Spark! Twilight's voice pounded again and my thoughts fell silent, quelled by her commands. She was right. I had to end this.

Spark turned around and I stopped again. She grinned widely as her eyes found me. Her horn lit up, and she reappeared across the catwalk.

"Well, I was wondering when you'd show your face, Star," she said. I narrowed my eyes at her.

"This ends here, Spark," I said, stomping a hoof. A loud clatter rang throughout the room. I was doing it! I could do this! I had to stop her. I knew it deep down in my heart. Twilight said so. Why did I keep saying that? My head was pounding with her thoughts now. I was unable to differentiate them from my own.

"Star...?" Violet said. I put a hoof up before she could say anything else. They couldn't help with this. This was my job. My responsibility. I needed to stop Spark. It had to be me.

"No. This is my fight, Violet," I said. "I have to stop her. I want you to stay out of this."

"How valiant of you," Spark said. "I commend you for being so noble. However, I cannot allow your friends to interfere even if they agree not to." Her horn flared and my friends behind me disappeared.

They reappeared in a cage, held solidly from the ceiling above one of the vats of taint. Violet shouted, Nixis snarled. I growled loudly, turning my attention to Spark.

“You let them go,” I said. “Your fight is with me.”

“Indeed it is, little Star, but your friends always have a knack for getting in the way,” the other alicorn replied. “Should they attempt to free themselves, the cage will drop into the vats. I won't care one little bit. They'll make for nice alicorn slaves. Except the hellhound, of course.”

“You... you bitch,” I snarled. Spark chuckled.

“Really? Is that all you have to say? We're together again, after what felt like so long,” she said. “I've spent too much time in this body. Your friend Lucky, she's been fighting me ever since we left Chicacolt.”

“Good,” I spat before I could even think about what I was going to say. “I hope she kills you from the inside out.” I blinked at what I had just said. Where were these words coming from? This wasn't me...

“Ooh... saucy,” Spark said, rolling her eyes. “No such luck, Star. Your friend is on lockdown inside my mind. She's supplying the body, I'm supplying the soul. Now.... come along quietly and we can start this without issue.”

“I don't think so,” I said. “I've come to stop you, Spark. What you're doing is wrong.” Spark grinned.

“So... not so quietly then. Fine, we'll do this the hard way,” she said. “You don't want to help me start a new world, so be it. I will have to force you instead.” Her horn flared, a bolt of compressed magic soaring through the air at me. I yelped, casting a teleportation spell to escape. I reappeared on the stone floor next to the vats. Spark's magical blast turned to the left, coming back around to aim right at me.

Oh... fuck me, I thought, frowning. The bolt of magic shot down in the blink of an eye, punching through the shield I tried to hastily erect. It hit me square in the chest, sending me reeling to the ground. Pain wracked my body as I flailed on the hard stone floor. I grunted as I tried to stand, the flapping of wings the only sound I could hear over the pounding of my heart. Spark stood triumphantly in front of me, a cruel grin on her face.

“You see, Star. I am magically superior to you. I am the Element of Magic, after all,” she said. “How again did you think you were going to stop me? I'm curious.” I narrowed my gaze at her, halfway to my hooves. Every inch of me throbbed with pain. I ignited my own magic, summoning my blade. I sent it flying towards the dark alicorn, splitting it into its five pieces. Spark looked bemused as she lifted up a shield of her own. My blades dinged off like they were nothing. They dissipated into the air.

Star! Get up! Twilight's voice echoed in the back of my mind. I groaned, trying to push my legs up at her voice. I needed to get up, I needed to stop Spark.

“Oh ho,” Spark said. “I see you learned something from fighting with Avarice. I was fairly surprised that you were able to defeat her and the other Elements. From what I'm seeing here, they should have killed you several times over. Except maybe Sorrow. She was far too random to defeat you.”

"I had help," I said, gritting my teeth as I struggled through the persistent pain. I righted myself to my hooves, glaring at her. Spark tittered.

"Yes... your oh-so-precious friendship," she replied. "It isn't going to save you this time, Star. I'm going to end you, and then I'm going to take your body for my own."

"So you do need me," I said, walking slowly in a circle. Spark mirrored my movements. I narrowed my gaze at her.

"I need your body. Not you," Spark said. "I also need the shard, but you were kind enough to bring that to me already. You can't imagine how pissed I was when I found out that Discord had scattered it into the Everfree, of all places."

"I can imagine you weren't too pleased," I said, grinning. "Too bad though, you won't be getting it." I flickered my horn, re-summoning my blade. Spark glowered at me, her magic filling the air to bring her own magical blade into existence. With a snarl she charged, the sound of her hooves hitting the stone the only thing I could hear. I held my stance, lifting my blade at the ready. Spark's blade split apart at the last second, turning into fifteen brilliant shards of pure amethyst. I yelped, dropping my blade and jumping back to avoid getting hit by three of them. Spark stopped short, preferring to stay at a distance and as she started flinging blade shards at me.

Flaring my horn, I raised my blade back up and dispersed it, sending all five shards flying through the air. I grinned, noticing that they were roughly the same color as Spark's. I could use this to my advantage. I just had to get Spark to think I'd dismissed my blade. Dimming the magic on my horn, I struggled to keep the tenuous control over the five shards. I jumped around, dodging Spark's strikes as best as I could while maneuvering my own shards into place.

I struck, sending all five swerving in. Spark grinned, her magic extending out into a shield that stopped them cold. I growled under my breath.

"Cute trick," Spark said. "But I think I know how many shards my blade has. Besides, I can smell your magic a mile away, Star."

"Had to try," I said, narrowing my gaze at her. "You can stop this, you know. This plan of yours, to create the perfect world." Spark chuckled lightly.

"I *know* that you don't get it, Star. I can't stop this anymore," she replied. "The plan is already in motion, wheels are turning and instructions are being followed. I *will* create the perfect world. The world that will bow to me, that will give me the credit I am deserved."

"That isn't going to fix anything, Spark. You're just like Nightmare. Short-sighted, narrow," I said, my words again spilling out of my mouth without having even thought of them. It was like... like I didn't even have control of my own speech. Spark's eyes glimmered. She must have realized something was off too.

"Interesting. This isn't like you, Radiant Star," she said. "You would never be so bold as to call me out like that. Where did this new-found confidence come from?"

“Wouldn't you like to know,” my mouth spat back. My eyes widened. What in the world was going on?

“So catty, too,” Spark replied. “Too bad I have to kill you. I kind of like this new snarky version of you.” I blinked. Spark hadn't realized a thing. She just thought I was... acting different? I knew better, though. Those weren't my words, that wasn't me talking through my mouth.

Star, Twilight's voice echoed in the back of my mind. Star, you have to listen to me. Spark may be the Element of Magic, but even her raw power won't be enough to withstand the memory spell. I can try and give you a chance, but that's all it will be - a chance. Even I can't guarantee the effects of a memory spell.

Yes, Goddess, I thought. I blinked again. Wait... what did I just think? Where did that come from? I shook my head. I mean... alright Twilight. What am I supposed to do once I cast the memory spell?

Spark is being anchored to the soul of your friend, Lucky, Twilight said. If you can separate the two, Spark will be weakened and you can seal her away. I grimaced, but nodded anyways. I needed to seal Spark away. She was going to hurt others, to cause great damage to the world. She needed to be stopped. Spark glared at me from across the room. I heard more shouting. The others, my friends, they were trying to get my attention. I couldn't hear what they were saying though. Spark apparently could, as she shot a glare up to where they were hanging inside the cage.

“That will be enough of that,” she said, her horn flaring. A hazy purple shield popped up around the cage, cutting off the sound entirely. Spark returned her attention to me. “Now... where were we? Oh, right. You were about to die.” A blast of magic erupted from her horn at me. I growled, lifting up my alicorn shield. The blast struck and shattered the barrier, but thankfully didn't penetrate any further. I jumped to the side, barely missed by the bolt that came next.

Breathing a huge sigh of relief, I ignited my own horn and lifted Stargazer. I fired, blue blasts of light hitting a perfectly formed purple shield that came into being around Spark. The magical energy blasts dissipated harmlessly.

“Try harder!” Spark shouted, stomping her hoof. A surge of power erupted from her shield, slamming into me and sending me flying into one of the stone pillars. Pain shot through me, knocking Stargazer out of my magic to hit the ground with a clatter. I groaned, pushing myself to my hooves. I couldn't take much more of this abuse. I had to stop Spark. I knew I had to. But how? I looked down to Stargazer.

The shard, Star. Use the shard. Focus your magic on it, Twilight said. I blinked. Of course, the shard! Maybe I could use it to enhance my spellcasting!

I lifted Stargazer, opening the casing. The star-crystal lifted out of the gun and into my grasp. The crystal lit up in my magic, and I could feel the power contained within it. It felt like my own magic, only more so. I prodded the power and felt it ripple around my mental ‘touch’, happy to help me. Grinning, I flared my horn, the star-crystal surging into joyful life under mine. This. Was. Awesome! The power that this thing held... no wonder Spark wanted it. My magic reached out and I effortlessly flung up Shining Armor's shield spell, the purple barrier shimmering into existence as a blast of energy struck it. It bounced away and hit the ground. I retaliated, firing a blast of my own, using the crystal shard as a focus and a power source.. The enhanced bolt struck against Spark's shield, shattering it and

hitting her in shoulder. Spark snarled as she fell backwards.

“Bitch!” The other alicorn cried out angrily. I ignited my horn and sent another bolt of magic at her. Spark jumped into the air and flapped her wings, the bolt striking the ground harmlessly. I looked up to see shards of amethyst striking at my shield barrier. I hadn't even noticed them there. I had to hand it to her, Spark's mastery of multiple spells at the same time was pretty incredible. Even with the star-crystal backing me, my barrier wasn't going to be able to handle much more abuse. Surely enough, it shattered and I jumped back as several shards of glittering crystal rained down on me. Setting Stargazer to the side, I grabbed the star-crystal in my magic and took to the air myself.

Alright, Twilight. Where's my opening? How do I cast the memory spell on her? I said, hoping that the lavender mare was still listening. Spark fired several bolts of magic at me, which I maneuvered to dodge. They zoomed back around to hit me. I grunted, tucking my wings into a barrel roll as I sent my own magic out to intercept. The bolts collided in the air, exploding in a brilliant display of color.

I'm trying, Star. Patience! Spark is resisting my attempts to break through, the voice responded.

“So that's what it is,” Spark said, hovering in place above the vats. “You just had to go and involve the purple bitch, didn't you?”

“I don't know what you're talking about, *Spark*,” my mouth opened of its own volition. I hadn't even intended to respond, so why had I? It didn't make any sense!

“Well, that sure explains it,” Spark replied. “I'm surprised at you, Star. I thought you were your own mare.” I growled under my breath.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean... you're letting that purple bitch run your mouth and body right now. We can't have that,” Spark said. My eyes widened. What did that mean? Spark's eyes acknowledged my own, a sharp grin emerging on her face. “Oh ho... you didn't know? Twilight's always been a bit of a control freak. She's had her little talons locked into you for some time. I wonder for how long...”

She's lying to you, Star. Don't listen to her, Twilight said in my mind. *She's trying to put you off so she can beat you. Stop her first. I'm breaking through her mental defenses now, just keep her talking. She can't stop me. I will do my best to hold her, but it'll be up to you to cast the memory spell. It's the only way you can separate Spark from her body. Then you can seal her up and this will all be over.*

I nodded to myself, knowing in my heart and mind that Twilight was right. I had to stop Spark, but I still wasn't sure about sealing her away. There had to be another way! Regardless, I had to keep her talking, to get an opening to cast my memory spell.

“You're lying,” I said. Spark raised an eyebrow.

“You think I'm the one lying? Poor Star. I've been the one who has been the most honest with you,” she said. Instead of the mocking pity I would have expected, she sounded... sad. “Twilight is the one who lied to you. This whole time, it's been her.”

“Enough, Spark,” I interjected angrily. “You're the liar. You told me you were there to help me, and

then you tried to use my body for your own sick twisted game. I'm done with you." I couldn't tell if I was talking for myself, or for Twilight. A bit of both, I supposed.

Now, Star! Twilight's voice cried out in the back of my mind. I grinned, lifting the star-crystal. My horn ignited, forcing my magic through it as a conduit. A wave of magical power exploded from the shard, halting Spark in midair. Tendrils of energy latched onto the mare's horn, wings, and legs. Her eyes widened as I shot across the air at her.

"Gotcha," I said, grabbing onto her neck. I snarled, touching the tip of my horn to hers. Magic flowed from tip to tip as I cast the memory spell and the world itself fell away into nothingness.

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My eyes opened and I looked around. An endless rolling plains of crystal went on for miles and miles all around me. I blinked. *Did the memory spell fail?* I thought to myself. Before I could orient myself or make sense of the scene, I heard a noise. Hoof steps sounded across the sheet of crystal, clacking loudly against the hard surface. I turned about, ready to strike when I stopped.

"Hey, Star," a familiar green pony said, waving a hoof. Lucky stood across from me, looking fairly terrible as she forced a smile. Her mane was ragged and she looked deathly thin even for a spirit. Still, her eyes were bright and so was her smile.

"Lucky?" I said. "What's going on? What are you doing here? Hell, where is here, and what am I doing here?"

"This is Spark's mind," Lucky said. "I've been trapped here for quite some time." I blinked.

"What?" I said. Lucky nodded.

"Spark's had me trapped here while she uses my body. One of the... consequences of allowing her to merge with me," she said. "I'm so sorry, Star. I never would have... have done it if I'd known what she'd do."

"It's alright," I said, smiling. "That's one of the reasons I'm here. If I can separate Spark from you, then your spirit will be free. Spark will lose power."

"I... I don't know, Star," Lucky replied, her eyebrow raised. "Are you sure that it will work?"

"Positive," I said. "After all, I still owe you one."

"Star..." Lucky said. I lifted a hoof.

"No, I mean it this time. A lot's changed since you last saw me. I finally get it now," I said. "You're my friend and I want to help you. Now... you say you've been trapped here?"

"Yes... she's been my guest," another voice said from behind me. I looked back to see Spark. The purple alicorn had a grin on her face. Her wings were tucked in and she looked happy as could be.

"Spark," I said venomously. "About time you showed up. It's time to end this. I'm going to cut off

your connection to Lucky, and then seal you away for good.” Spark chuckled.

“Is that what Twilight told you to do?” She said. “Tell me, did Twilight even bother to tell you what would happen after that?” I opened my mouth to reply, but realized that she was right... Twilight had only told me it would be over. Spark grinned. “I thought so.”

“I... I don't care,” I said angrily. “You're going to hurt millions of ponies, Spark. I can't allow that.”

“Star...” Lucky said as she trotted up next to me. “She's beyond reason. I've tried to convince her several times to stop this, but all that earned me was my indefinite stay here.” I continued glaring at Spark, who looked simply bored.

“Please. I think you misunderstand me, Star. I'm going to create a better world. Better than the Goddess could have ever hoped to achieve,” she said. “Free of pain, free of suffering. Harmony to the very end. The Elements of Harmony all worshiped as they should be.”

“You're talking about slavery, Spark. Plain and simple. You think that it will be free of pain? Maybe for you, but not for the ponies who's backs you will build on,” I said forcefully. “You're going to enslave ponykind so that you can live forever. It's wrong. Can't you see that?”

“There's the Star I remember,” Spark said, interrupting my train of thought. I cocked my head. “Can't you feel it? Twilight's presence can't reach you in this place. She doesn't know what is happening here. She's using you, Star.” I grimaced. Spark had lied to me so much, that I couldn't put any faith in anything she told me. Twilight was trying to help me make things right. She wasn't using me... was she? I looked over at Lucky. She was looking down at the ground. She sighed loudly.

“She's... she's right, Star,” the green mare said. “Twilight *is* using you. Even I can see it.”

“Why?” I asked, staring at both of them. I didn't understand it. Lucky wouldn't lie to me. Was she right? Was Twilight really just using me for her own twisted game? I prodded further. “Why would she do that?”

“Because Twilight also wants what I seek,” Spark said. “The perfect world, the world of Equestria that was. Harmony. Except with her as the figurehead, the new Goddess.” I blinked.

“You can't be serious,” I said. Spark scoffed, but nodded all the same. “If that's the case, then help me. Spark... you're the Element of Magic, for pony's sake. You can be so much better than this. We can stop Twilight, and you can return to sleep to wait for a new Bearer.”

“Do you really think I plan to stand by and watch ponykind devolve further into bloodshed?” Spark replied. “I already had to do that once. No more. Ponykind has proven that it cannot manage itself. It needs somepony there to lead them, to guide them. The Bearers are a lost cause. The Ministry Mares proved that much to be true.” I growled under my breath.

“There is hope, Spark!” I shouted, pleading with her. “Don't you see it? There is hope. It's out there, waiting for you. Ponykind can be good. I've seen it! You've seen it! There are good ponies out there, living their lives as best as they can.”

“Good ponies? I think not. Even your closest of friends have skeletons in their closets that made them

into terrible, pathetic creatures,” Spark said.

“Don't you bring them into this,” I said, glaring at her.

“Oh, I think that we shall,” she said. “Your friend Lilith, once a cold-hearted killer. Now a good pony? She killed so many in her life.”

“She's not that way anymore,” I snarled flatly.

“No? Like the zebras say, Star, you can't change your stripes no matter how hard you try,” Spark replied poignantly. “Or what about the hellhound? Does his eloquence hide the fact that he is a savage beast? Have you ever asked him what he was like before Ponyville? Do you even know?”

“Shut up,” I said. “Nixis is good. He's trying to be better everyday.”

“Please,” Spark said. “Let's not forget your dead friend... the earth pony.”

“Don't you dare say his name,” I spat. Spark was really starting to piss me off now. “Don't. You. Dare.”

“Touched a nerve, I see. He got his wife murdered, didn't he? By slavers he was hired to protect, no less,” the dark alicorn said, licking her lips. “What was his name? Oh... right... Steeljack.” I growled loudly.

“Stop it!” I shouted. “Stop it, now!” I couldn't hear these things. Not about my friends. Not about... Not about him.

“That's my point, Star. No matter what you do, ponykind will still have nothing to look back on except for the long and bloody history that's carried it to this point. The past will always haunt them, destined to repeat itself until they are all dead!” Spark snarled. Her nostrils flared.

“It doesn't matter! Don't you get it, Spark? Your past does not define you!” I protested. “Everypony deserves a second chance at happiness. Everypony deserves the chance to live!”

“I don't think so, Star,” Spark said. “This world, it's too far gone for anyone to save. But I will save it. I will make sure that there is nothing but perfection!”

“Then there is no hope for you, Spark. I have to stop you,” I said angrily.

“Or you could join me,” Spark said, lifting a hoof. “I need your body after all. Join me, and help me make the world a better place. A perfection of pony existence.”

“No,” I said coldly. “You don't get it, Spark. I won't join you.”

“Alas, I sort of figured that was the case,” Spark said, putting her hoof down. “Your body will be mine, Radiant Star, whether you join me willingly or not. I'll just have to take it.”

“Fat chance,” I said. “Why do you need my body anyways? What's so important about me that you can't work your stupid world domination crap with the body you have now?” Spark giggled.

“Oh, Star. I can't tell you that. That would ruin all the fun,” she said. “Now... get out of my mind. We have a fight to finish, after all.” I stomped my hoof on the crystal ground.

“Let Lucky go,” I said. “Then I'll gladly stomp your ass into the ground.” Spark sneered at me, her black mane blowing in some non-existent breeze.

“I don't think so. Not until I have your body,” she said. I grinned, flaring my horn. Somehow, even in the middle of a magical dream sequence, my horn and magic still worked. I fired, sending a blast of telekinetic energy at Spark, who merely dodged to the side. She retaliated by firing her own blast of energy, which hit me in the chest and knocked me back to the ground. Lucky yelped and appeared next to me.

“Star! Are you alright?” She exclaimed. I grunted, pushing myself back up to four stable hooves. Pain wracked my body. I didn't like that part. I worried about what would happen if I died in here. I nodded.

“I'm fine,” I said, igniting my horn and raising a shield spell. Another blast of energy struck it, dissipating harmlessly. “Right now, I need you to focus. We have to separate your spirit from Spark. I can't do that without your help.”

“But, Star... I...” Lucky started to say. I growled, deflecting another blast from Spark. I returned one of my own.

“This is not the time for that!” I cried out. “Lucky. You're going to be fine. I promise you. But you have to help me. If you don't, I can't stop her, and then we're all doomed.” Lucky looked down at the ground, but nodded.

“Alright, I'll do it,” she said, her voice filled with confidence. She trotted up next to me, her horn blazing as she cast her own shield around herself. “Spark! That's it! I'm through with being your riding mare! Get your own body!”

“That's it,” I said, grinning. “You tell her, Lucky.” I reached out with my magic, lashing at Spark with a raw wave of telekinesis. The dark alicorn stood firm against the assault, batting away the magic like it was nothing. The dust settled and there we were. Lucky stood next to me, her horn glowing fiercely. Spark stood across the crystal clearing, her eyes dark and angry.

“So, you've made your decision then,” she said. “I had hoped for better from you, Radiant Star. You and I could have done so much together, if you'd have just let me have your body in the first place.” I snorted. Despite every attempt, every time I'd tried to talk to her, she was still the same old Spark. She wasn't able to be saved. I had bent my mind into circles trying to figure out another way, but I just kept coming back to the same conclusion.

I would have to seal her away for good. Spark was too dangerous, too harmful to allow to exist. She had to be sealed, and destroyed. Only then could ponykind prosper. I knew what I had to do, but I had to do it right. I had to get Lucky out of there, and then I could deal with Spark properly.

“Save your shit, Spark. We're done,” I said, flaring my horn. I roared, the blast of magic erupting forth. Instead of being aimed at Spark however, I aimed at the ground. Destruction ripped across the

crystal surface, separating Lucky and me from Spark. Spark shouted, but I wasn't listening to her. I focused my magic on Lucky. Instinctively I reached out and tugged on her spirit, pulling at the bonds that held her to Spark. With a grunt, I ripped those bonds away. I felt Lucky's spirit disappear as the world below me began to shatter and break.

“No!!” Spark shouted angrily. I grinned as I lifted into the air, watching the world that was Spark's mind crash and burn. With a flash of white light, my eyes opened.

OoooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

“Star...?”

I grunted in response, pushing myself up to my hooves shakily. I looked up, seeing Lucky standing there. I frowned when I realized that she was just a spirit again. Her shared body was nowhere to be seen. The vats of IMP sat there, swirling with rainbow colors. The bodies on the stone slabs were silent, as was the cage still containing my friends. It was as if nopony else was there. Another thing was quite odd. I could no longer feel much of Twilight's presence, but it was still there, building back up. I chalked it up to the effects of the memory spell.

“Lucky? You're...” I said.

“I know,” she said, frowning. “You did it, though. You separated me from Spark.”

“Thank the Goddess,” I said. Another frown crossed my face when I realized that Lucky was the only one I could see. I couldn't see Spark. “Where is she?”

“I... I don't know. You don't suppose she's gone, do you?” Lucky asked. I grimaced, shaking my head.

“No... she's probably got some trick up her sleeve,” I said. “First things first, though.” I looked up at the cage my friends had been trapped in. It was still wrapped in the persistent magic of Spark's shielding. With a flare of my horn I released the spell. With a second flare, I lifted the entire cage and set it down on the stone floor. The door popped open, revealing Violet. My green love sprang out of the cage and nearly bowled me over with her hug.

“Star!!!” She cried out. “Ohmygosh, are you alright? What happened out there? We couldn't hear anything after Spark...”

“It's alright, Violet. It's almost over. There's just one more thing left to take care of,” I said softly. I looked to the others. Nixis had stumbled out next to Sunshine, looking no worse for wear than he had been, while the latter had a fearful expression on her face. Lilith looked angry, but thankfully not at me.

“Where is that bitch? I owe her a little present, courtesy of The Bitch,” she snarled. I smiled, placing a hoof on her shoulder.

“I am glad you all are okay,” I said. I grimaced. I was afraid to tell them what I was about to do. Especially Violet. I had made my decision, and she wouldn't like it. She didn't have a choice in the matter, though. Neither did I. Violet must have known something was up, because she spoke next.

“Star? What's wrong?” She asked. I looked away, painfully. Lucky stood nearby. Her eyes widened. She knew, too.

“Star, you can't,” she said. I shook my head.

“Violet... whatever happens next... I want you all to stay out of it,” I said. I narrowed my gaze at the mare I loved, more than anything in the world. “No matter what. I mean it.”

“What are you going to do?” Violet said, her voice cracking. I couldn't take it. I couldn't look her in the eye and stay strong. I looked down at my hooves. Violet grabbed my shoulder. “Star... what are you going to do?” Before I could respond, a chuckling laugh echoed from all around us. My eyes glimmered. I knew that laugh.

“Oh... wouldn't you like to know?” Spark's voice said. “Tell her, Star. Tell her how far you will go to stop me. It won't work. I am immortal, and I will not be undone so easily.”

“Show yourself, Spark,” I snarled, turning back towards the stone table in the center of the room. “Show yourself, and let's finish this.”

“Yes... let's,” Spark said, a flash of purple light emanating from one of the bodies on the slab. It's coat, once a milky white, turned a deep shade of purple while it's mane and tail turned dark black. It lifted itself off of the table and stood up. Spark shuddered as she adjusted to the body. I growled.

“How...?” I said. Spark grinned.

“I could have taken any one of these bodies,” she said. “But they are only temporary. Useless in the long run. They're not your body.” I took a step forward. Violet's hoof tried to stop me.

“Star, wait!” She said. I stopped in my tracks. “We'll do this together.” I shook my head.

“Violet, no. I need to do this alone. I'm the only one who can stop her,” I said. “Remember... whatever happens. Stay out of it.” I pulled away from my love and started forward. I couldn't look back at her, I couldn't let her see how much it hurt me to say those things, to pull away from her. I couldn't look at her, for fear that I might break down and lose myself. Lucky strode next to me as I walked to meet Spark.

“Star, you can't do this. It's insane! Don't you know what that will do to you?” Lucky said. I grimaced.

“I know,” I said under my breath. “But it's the only way to stop her. She doesn't want to be saved. She doesn't want a second chance. She doesn't deserve one.”

I agree, Twilight said in the back of my mind. Spark has proven herself to be far too dangerous, and uncooperative. Seal her, and all of this will be over.

I plan to, I thought in response. Spark's smug grin never left her face as I stepped up in front of her. I scowled, narrowing my eyes at the dark alicorn.

“Ready for round two, Star? I promise, I won't make this easy on you,” she said jokingly.

“Star!” Lucky cried out, stomping her hoof. I raised an eyebrow at her. “Stop this! What about Violet?”

“Violet will be safe - You’ll *all* be safe, once I’ve destroyed Spark. I have to do this.”

“Yes... run along Lucky. You may have gotten your freedom, but that doesn't mean I won't destroy you,” Spark snarled. “You were a means to an end that I no longer need.” Lucky glared daggers at Spark.

“Try me,” she said. “Star's my friend. I'm going to help her stop you, and we'll do it the right way.” I cleared my throat and lifted a hoof.

“Lucky,” I said. “Do what she says. Leave this place. I'll come find you once it's all over. I promise.” The spectral mare's eyes widened.

“What?!” She said. “Star, please... listen to reason!”

“Lucky!” I shouted at her. I didn't care anymore if Violet and the others saw me speaking to thin air. “Leave!” I turned back, seeing the others. They looked apprehensive. Violet had tears in her eyes. I couldn't look her straight in them. “The same goes for the rest of you! Leave, and I will take care of this! It's my responsibility!”

“Mmmm... yes, leave us, so that we can finish our playtime,” Spark purred. Her horn flared and my friends disappeared in a flash of white light. Even Lucky disappeared. I couldn't spare even a moment to try and figure out how that was possible. I turned back to Spark, snarling.

“Where did they go?” I asked. Spark chuckled.

“No worries. I just placed them further back down the tunnels. The denizens of this place will keep them busy. By the time they get back to us, we'll have ended this... one way or another,” she said. I blinked. Spark was being... noble? Was that the right word? I couldn't believe it. Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I took a step forward.

“Fine, let's do this then, Spark,” I said. “Let's end this.”

Yes... let's end this, Twilight's voice ground out in the back of my mind. *Spark will rue the day she crossed Twilight Sparkle.*

I growled, flaring my horn and sending a bolt of magical energy at Spark. The dark alicorn ducked to the side, dodging with ease as she sent her own beam of magic. I lifted the star-crystal, using it as a focus to create a shield that deflected the bolt easily. My amethyst blade hummed into existence, slashing wildly at the other mare. Spark retaliated, summoning her own blade to block.

Our blades clashed, back and forth, to and fro. Flecks of magical energy ripped the air itself apart as we tried to get the better of the other. For all of our power and effort, we were evenly matched. I jumped to the side, splitting my blade up to block several of Spark's own shards. Crystal rang against crystal, screeching horrible in my ears as I continued circling and strafing. Spark wasn't letting up either, her shields just as well-timed as my own.

I was thankful for the star-crystal's power boost. The power shard was magnificent in its design. I could see why Twilight had commissioned its creation. It continually refilled my strength and magic as I fought, negating the need for any curative potions. With it, I operated purely on autopilot, like somepony else was doing the driving. I flared my wings, sending a wave of magic out that slammed hard into Spark, sending her reeling back for a brief second.

I charged in, reaching back with a hoof. I let loose, hitting Spark in the face with a hoof strike that left her face bruised and swollen. The dark alicorn jumped back, raising another shield that blocked my second attack.

"You're good," Spark admitted. "It's too bad that you haven't noticed it yet." I flared my horn, sending a wave of magic at her. She dodged to the side easily.

"Enough talking!" I shouted, readying my magic for a counterattack. Spark merely chuckled.

"Fine, if you don't want to discuss it," she said. "You're being far more aggressive now that Twilight's got her little hooks deep inside you."

"No more lies, Spark!" I retorted. I released my magic, sending out several tendrils of telekinetic power at her. Each one latched onto her legs, grabbing her and lifting her into the air. Spark didn't fight back. She stared at me, her eyes dark.

"I see," she said. "You can't even tell can you? You can't see that she's been controlling you this whole time."

She doesn't know, Spark, I heard Twilight say, her voice coming from my mouth and echoing in my mind. *She doesn't know, and now it's far too late to convince her otherwise. Right, my little Star?*

"Yes... Goddess," I said, my mouth moving of its own accord. Yes... this was right. I was going to stop Spark, to seal her away for good, all for the glory of my Goddess. Spark hung in midair, suspended by the magical tendrils I'd cast. She chuckled. I squeezed with one of the tendrils, interrupting her disrespectful laughter.

"Twilight, Twilight... it's so good to hear your voice," she choked out. "I never thought I'd hear that voice ever again... It's over, isn't it?"

It is. Your plans for domination are over. Let's face it, your heart was never truly in it from the start, Twilight said, her voice pounding in my head. *Star... it's time. Begin the sealing spell. You know how to do it.* I nodded, my horn flaring as I lifted Spark over to the stone circle. I set her down carefully, using the magical energy to hold her in place. The items needed for the spell were conveniently ready for me. Spark had laid out several of each item on the stone table, needing them for the resurrection spell. I knew what I had to do.

"Spark. It is time for you to be sealed away," I said, my voice slipping into a monotone. I lifted a bottle of glowing blood from the table, splashing it on her.

"The blood of a changeling, to charge the body with the magic of form..."

Spark hissed at me. I didn't care. I only wanted to appease my Goddess. A packet of hairs shook out over her next.

“The mane hairs of a zebra, to charge the soul with the magic of life...”

Another bottle lifted, this one full of a rainbow colored liquid. I smiled at it. It was glowing and beautiful. I dumped it on Spark without hesitation.

“The essence of a rainbow, to charge the mind with the magic of clarity...”

Next came several dragon scales. They were different colors, all of them. I wondered how Spark had managed to acquire them. It was of no real matter though. They dropped onto Spark. She howled and writhed.

“Stop, Star, stop! Don't let her control you! She wants you! It's always been her!” She shouted. I didn't hear her. I kept going through the motions, kept chanting the ancient spell.

“The scales of a dragon, to charge the horn with ancient magic...”

The scales started glowing, a soft blue color. Crackling magic began to fill the air around me. It was happening. There was only two more things left to do. My horn burst into life, connecting my magic to Spark's horn. Naturally when my Goddess had done this, she'd had the tiara, but I had the real spirit right here.

“The Element of Magic, the spark with holds together Harmony itself... to charge the life with the soul of the dead.” Spark's horn began to violently surge and glow. One more step, one more thing and Spark would be gone forever. I would no longer have to worry about anything else, anymore. I would be happy. I looked down to my sides. Yes... just one more thing.

“Star!” I heard voices and shouting from behind me. It was Violet and the others. They'd managed to find their way back to the room. So had Lucky. They were all shouting at me. I didn't hear them. I couldn't hear them. My magic reached out, taking a hold of my wings.

That's right, Star... just one more piece. You've been very brave, little one. Now it's time for this to be over for good, Twilight said in the back of my mind.

Yes, my Goddess, I thought back. I live to serve.

I grasped my wings at the roots firmly with my magic, and I gritted my teeth. More shouting. I couldn't make anything out over the pounding of my heart and the pressure of my Goddess in my mind, so I ignored them.

And pulled off my wings..

RIIIIIIIIP

My wings ripped free of their sockets, the pain rushing up and down my body as I staggered forward. Blood poured from my sides and I dropped to my front knees. Spark looked horrified. Blood flowed from my bitten-through tongue as I painfully spoke the final words of the incantation.

“The wings of an alicorn, given freely to purge evil from the world,” I said. “Blood and bone and flesh and feather, give root to my magic. Free me of this accursed spirit!!!” Spark's body began to glow wildly, the star-crystal shooting out from my magical grasp above her. Spark snarled as her body was slowly pulled into it. She locked eyes with me, the hatred seemingly gone from them.

“I'm... I'm sorry,” she said, and then she was gone. The star-crystal sat in her place, smoking. I smiled brightly. I had done well, I had managed to stop Spark. My head felt woozy. I heard more shouting, panicked shouting.

“Star!! NO!!!” Violet shouted as she was at my side in an instant. Her horn burst into furious life as she poured healing into my body.

“V-V-Violet...” I said softly, slumping to my side. Violet's face was a mixture of rage and pain.

“No, Star... no no no... don't you do this to me!” She cried out. I managed a smile.

“It's... okay,” I managed to say.

You have done well, little one, Twilight said. Violet's eyes widened as she looked up.

“Who...?” She said, before a blast of magic sent her flying away from my side. I grunted, trying to push myself up.

“Shhh.... don't move, Star,” a voice said from above me. I looked up to see... her. Twilight Sparkle, in all her glory. Her wings spread out proudly on each side, a gold crown on her head. “Moving will only damage your body further, and I need it still for my glorious work.”

“Wh-What?” I said. I looked down at my sides, seeing the blood pouring from them. What had I done? How did...? I looked back up at Twilight, horror filling my eyes as I realized it.

Spark had been right. She was right all along.

“Yes... she was right,” Twilight said, smiling. “You were always my little Star. My pawn.”

“Get away from her you bitch!” Violet shouted. A stream of silver fire shot through the air, passing completely through Twilight's body to splash harmlessly against the far wall. Twilight grimaced, lifting a hoof. A magical shield, much more advanced than anything I could ever hope to cast cut off the others from us. Twilight smiled softly.

“There... now we have some more privacy to talk, you and I,” she said.

“Wh-Why?” I asked. My mind was racing, trying to figure out when Twilight had managed to control me. How had I not seen it? When had it happened? I managed to vocalize that question with a weak “When?”

“I needed a body. I told you once that you were to be a new Goddess, and I was right. You see, Star... I created you. You were never a real pony. I molded you out of raw I.M.P.,” she said, clearly impressed with herself. My eyes widened. I wasn't real? I had memories... but they were all hers. They were all

Twilight's memories. Where did my memories go? Twilight grimaced as I shuddered. "I know you're in a lot of pain right now, but trust me. It will be all over soon. Once I take over your body for good, you will be good as new."

"But... I... I had a choice," I choked out. Twilight chuckled.

"Silly pony. You never had a choice at all. I created you without a choice in the matter. I was rather pleased I was able to slip you past Trixie. She was too busy worrying about the Black Book and Littlepip to realize what I had done," she said. "I hadn't counted on being blown up, though. Alas, such is life! Now we get to make a fresh start of things." Twilight lifted a hoof to her chin, smiling.

"Just think, Star. You get to be the new Goddess of the Wasteland. A verifiable Princess! Doesn't that make you excited!"

Footnotes:

Radiant Star: Error...

Violet Iris: Maximum Level Reached!

Nixis: Maximum Level Reached!

Sunshine Sky: Maximum Level Reached!

Lilith: Maximum Level Reached!

Chapter 36: Endgame, Part 2

“From one to another, another to one. A mark of one's destiny singled out alone, fulfilled.” That doesn't make any sense. It doesn't even rhyme!

Endings. The trouble with endings is that they're not always *the* end. Most endings represent a new beginning, a way forward. Every ending leaves you wanting more. But what defines an ending? How does one know that something is truly ending? At what point does my story end? I cannot say for certain. I only know that it is coming soon.

The true end. The end of all things that I once held dear. The end that I would have to fight to prevent. The oncoming storm. In that moment, my sides streaming blood from the places where my wings were, I beheld failure. I saw my entire life and it was an insignificant waste. But at the same time, it was filled with friends, with good times, with love and with hate. With pain, grief, suffering, joy, and the entire spectrum of emotion and experience that defines a pony. My life... was not so bad. My life was a lie, a sham, a creation of a mad pony who was so wrapped up in the past, that they couldn't see the future for what it was.

There's a saying for that in the Equestrian Wasteland. It's called 'old world blues'. And I fear that I myself have been victim to its siren song. I've spent so much time with my head in prewar Equestria, that I was unable to forge the path ahead. No longer. No longer can I sit idly by while good ponies die. No longer can I let myself be defined by the machinations of a crazy pony. No longer will I let my fate be predetermined.

I will make my own fate. I will forge my own path. And nothing, not even Twilight Sparkle, will stop me.

I lay there, breathing hard. My breath sawed out of my nose as my heart slammed against my ribcage. I struggled to move, my life force leaving my body faster than I could imagine. My sides felt like fire from where my wings had been removed. Goddesses... I could even see them, laying flat against the cold floor! Blood coated my once beautiful wings, the aftermath of my actions. I had done something unthinkable. I had marred myself in the name of one who had betrayed me.

Above me stood her. Twilight Sparkle. The pony who'd orchestrated my entire existence. The one without whom I would not be alive. I hated her. I wanted to hurt her. But I couldn't. I couldn't even move, the pain was simply just too much. A soft smile crept onto her face.

“Now... let's fix some of these glaring problems you've caused, shall we?” She said cheerfully. I didn't know how anypony could be as cheerful as she was being.

“Wh-Why?” I croaked. It was the only thing I could say. Twilight grinned.

“Oh, Star... you know why. I had to do it. I needed your body. My work here in Equestria simply wasn't finished yet,” she said. Her horn flared, and I felt my body lifting into the air. I felt so light. I'd lost so much blood. I was wondering why I hadn't died yet. What was keeping my body alive?

Twilight grimaced. "Look at you, though. No, no... this won't do at all."

Arcane magicks coursed through my veins, sending fresh waves of pain all over my body. I grunted and screamed as Twilight's power washed over me. I felt bones crackling, pushing outward.

"Yes..." Twilight said. "That's good. We'll have you right as rain in no time, Star. After all, I can't have your body and be a good Princess without those lovely wings of yours, right?"

"F-f-f-f," I tried to choke out. Twilight frowned.

"Now, Star. That's no way for a Goddess to behave," she said, sighing. "I suppose some side effects to the experiment were to be expected." *Experiment?! I'm not some fucking experiment, you bitch!* I screamed in my head. I still wasn't able to manage speech. Twilight's frown returned. "Little too vulgar for my tastes."

Wait... you can hear my thoughts? I thought tentatively. Twilight nodded.

"I can hear every little thing rattling about inside your head there," she said. "I created you, after all. I know more about you than well... you do." My body spasmed again under Twilight's ministrations, her horn carefully working over my entire body. All I felt was pain. All I saw was red. I hated Twilight so much for all that she had done. I hated myself more, for falling into that trap. Spark had tried to warn me, and I had failed to heed her.

How long? How long have you been controlling me? I thought back.

"Well... quite a long time, really. Since Chicacolt, at least. Or rather, since Spark left your body," she replied, placing a hoof to her chin. "Convincing you to expel Spark using the power shard was pretty easy really, and I needed her out of the way. I hadn't quite counted on your friend Lucky, though."

Hadn't counted on? What'd she do? I thought. I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. This was my best chance to get some answers about my supposed life. I also hoped that if I kept Twilight monologuing long enough, Violet and the others could break through her shield and rescue me. There was no way Twilight could get out of this with them around.

"Spark was... more resilient than I thought. Your friend gave her a way to escape me. That's not to say that she didn't have her own agenda, but Lucky let her plans derail my own," Twilight said. "That's why we ended up here. I couldn't fully control you after Spark left you, and that was because her presence on this world was stopping me from entering it. She needed to be sealed away for me to fulfill my own plans."

That's why Spark wanted my body, right? Because you... I thought, a surge of rage muting even my mental voice.

"Because I created you, yes. Spark knew that. She wanted to tell you, more to mess with my plans than anything else, but she wanted control of you as well," Twilight replied. "I was trapped away, stuck in that damned power shard."

The shard? I thought. Twilight nodded.

“Limitless power in such a tiny package. When I discovered that it had survived the ages of time, I knew that it was my ticket to regaining my body,” she said. “Being a part of the Goddess did have its benefits.”

How did you escape the Goddess? She died, I thought.

“I was smart,” Twilight said. “I saw the writing on the wall. Littlepip wasn't the first 'hero' that the Wasteland had produced, but her methods certainly were the most effective. Trixie's attempted union with Red Eye was just the angle Littlepip needed. I knew it would lead to Trixie's destruction.”

That doesn't answer my question, I thought angrily. I floated there, spasming again underneath the magic that Twilight was sending throughout my body. I felt more bones crack and pop inside of me, adding spikes of agony to the waves of pain rolling through my battered flesh.

“I plotted. I planned. I learned Trixie's patterns and found a way to communicate with out her being aware of it. I reached a unicorn in the Twilight Society who was all too eager to believe that I was who I said I was,” Twilight said. “Dusk Blue was my eyes and ears in the outside world.”

Dusk Blue betrayed you, though. He was working for Discord all along, I thought. Twilight scrunched her face.

“Yes... well I certainly wasn't expecting Dusk Blue to be his agent, but that all worked out quite beautifully if I do say so myself,” she said.

So what happened next? I asked.

“Well... when Trixie absorbed me into the Goddess, I had thought that my life was over,” Twilight said, sighing. “It wasn't until I had caught the news from Dusk Blue that my pet project, the shard I'd created, had survived... that I found hope again. I knew what I had to do.”

You escaped inside it, I thought.

“Mostly. Parts of me escaped inside it. It wasn't a perfect split, given that the shard itself wasn't whole. When I sealed Spark, I made sure to split the shard into two to protect it,” Twilight explained. “I disguised it as a memory orb with a trap spell to prevent anypony from viewing it. Well, anypony that is... except for you.”

Why me? Why was I chosen for... for this? I replied. Twilight snorted.

“Oh, don't take it so personal Radiant Star. I needed a body. My real body was obviously gone, having been absorbed when the megaspells dropped. I needed an alicorn to use for my own purposes. I couldn't just use one of the ones that Trixie had made. She would have known I was planning on backstabbing her. I was originally going to kill her, you see. But thankfully, Littlepip took care of that for me.” A fleeting thought struck my mind. A stray memory of pulling a gray mare out of the wreckage at Maripony.

You used my body to save her? I thought. Twilight snorted again and chuckled loudly.

“Silly filly. You only have that memory because it was my own. No, I sent you away as soon as Trixie

started sending away her own alicorns. I had to trust that Dusk Blue's spell would work, and I had too little time," Twilight said. "I did owe Littlepip though, for setting me free and taking care of Trixie and the others. So I popped into one of Trixie's children. To be honest, I was surprised she survived. Surprisingly resilient, that one."

She'll stop you, you know... they'll all stop you. The Element Bearers will stop you, I thought forcefully. Twilight snickered a little at this.

"Please, Star. Give me some credit. I'm the smartest mare in the known world. I've thought this through, trust me. Spark's sealing is permanent now that she's been locked into the complete shard. Without Spark, the Elements of Harmony aren't on the table," she said. "Besides... I'll have a body and access to all the magic in the world. I'm unstoppable."

So why are you stalling then? Get it over with and take over already, I thought, my eyes meeting hers. I narrowed my gaze at her.

"Unfortunately, the amount of damage done to your body getting down here, fighting Spark, ripping off your wings... that all needs to be repaired. You didn't seriously think I was going to take your body the way it was, did you?" Twilight replied, rolling her eyes.

You're repairing my body? Why can't I talk yet? I thought.

"Because quite frankly, I don't want you to. I've shut off your locomotor function for the time being. Until I'm finished, at least," Twilight said.

Why leave me able to think? I'm confused, I said back. I didn't understand it. If Twilight was so powerful, why was I still here? Why was I able to converse with her this way? It didn't make any sense... unless... *You can't do that, can you? You can't shut my mind out.* Twilight sighed.

"No. I can't," she admitted, grimacing. "I suspect that your deal with Discord did that. He made it so I couldn't expel your mind, somehow. You can understand now why I was so angry that you released him. I adjusted my plans accordingly though. Without your physical facilities, your mind isn't a threat to me. I can do what I want. Besides... you're an intelligent mare. I like thought-provoking conversation, and you've proven that you can give that."

I don't want to be your conversation buddy, I thought. *I want my body back!*

"It's not your body, Star. It belongs to me," she said. "Your mind is the by-product of the Goddess being gone, that's all. Had Trixie not died before I executed my plan, 'you' would have never existed."

I don't care. It's my body. My mind, and my life! I shouted in my mind. *And I want it back!*

"I can't allow that," Twilight said sternly. "I've spent too much time planning for this moment. I *will* see Equestria returned to its former glory. I intend to guide this world into a new age, Star. Can't you see how wonderful that will be?" I blinked. She was just like Spark. She was crazy!

You... you're just like Spark, I echoed. *Don't you get it, Twilight? The world doesn't need you anymore? It doesn't need the Ministries!*

“Hah. The Ministries,” Twilight said flatly. “A colossal mistake if there ever was one. No, Star. I don't want to return Equestria to the time of the Ministries. I want to rule it, as a Princess. As its Princess.”

You mean as the Goddess, I thought. Twilight giggled.

“I will admit, Trixie had a solid concept. Her implementation was terribly flawed, though,” Twilight replied. She closed her eyes for a brief moment and smiled. “Yes. That is the correct terminology, Star. I will be the Goddess of the Wasteland. I will scour this world of its evils and reinstate the world we had before.”

I'll stop you. I won't let you, I thought back angrily.

“Please... you can't even move right now,” Twilight said. Her horn flared again and I felt my body lowering back to the ground. My hooves touched the cold stone and I blinked. I had been so focused on Twilight that I hadn't realized that the pain had gone away. Twilight smiled. “Spread your wings, little one. Spread your wings.” I looked back, forced to by Twilight's magic. I had no real control of my body, just what she was making me do. Sitting on each of my sides were the most gloriously beautiful purple wings I'd ever seen. They shimmered in the light of Twilight's power.

The wings flexed carefully, the colors of their feathers changing subtly as they moved. Twilight moved my head back to look at her.

“There we are, Star. Now you're ready to go,” she said.

No! I shouted in my mind. I tried to close my eyes and shake my head, but I couldn't. Twilight had full control over everything. *I won't help you! You can't make me!*

“Now who's acting like a child?” Twilight replied. “I'm going to cast the spell now. My mind and soul will transfer into your body, and then it will be done.”

What... what will happen to me? I thought.

“Oh, your mind will still exist within my body,” Twilight said. “I told you before, I can't erase that part of you. But don't worry, we're going to be bestest of friends you and I!” She smiled brightly. I tried to move, to get away, but I couldn't. Twilight's horn began to flare and I shouted and screamed inside my mind. I heard shouting over the top of my own. I tried to move my head, to shout back. No response.

“Get away from her!” Violet roared. The shield that Twilight had erected had a massive hole in it. Sunshine Sky stood just beyond it, panting loudly, her horn blazing as she tried to keep the hole open. Twilight glanced at my friends casually, a small smile forming on her lips.

“Well, if it isn't the little one's friends,” she said. “How adorable. I have to thank you, for taking care of my body for me. I don't know what I would have done if she'd have been destroyed.”

“She's not your body!” Violet snarled, her magic lifting Thunder Flash in the air. “Now let her go!”

“Tut, tut,” Twilight said, snickering. “I do not think so. I've worked far too hard for this to just give up.” Her horn flared, sending a bolt of magic that sliced the beam rifle into three pieces. Violet looked

aghast as the magical energy weapon dropped to the ground with a clatter.

“Stand back, Violet, I'm gonna waste this bitch!” Lilith said, stomping a hoof. My marefriend shook her head fiercely.

“You'll hurt Star, too! We can't do that!” Violet replied.

“Violet, what do you think will happen if that bitch gets into Star's body? Happy fun times for everypony?” Lilith argued. Twilight raised a hoof.

“Actually, I plan on --”

“Shut up!” Lilith snarled, turning back to Violet. “It's the only way, Vi! She can't take Star's body if she doesn't have a body!” I knew in the back of my mind that I agreed with her. At that point, I would have faced death if it meant that Twilight couldn't use my body for her plans.

“Enough.”

All heads turned to look at Twilight. The mare's eyes were blazing with energy, her horn brilliant and majestic. It was terrifying to look at.

“I have had just about enough of you meddling in my plans,” Twilight spoke, her voice radiating with magical power. It pounded inside my head. ***“Your efforts have been for naught, little ones. I am magic incarnate, the most powerful pony in existence. I will not be denied my ascension.”*** I strained to turn my head, to look at Violet, but I couldn't. Twilight wouldn't let me.

“I'm not letting you have her!” Violet responded, her voice cracking. She was crying. “I love her, and you can't have her!”

“You have no choice in this matter, mortals,” Twilight said, her horn flaring as she sent out a wave of telekinesis that knocked back my friends. They went soaring to the ground, their forms restrained by Twilight's purple magic. I realized I could see all of this, as Twilight had allowed me to see through her eyes. My friends struggled against the magical chains, Violet most of all. She glared at Twilight venomously. Twilight merely shrugged and walked back in front of me.

Let them go! I called out from my mind. Twilight grinned.

“No... they get to watch what comes next. It will help them understand their place in this new world of mine, Star,” she said. “Now... let us begin the transference.” I could only stare as Twilight's horn glowed a brilliant white before everything around us faded to black.

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I knew where I was before I even opened my eyes. The feeling of this place was far too familiar. It was the library. It had always been the library. It was the first place I'd really noticed I'd been able to speak with Twilight. The mare herself sat comfortably across from me. She had a confident grin on her face. I looked down at myself and realized that I was my normal color again. *When did that happen?* I thought as I looked back up at Twilight.

"Welcome, Star. This is it," she said. "This is where I claim what is rightfully mine."

"No," I said angrily, dismissing my thoughts about my coat color. "I'm not going to allow that."

"You really don't have a choice in this matter," Twilight said. "I am your Goddess, and you will obey me."

"The Goddess is dead," I spat back. "And so are you." Twilight snorted, cracking a giggle.

"You're so feisty when you're angry," she said. "I'm glad that I picked you. Taking over the world with you at my side is going to be quite fun." She stood, motioning to the library around us. "Don't you understand? This place represents my mind. My soul. I'm inside your mind now. What's left of you... it's all mine. I'm in control here."

"Go to hell," I retorted.

"Language," Twilight replied, tapping a hoof. "One of those crass things we'll have to work out of you once I'm in control. Now, take a seat. The transference will take some time to complete, and I want you to know some things. We're going to be together for a very long time, we might as well air out all of our dirty laundry, Star." She sat back down at the table. I glared at her, imagining myself stabbing her with tiny little mind daggers. It didn't help. She was right, after all. There were still some things I needed to know. I had to hope and believe that the others would be able to free themselves.

"Fine. I had some more questions anyways." I sat down across from her. "Shining Armor." Twilight grimaced.

"He was a ploy. A plot by Spark. Nightmare... she told Spark about the possibility of transferring her soul into a physical body," Twilight replied. "Spark managed to convince her to try, that they could pull it off. She needed a unicorn powerful enough to cast the spell to do it. Me."

"What happened to Nightmare?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Twilight said. "I assume she died when the megaspells dropped, but Discord survived, so who knows? The statues you found in Chicacolt, the ones that turned Pride into what she became, were mere fragments of her real power. Who knows where the real thing ended up?"

"So... Spark convinced Nightmare to have Shining Armor placed in the right place to contract a possibly fatal poisoning," I said. Twilight nodded. "Then... tried to get you to resurrect him into another body."

"Correct," Twilight said. A stray thought crossed my mind. A memory of Twilight in the hospital after the sealing. A memory of a white alicorn, of a certain Princess.

"Where does Celestia come into this?" I said.

"She... She sensed the wrongness within me," Twilight said. "Dark magic that had been building since before I had become an alicorn. She felt responsible. Said she had unintentionally shown me how to use it, and didn't know to make it stop."

"She helped you," I said flatly.

"Yes. She knew a method to suppress Spark so that we could plan. I used my connections in the Ministry to convince Luna that a weapon would be required for her, in the event of a great battle," Twilight replied. "I used that project as a way to develop what you now know as the power shard. A device that I would ultimately use, with Celestia's help, to seal Spark away."

"There's still something I don't understand," I said, scratching my head. "Why? Why seal Spark? Why go to all this trouble? It doesn't make any sense."

"Those reasons are my own," Twilight replied. I grimaced, knowing I wasn't going to get an answer. A clock chimed on the wall. Twilight stood. "Time's up. The transference will begin. When we both wake up, I'll be in your body, and my ascension will be complete."

"Twilight, you don't need to do this," I said. "Please. This world... it doesn't need you. It doesn't need a Princess of old to save it!"

"I disagree. If anything, my experiences from being in the Goddess, from having seen the current state of pony kind... It only reinforces the fact that they need somepony like me to guide them, to lead them," Twilight said. "I am the only one qualified for the job." She stepped forward, her horn blazing. "Now then, **submit**."

"No," I spat.

"**You will submit**," Twilight said, her voice taking on an ethereal quality. I shrank beneath her. I was trying to stall as best as I could, but somehow I knew it wouldn't matter. I was at the end of my diversion. I was going to give my body to Twilight, whether I liked it or not.

"Stop!" A voice shouted from in front of me. A green form blocked my view. I blinked. *Lucky*...? I thought as I realized the green mare was standing there. Lucky looked back at me briefly, her eyes flaring with determination. She looked *pissed*. She turned back, flaring out her wings in challenge. "You will not have her, Twilight."

"So... the spirit. Lucky, was it? I admire your tenacity, but she's already mine," Twilight replied. "There's nothing you can do to stop me." Lucky stomped her hoof angrily.

"I can, and I will. This is wrong, Twilight. Can't you see that?" Lucky said. "This world doesn't need you anymore."

"Step aside, spirit," Twilight replied calmly. "I will not ask you again."

"No," Lucky said. She flared her horn. "I'm getting Star out of here." She stepped forward, firing a blast of energy at Twilight. The purple mare growled, conjuring a shield out of thin air. The blast deflected off, striking the walls. Lucky turned to me. "Move, Star, move!" I blinked, nodding.

"**NO!**" Twilight roared, the air around us suddenly feeling heavy and oppressive. Lucky grunted under the pressure, grabbing onto my shoulders. She sent a second blast at the purple alicorn, catching her off guard. The magic hit Twilight dead in the chest, sending her flying into the back wall.

“Let's go!” Lucky shouted, pulling me up. I followed behind her through the main door of the library. We stepped out, finding ourselves in an endless hallway. It was lined with doors. Each one had a torch lit above it. Words adorned each door. My eyes widened. I couldn't help but recognize this place. I'd been here many, many times before.

“I've been here...” I said quietly. Lucky looked back at me.

“What?” She said. I motioned at the hall.

“I've been here. It's the hallway. It's where I first came when I started seeing... her emotions,” I said. A roar came from the door we'd made our escape from, drawing me out of my thoughts. A wave of purple magic came flying out into the hallway, coalescing into the form of Twilight Sparkle.

“***Radiant Star***,” she intoned. I quailed for just a moment at the power in her voice.

“Run!” I shouted. Lucky nodded and we started running, ignoring every door and every torch. I didn't want to remember this place. All I wanted to do was get away from it. The hallway went on for forever, never stopping. I *felt* Twilight behind us. Her screams and roars were power and rage given shape. I didn't want to know what would happen if she caught us.

“Where are we going?!” Lucky called over.

“Just keep going, I don't know!” I shouted back. I growled under my breath. I needed a way out. Somewhere Twilight couldn't follow. But this was my mind... her mind... oh whatever! I'd been here too many times to remember everything about it. A name flashed across one of the doors.

Loneliness.

I blinked, stopping cold. Maybe this could help!

“Here! Lucky, here!” I said excitedly, flaring my horn. The door flung open and we filed inside, closing it behind us.

“What in the hell?” Lucky said. “Where the hell are we?” I turned, smiling. A pond next to a field of grass under a starlit sky filled this room. I remembered it well. A filly sat on the other side of the pond. Her eyes widened as she saw us.

“You... you're not supposed to be in here!” She cried out. “She'll get angry with you! She'll get angry with me!”

“We need your help,” I said calmly. “We don't have a whole lot of time.”

“Star?” Lucky said, nudging me in the side. “What is this place?”

“It's part of Twilight's mind. The places she's locked away her memories and her emotions,” I said. Lucky's eyes widened.

“Locked away?” She asked. I nodded, towering over the scared little purple filly.

“Loneliness, I know you're scared of her. She's angry at me already, but all I want to do is help Twilight. She's got to see that what she's doing is wrong,” I said.

“I can't!” Loneliness replied. She started crying. “I'll get it trouble!”

“I can't promise that you won't be hurt by this, little one, but you have to help us. I need to get out of here. It's the only way I can help Twilight,” I said, extending a hoof. Loneliness shrank away for a brief second before nodding slightly.

“O-O-Okay I'll help you,” she said.

“Wait, why is she helping us?” Lucky intervened.

“Because Twilight is the only pony who could be so organized that she's compartmentalized her own emotions,” I said. “She's lost touch with those emotions that she's neglected, like Loneliness here.”

“Huh? How is losing touch with being lonely a bad thing?” Lucky said. I heard banging on the door.

“No time to explain,” I said, turning to the filly. “If you have a way out for us, now would be a good time to show it. We can't go back the way we came, after all.” The filly nodded, motioning for us to follow her to the pond.

“You'll have to swim down to the bottom. There's a portal there that will take you to another one of the emotions... I don't know which one though, I've never used it,” she said. “Are you sure you're here to help Twilight?”

“Swear on camembert, kiddo,” I said, placing a hoof on her head and ruffling her mane. “Just keep your head down and stay out of her way if she comes through here. We don't need a sweet little filly like you getting hurt.” I jumped into the cold water of the pond, followed closely by Lucky. I found that the water was closer to breathing actual air, I didn't even need to hold my breath! As we swam downward into the murky depths, I heard the door slam open from above.

“**Where are they?**” I heard Twilight say. Her voice was rich with magic.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Loneliness replied.

“**Liar. You know. They came in here. Where are they?**” Twilight said angrily. I shared a worried look with Lucky.

“You won't find them,” Loneliness said. “They're going to get away from you.”

“**Insolent child. Why would you help them?**” Twilight asked.

“Because you need help, Twilight,” Loneliness protested. “This isn't good for you! You need to move on! To find your friends!”

“**Foolish filly. Why did I ever allow you to exist?**” Twilight said. “**No matter. There is no room for your kind in my new body.**”

"No! You can't do this to me!" Loneliness cried out. "You need me, Twilight. I'm a part of you! You can't just lock us away and get rid of us!"

"I can do whatever I wish," Twilight replied casually. ***"Now step aside, or else I will destroy you."***

"No," Loneliness said. "Miss Star is my friend. She's trying to help you. She promised me that she would try and make you better. I believe in her!" My eyes widened. *No, Loneliness! Don't try and stand up to her!* I thought to myself, halting for a moment to decide whether or not I wanted to swim back up and punch Twilight in the face.

"Pity. You think you can stop me? I am all powerful," Twilight said angrily. ***"I will give you one final chance. Step aside!"***

"No."

"As you wish, then."

I felt the magic all the way down to where we were swimming. I heard Loneliness scream in agony and then... nothing.

"She... she just..." Lucky said quietly next to me. I nodded angrily and pointed downwards. A glowing ring sat at the bottom of the pond. It grew larger the closer we came to it, finally swallowing us in a flash of purple light. We fell through the air, landing in the middle of a long palace hallway. I groaned as I pushed myself up. Lucky was down next to me. She stood shakily. I glowered at the floor.

"Twilight got rid of one of her emotions," I said, growling under my breath.

"There you are," a set of voices said from in front of us. "We've been looking around forever for you." My gaze snapped up to see two unicorns. One of them was a deep purple, while the other was a desaturated gray. I narrowed my eyes. I knew these two as well. It seemed like every emotion of Twilight's I'd ever met was popping out of the woodwork.

"Harmony, Disharmony," I said. "Funny. I didn't think I'd run into you two ever again."

"Sorry for the bumpy ride there, Radiant Star," Harmony replied. "You two are being looked for everywhere now. Twilight's scouring her whole mind for any sign of you."

"Yeah... She's not very happy with you," Disharmony added.

"Well, what do you expect? She's trying to take over my body!" I growled. "She killed Loneliness."

"Yes... we know," Disharmony said.

"Poor filly," Harmony said. "But there's not much we can do about that. We need to get you out of here." I glared at her.

"Why help me?" I said.

"Because we have to keep the balance," Disharmony said. "Twilight's lost it. Her emotions are in

turmoil. She's worked so hard to get to this point that she's breaking down. Order and Chaos must be kept in check."

"How do we get out of here, then?" Lucky chimed in. I looked over at her.

"How did you get in?" I asked. Lucky grimaced.

"I... I don't know exactly. All I know is that I was outside some library after Twilight did her thing," she said. "I heard her from outside, and came in to help."

"The spirit of this mare is connected to you," Disharmony said. "Perhaps she is the way we may return you to the world of reality."

"Star... is she talking about me?" Lucky asked. I nodded.

"How can Lucky help?" I said. Harmony grinned, bouncing around the green mare.

"Well, let's see..." she chirped as she circled around Lucky. "Hmm.... nope. Nope. Nope.... Definitely not."

"What are you seeing?" Lucky said. Harmony stopped cold in her tracks, studying Lucky intensely. Her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth.

"You know... you'd look pretty good with a ponytail," she said finally. I facehoofed.

"Harmony!" I shouted. "We don't have time for this! Twilight could be here at any moment!"

"***You mean like now... Radiant Star?***" A voice echoed from down the hall. In a flash of purple, the mare herself stood in front of the two emotions. I growled under my breath.

"Twilight," I said angrily. "You killed Loneliness."

"***Yes... such a worthless emotion. She was always trying to get me to listen to my friends, to let them in. She knew nothing. I purged that part of me,***" Twilight replied coolly. "***Now that we're all here, you will submit to me.***"

"Never," I said, glancing at Harmony and Disharmony. "If you two have any ideas, now would be the time to hear them!"

"Stand back," Disharmony replied. She stepped in front of Twilight. "I am sorry, Twilight, but we cannot allow you passage here."

"***Fool. You are part of me. I control you,***" Twilight said. Disharmony smiled briefly, before returning to her frown.

"You think so? Why don't you tell her Harmony?" She said. Harmony bounced over next to her twin, grinning.

"You don't have as much control over us as you think you do, Twi Twi," she said. "Fact is, you shut

out so many of your emotions that they developed their own ambitions, their own personalities. Not all of us agree with what you're doing."

"Then I will have to destroy you," Twilight argued. Harmony scoffed, while Disharmony chuckled.

"You hear that Dissy? She thinks she can destroy us!" Harmony said. The other mare nodded.

"She has no idea who she's dealing with does she, Har Har?" Disharmony replied. Harmony grinned brightly.

"Oh, Dissy you called me Har Har! You do love me!" She chirped.

"Don't let it get to your head," Disharmony said. The grey unicorn turned to look at me. "You two need to go. There's one emotion who might be able to help you. She may be able to break Twilight's control long enough for you to escape out of the mind space. I warn you though, she's a little volatile."

"Which one?" I said shakily, fearing I already knew the answer. It was one of the emotions that I'd been scared as hell of to see. The one that had berated me so long ago in a room in the Hoofton Hotel. The one that had told me I didn't matter, that my friends didn't love me or care about.

"Anger," Disharmony replied, confirming my fears. Her horn flared menacingly. "Now get going!" I grunted, grabbing a hold of Lucky and turning tail down the opposite end of the hall.

"Get back here!" Twilight shouted, sending a wave of telekinetic energy at us. A brilliant shield formed behind us, stopping it cold. I looked back briefly to see Harmony and Disharmony's horns blazing wildly. The energy blast went soaring back at Twilight, pinballing the shrieking purple mare off the walls of the castle corridor.

"I've said it before," Harmony said. "Order cannot exist without Chaos, and vice versa. As long as my sister and I are together, we can't be stopped. Now, Radiant Star, you go! We'll hold her off as long as we can!" I nodded, taking off after Lucky. We pounded hooves down the old palace hallway. It seemed like it went on for forever.

"Star, no offense, but this shit is fucked up!" Lucky shouted as we ran.

"I'm not disagreeing with you!" I called back. I could hear the fight between Disharmony/Harmony and Twilight still. Blasts of magic resonated in the air, the two emotions working in perfect concert to keep us safe. I kept moving forward. It was the only thing I could think of to do. There was just no way out of this particular hall! I kept scanning the side walls for any doors, but all I kept seeing was smooth stone.

"How in the hell are we supposed to find this Anger, anyways?" Lucky said from my side. "It's not like there's any doors or anything!" I grimaced. I knew there had to be some way back to the hallway. The portal we'd taken prior had dropped us here, there had to be a way out. My mind racked itself silly trying to remember any doors from my times with Twilight's emotions. I focused hard, grunting as I stopped running. I could no longer hear any fighting. Lucky stopped too, her mouth wide open as she pointed to my side.

Situated on the wall adjacent to us was a glowing portal. I grinned.

“Guess we got kind of lucky, eh Lucky?” I said, stepping towards it. Lucky snickered.

“Like I haven't heard that one before,” she said as we made our way into the portal. There was a flash of light, then darkness.

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“Hello...?” I called out. “Anypony there?”

“I'm here,” Lucky said softly. “Where are you? Hell, where is here?” I grimaced, my eyes trying to adjust to the dark corridor. My gaze found a white door with a name scratched out on it. I couldn't make out what it was supposed to be. I turned, finally able to see Lucky.

“Looks like we're back in the main hallway,” I said. “But all the torches are out. Something bad's happening. I can just feel it.” I felt it in my bones. Twilight's anger with me was boiling over. She had expected me to follow along like the good little foal she wanted me to be.

But I couldn't be that. Why couldn't I? Twilight had her hooks in my body from the get go, and she'd been able to control my actions up to the point that she'd tried to transfer herself into my body. Why was I suddenly able to resist? I looked over at Lucky, realizing it wasn't until she'd shown up that I'd found the strength to move. Harmony and Disharmony were right about one thing, there was something about her presence here that made me curious.

“Lucky?” I asked tentatively. “Have you ever wondered why you're here?” The green mare looked over at me while we walked. I scanned each door, lighting my horn so we could see.

“What do you mean, Star?” She said. I narrowed my gaze at her.

“I mean, have you ever wondered why you're still here? You *died*, Lucky. I saw it with my own eyes,” I said. “And then suddenly you were still there. I could never really figure out why.” Lucky looked away briefly, her head low.

“I... I'm sorry, Star,” she said. “You have to understand... I wanted to move on. But he wouldn't let me. I was told not to tell you.” My eyes widened.

“Who...?” I asked. I knew the answer before she could even reply.

“Discord,” she said. “One of his facets snatched my spirit out of thin air after I died. Told me that I needed to stick around, to help you. That I would be important.”

“He knew,” I said, blinking. “That fucking bastard knew about Twilight. He knew all along and he never fucking told me!” I growled out loud. “Why? Why would he do that?”

“I assume it's because he thought it was funny,” Lucky replied, sighing. “The ultimate prank against Twilight. Preventing her from getting what she wants.” I lifted a hoof, but Lucky motioned with her own, silencing me. “Let me be clear, I didn't know about what Twilight was up to until Spark locked me away in her mind.”

“So why did you let Spark take you then, if you were supposed to help me?” I said, walking past several more scorched doors.

“That was... impulsive. I thought that's what Discord wanted me to do. If I stopped Spark, I stopped it all from happening this way,” Lucky said. “Turns out, I was wrong. I was supposed to stay with you. That's one of the reasons Discord split up the shards. He wanted to stop Twilight. He'd never admit it, but Equestria ruled by an iron hoof under a brand new Unity? Not exactly the world he'd want to live in. Too orderly, too structured.”

“So he used you,” I said. Lucky grimaced.

“To a fault,” she said. “I think... I think I was supposed to be here, at this point in time, in this place. If I hadn't been...”

“Twilight would have won,” I stated simply. I kept walking, finally stopping next to a door I remembered all too well. It was boarded up and several heavy chains adorned it. The word **Anger** had been scratched into the boards. “This is it.”

“I've got a very bad feeling about this, Star,” Lucky said.

“Me too, but if she can help us, then I'm willing to take a chance,” I said, flaring my horn. “Besides... if she's still locked up, my intuition tells me that Twilight doesn't like her. And she probably doesn't like Twilight either.” I growled, ripping at the chains with my magic. They fell away to the ground with a clatter that echoed down the hallway. I slashed into the boards with my magic blade, ripping burnt gashes into the door's surface. I turned around and planted my back hooves into the door in an applebuck, breaking it off its hinges.

I stepped inside, Lucky following closely behind me. The hallway the doorway led to was dark enough that I had to light my horn to see. Dirt and debris lined the floors. The hallway finally relented, giving way to a large metal door with a barred window in it. Beyond I could see dirty off-white padding. I looked inside, grimacing. Sitting in the center of the room was a unicorn, wearing a white coat that bound her front legs to her body. Chains attached to shackles on her legs prevented her movement. An arcane device sat firmly rooted to the mare's horn.

“Hello...?” I called in softly.

“What do you want?” The mare said. Her eyes drifted up to the door. There was no life left in them.

“A-A-Anger?” I asked. The mare grunted.

“Radiant Star. Never thought I'd see you ever again,” she replied. “What do you want with me now?”

“We need your help,” I said. “To get out of here.” Anger snarled, shaking as she tried and failed to stand.

“Right, get out of here... you don't think I would have, oh you know... DONE THAT ALREADY IF I KNEW HOW?!” She roared. I grimaced.

“Harmony and Disharmony sent me,” I said. “Twilight is trying to take over my body. They told me

you could help me escape here.” Anger simmered down at the mention of Twilight.

“That.... that *bitch* locked me in here,” she said. “Threw away the fucking key too. Right after I got out and came after you, actually.”

“At the hotel,” I said calmly. Anger nodded.

“I was trying to warn you. To put a little fear in you, to stop you from continuing your quest,” she said. “Twilight threw me in here to keep me away from you.” I narrowed my gaze at her.

“Well, then we can help each other then. I'll let you out, and you help me get the fuck out this crazy twisted mind space of hers,” I said. “And then, I'll put a stop to this once and for all.” Anger chuckled lightly.

“You think you can defeat her? I'd like to see that,” she said. She met my gaze. “Fine. Get me out of here and I can get you out. You're going to need to sever the connection between your minds. It's not pretty, but it should send you back into your own body.” I blinked.

“That sounded... smart,” I said. Anger laughed.

“Just because I'm an angry bitch doesn't mean I'm not part of Twilight,” she said. “Now are you getting me out of here, or what?” I grinned, nodding.

“Star... are you sure she can help us?” Lucky said.

“No, but really... we don't really have any other options. Twilight's slowly reining in all the rest of them, and I doubt Harmony and her sister kept her at bay for very long. Now, stand back.” I flared my horn, kicking out with a wave of telekinesis that battered the large metal door. It buckled beneath the force of the blow, bowing in until it finally sprung its latch and slammed open. I stepped inside.

“Good, good... the inhibitor on my fuckin' horn. Get it off, and we'll be good to go,” Anger said. I nodded, reaching out with my magic. The inhibitor resisted at first, but finally came away in a burst of fiery energy. Anger grinned widely, her own horn igniting. The white jacket she wore disintegrated instantly, and the chains melted away to hiss in glowing puddles on the floor. She stretched her legs out, sighing.

“Better?” I asked.

“Much, much better,” she replied, nodding. She looked over at Lucky. “You must be the spirit. Good. We need you for what comes next.” Lucky cocked an eyebrow.

“I have a name, you know. It's not just 'the spirit',” she replied. Anger rolled her eyes.

“Fine. Lucky. Here's what we need to do,” she said. “Your presence here is what's allowing Star to think coherently and not just give herself over to Twilight. Because of that, it's gonna take both of you to cast the spell needed to get you two out of mind space and back into the real world.”

“So... how does the spell work?” I asked. Anger's horn glowed brightly, summoning a piece of chalk.

"It's a ritual spell, so it's just time, runes, and power. You need to sit in the circle I'm going to draw and summon magic out of your horns. Once enough is built up, you'll touch horns and release it. It's a little trick called 'magical discharge'," she said as she began drawing on the floor. Arcane runes took shape as the mare moved around the room. "The amount of energy the ritual generates will interfere with Twilight's transference spell and release you from it. The kick is enough to wake you up."

"Are you sure it will work?" Lucky said. "That sounds... dangerous." I nodded in agreement. Anger rolled her eyes again.

"Listen, who came to who for help here?" She said. I smiled sheepishly. Anger grimaced. "Thought so." She started for the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"You think I'm gonna sit in here with you? You two are gonna be sending out a lot of energy. I'm gonna sit right outside and monitor from there," she said. I nodded, feeling rather uneasy about this, but I had to do something to get out of Twilight's mind space. I needed to get back to my friends, to stop Twilight... something I wasn't even remotely sure how to do. Anger pulled the door closed loudly as Lucky and I took our places inside the circle.

"Are we ready?" I called out to Anger.

"Sure, start charging up your horns. Get them magical juices flowing," she said, her voice muffled. I gritted my teeth and started pooling my magic into the base of my horn. The energy traveled up to the tip, enveloping it in a glowing purple sheath. I noticed Lucky had begun doing the same. Her green magic surrounded her just as my own did. I poured more magic into the pool, struggling to keep up the storage of it until it could be released. The air filled with the sounds of wind and howling as the circle below us reacted. It began to glow softly, pulsing under the force of the magic in the room.

Have to... keep going... must not stop! I thought, trying to keep my eyes open under the strain. Lucky appeared to be having similar troubles as best as I could see. The circle continued to pulse, brightening to a blinding white light that drowned out everything else in the room. This had to be enough magic! I took a step forward, watching carefully as Lucky did the same. Lowering my head, I touched my horn to hers and released the magic.

Chaos erupted. Magical energy surged within the room and my eyes forced shut to prevent myself from being blinded by the intense power. I felt the magic in the floor surge upwards. It was working! We were going to get free!

Several arcs of energy connected from myself to Lucky. The magic was tearing at the walls of the tiny room, flaking off pieces of stone here and there. The maelstrom of power surrounded us, promising freedom. I grinned.

"See ya, Twilight!" I called out triumphantly.

Finally, I heard a popping sound and I opened my eyes as the magic began to drift away. Did we do it? Did we get free? I gasped softly. The room was gone. Lucky still stood across from me, blinking hard. We weren't in the room anymore. No, we were now in a palace throne hall. And sitting at the top of the steps on the throne... was her. *No... No, no, no, no!* I thought.

“Welcome, Radiant Star,” she said, chuckling softly. From beside her throne stepped out Anger. I glared at her. She'd.... she'd set us up!

“Delivered in a nice tidy little package for you, Twilight,” the unicorn said. Twilight grinned as she looked down on Lucky and I.

“Star...?” Lucky said, turning to look up at Twilight. “It... it didn't work?”

“No,” I said, grimacing. “Anger... betrayed us. I suppose I should have seen that one coming.”

“Did you really think that I didn't have any control over my own emotions, Radiant Star? Disharmony and Harmony were a ploy. I knew that once Loneliness had helped you escape, that you'd end up there,” Twilight said from the throne. ***“Now... it is time for these games to stop. Your body shall be mine, and there is nothing that either of you can do to stop me.”*** I grimaced, realizing that I should have known better. I was still just a foal, floundering around before a Goddess. Twilight was right. There was no way out of this. No way I could get free of her. I was about to turn to Lucky when she spoke first.

“No... I have to get her out of here... Okay I can do that...” Lucky muttered under her breath, glancing over at me. Twilight chuckled softly.

“Anger, darling?” She said. Anger's ears perked up.

“Yes, Goddess?” She said. Twilight pointed at me.

“Take her.” Anger grinned wickedly.

“Gladly,” she said, trotting down the stairs. Her horn flared, sending a bolt of telekinesis at me. I yelped, leaping to the floor, the blast just barely missing me. Lucky returned fire, opening her wings in challenge. I tried to move, tried to help, but I... I couldn't. Something was preventing me from moving to assist her.

“Just try it!” She shouted. Anger snarled back.

“I intend to!” She returned, leaping at the green mare. Lucky jumped back, slamming her front hooves into Anger's chest. The purple unicorn hit the ground hard, flaring her horn. The blast of energy struck Lucky, sending her flying back next to me.

“Lucky!” I called out, whatever force holding me had finally let me scramble over to her. Lucky grunted under the strain as she pushed herself up.

“Gotta get you out of here,” she whispered. “Have to find the way out...”

“Get up, Star,” Anger said, walking up to stand over the two of us. “Get up and face your destiny.”

“Fuck off,” Lucky spat, standing shakily. She charged at the emotion, slamming into her. Lucky struck with a forehoof, bringing it down upon Anger's horn. The keratin appendage shattered underneath the blow, spraying both mares with blood. Anger howled in pain as her body dissipated into nothingness.

“Lucky...?” I said, standing. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said, grunting as she stood. Blood covered her face. I was about to move, when I was interrupted by a cough. My eyes shot up to Twilight. She still sat upon the throne.

“Enough,” Twilight said, spreading her wings out. ***“I suppose that I should have expected that. Some things are better done yourself, I always say. Now... submit, and let's end this, Radiant Star.”***

“No, Twilight. You cannot have her!” Lucky shouted. My eyes widened as the green mare stepped forward, her horn blaring brightly. Twilight remained impassive.

“Spirit. You test my patience, of which I have little. Begone with you. I will have my body,” she said. Lucky growled.

“No... you will not!” She shouted, releasing the magic in her horn. We disappeared in a flash of blinding light, appearing in an adjacent palace hallway. Lucky grabbed my hoof and began to ran. “Come on, Star!” I yelped loudly as I settled into a canter behind her.

“Where in the heck are we going?!” I asked loudly. Lucky shook her head.

“No time to explain! Somepony told me I need to get you to her, but I don’t know how!” She replied. “At least it’s a better place to be than back there!” The hallway ended abruptly in a staircase that led upwards. Wasting no time, we made our way up, constantly worried that Twilight would be hot on our hooves the entire time. We stopped when we reached the top of the stairs, panting loudly. I glanced back down them. No Twilight. We were safe... for now.

“There you two are,” a voice said, nearly scaring me out of my coat. “I’ve been looking for you two for what feels like forever!” I turned back to see a lithe purple mare with wings. She was wearing a sheer covering with lacy trim, complete with holes cut out for the appendages. She looked like she had popped right out of one of those old *Wingboner* magazines.

“Who...?” I asked. The mare chuckled.

“Silly filly. It’s me, Passion,” she said. “Like the wings? I didn’t have them the last time we met. I think they’re cute, myself.” She turned to Lucky. “You must be Lucky. She didn’t tell me you were a little cutie. You can swing my barn door anytime, hot stuff.” Lucky blushed fiercely.

“Passion, we don’t have time for this!” I said, stomping a hoof. “Twilight could be hot on our hooves any minute now!” Passion chuckled again.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. Twilight isn’t going to get up here,” she said. “She doesn’t even admit this section of her mind exists.”

“So how are you here then, if you’re a part of her?” I asked, feeling very confused. “Furthermore, how do I know we can trust you?”

“Twilight Sparkle, the mare so organized she even sorted out her own emotions. Can you imagine her having anything to do with me?”

I didn't have an answer for that.

"Aside from one time, she never has... and well, after Macintosh..." Passion trailed off.

"She never did," I replied.

"Exactly. I've been left to my own devices since then, Radiant Star," Passion stated. "Don't worry, you can trust me. Not all of us are interested in your body. Well... I am, but for... *other* reasons." A sly grin accompanied her compliment. I blushed as fiercely as Lucky did. I glanced over at Lucky. She was breathing heavily, recovering from the fight with Anger.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. She nodded after a few moments.

"I'll be fine," she said. "We should get out of this place. I don't like it here." Passion nodded simply.

"Follow me, then. And enjoy the view if you'd like," she turned away, swishing her plot back and forth at us as we followed. I groaned.

"Are you always like this?" I said.

"Oh, Star. You know you like it," Passion replied. "Twilight doesn't exactly want anything to do with me, so I have to make do."

"I have a marefriend," I stated simply.

"So... threesome then?" Passion said. I groaned again.

"You're a spirit emotion of a mad-pony," I said flatly. Passion shrugged.

"Never stopped me before," she said, winking. The old hallway we walked down slowly gave way to an older series of doors, lit by bright torches that sat above them. I stopped at one of them. There were words written on the door, but they weren't in any language I recognized.

"Where are we?" Lucky asked. Passion stopped walking for a second.

"This place is far older than even Twilight remembers it to be. It's a part of her mind space that belonged to her as she was growing up," she said. "It's here we can hopefully find a portal to get you to the one who sent me to find you."

"This isn't gonna require any magic spells is it?" I asked. "I don't know if I can do any more of those right now." Passion giggled.

"No, Star. At least not on your part. I'm to guide you to the portal and get you through before Twilight realizes where you are," she said, pointing at a door at the far end of the hallway. "There we are. Follow me."

"Why exactly are you helping us?" I said as we made our way towards the door. "And who sent you to find us? I'd like some answers, dammit. And I want out of this crazy mind-fuck space." Passion

pushed open the door, turning back to glare at me.

"I think you know the answer to Who, Star. As for why I'm doing this..." she said. "See for yourself." My eyes widened as I looked past her. Inside the room beyond the door was a massive workshop. More purple mares filled the shop, looking up from some sort of tinkering to wave at us as we passed by. Some were alicorns, some were unicorns, and some were even filly-aged. They reminded me painfully of Loneliness. I looked back at Passion while she led us through the throng towards the back of the shop.

"Are these...?" I started to ask. Passion nodded.

"Emotions that Twilight has cast off. Ones she thinks she doesn't need anymore. Thankfully, she doesn't know we're helping her," she said. She opened another door at the end of the shop, leading us into a back hall. "You have to understand... I don't want to die, Radiant Star. I'm a part of Twilight Sparkle, and I want her to accept that."

"Accept it? She killed a filly emotion," Lucky snarled. "She set that bitch Anger against us. She's not interested in accepting you." Passion frowned.

"Believe me when I say, I'm aware of that. For the longest time we've had a measure of freedom, being stuck inside Star's mind," she said. "Many of us want to be free on our own, but we're not real. We're part of Twilight, and we need to help her when she needs us the most. Now... enough of this banter. You want out of here, I can get you there." She pushed open a second door, revealing a large chamber. In the center of the chamber was an altar surrounding a large hole in the ground. Stone columns lined the circular walls.

"Fancy," I said. Passion smiled softly, trotting ahead of us to the center of the room.

"Alright, here's the deal. I'm going to cast the spell to open the portal and get you two through it. If anything happens, just get to the portal, you got me?" She said. Lucky and I both nodded. "Good. Now hang on. This ride's about to get a little bumpy."

Passion flared her wings out and ignited her horn, latching onto the magic of the altar surrounding the hole in the ground. I could see that the hole appeared to be bottomless. The altar began to glow fiercely, pouring magical energies into the reservoir below it.

"Stop." My blood froze. I knew that voice. I turned, seeing Twilight Sparkle herself entering the chamber. She looked pretty pissed. My eyes widened. Passion kept fueling the spell, oblivious to what was happening.

"Passion..." I said, taking a few steps back. "We've got company."

"Just... just keep her busy would you, hot stuff? I've got to finish the spell... There's no time to quit now..." She said, gritting her teeth.

"Passion, is it? I remember locking you up. I'll make sure to remedy that mistake. Stop whatever you are doing at once," Twilight said, scowling. She stepped towards the purple mare, but stopped when Lucky and I appeared to block her.

“No dice, Twilight. You aren’t getting her,” I said angrily. To my dismay, Twilight began to laugh.

“Do you really think you can defeat me? I am power incarnate, Radiant Star. Now... be a good little filly and submit,” she said. I glared at her.

“No,” I said. The magical energies in the room began to intensify. Passion hovered above the altar, wings spread and chanting loudly. I turned back to Twilight. “You killed Loneliness.”

“Yes... that emotion was weak. There is no place for it in my new body,” Twilight crowed. ***“Now... let’s see how well you can run now, Radiant Star.”***

“I wasn’t planning on running,” I snarled. “You aren’t getting my body, Twilight. I’ll fight if I have to.”

“Then you will fail,” Twilight replied, her horn blazing. I looked over at Lucky. She nodded, igniting her own horn. We were about to charge when a sheath of magic wrapped around both of us. Twilight’s eyes widened as we flung up into the air, the power of Passion’s spell carrying us towards the portal.

“No!!!” Twilight roared.

The portal opened, revealing a starry black void. Both Lucky and I fell through the portal into the void. *This place just... keeps getting weirder and weirder!* I thought as we fell. I looked up to see Passion standing over the portal. I tried to call to her as Twilight appeared behind her. I was too late. Twilight obliterated the mare in a blast of energy, cutting the portal off completely. I shut my eyes. Passion had done her best to try and help us, and she’d died for that.

“Lucky, are you alright?!” I finally called out, opening my eyes and looking around for anything that I could grab onto. I tried spreading my wings to catch air, but there was no air to actually catch. It was almost like we were sinking in space.

“I’m alright!” the green mare yelped. “I thought that was supposed to get us out of there!”

“Well, it did, but now where are we?!” I cried back. Suddenly, my hooves found purchase on something. We had stopped falling. I blinked. Below, a road made of stars extended out in front of and behind us. “Okay, I’m officially done with this whole mind space thing.” Lucky grunted in response.

“Me too,” she said. “Do you know what this is?” I grimaced, shaking my head. Still... it looked familiar. Like I’d been here before... before I could respond further several of the stars leaped up in front of us, forming colossal words.

HURRY FORWARD. THERE ISN’T MUCH TIME.

An arrow appeared as well, pointing in the direction in front of us. The words dissipated back into the void.

“I guess that means we go forward,” I said, taking a step. The carpet of stars coalesced around my hooves, carrying me down some invisible road. Lucky appeared next to me, her hooves carried by the same mystical force. We stepped cautiously, then trotted, and before long we were galloping flat-out

down the starry road. After what felt like forever, we climbed a gentle rise and the star road crested to reveal... a scrap of meadow floating in the void, with a tidy little house sitting in the middle of it. I blinked several times, trying to process how a house could exist in a void. It was a simple affair, modest and white with a large set of double doors. Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark was emblazoned on them.

The doors to the house creaked open and a purple alicorn stepped out. I nearly fell backwards, fearing another one of Twilight's tricks, but the Twilight who stood there didn't look nearly as menacing as the other one did. Instead, she had a smile on her face.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you," she said softly. "I'm here to help you. I sent Passion to collect you."

"You... you look like Twilight," I replied simply. "How do we know we can trust you?"

"Well, you're right about one thing," she said. "I am Twilight Sparkle. The other half of her at least. Come with me, and I'll explain everything." She motioned for us to follow her inside the structure. I shared a worried glance with Lucky, who simply shrugged. I trotted behind the other mare, following her into the house. It was even simpler inside, complete with a couch and several chairs. Nothing overtly fancy. Twilight motioned to the chairs. A towel appeared out of nowhere. It floated over to Lucky, the green mare taking it with a mumbled thanks. She began to wipe her face clean of Anger's blood.

"What did you mean by 'the other half of Twilight'?" I said, taking a seat. The purple mare sighed loudly.

"I'm the part of the Twilight that she rejected. The one you met," she said softly. "When we sealed Spark, she inadvertently sealed part of herself... me... inside of it as well. I was the one stuck in the memory orb." A fleeting memory suddenly bubbled up into my mind.

"It was you," I said. "When Pride forced me into the memory orb, I saw you." Twilight nodded.

"I didn't know that the other Twilight was planning on forcing you into servitude," she said. "She lied to me. Told me you were important and that you needed to be protected, and that we could continue our work through you."

"But you don't want to," I replied. Twilight grimaced.

"I'm tired, Radiant Star. I don't know what the other part of me went through exactly, but being in the Goddess *broke* her," she said. "She's crazy, and she'll do anything she can to get your body."

"I know," I said, looking around the room. "She can't get down here can she?" The other Twilight smiled softly.

"No. She doesn't even know I'm down here. That's why I sent your friend the message to get you out of there, in addition to sending Passion to collect you," she said, motioning at Lucky. I glanced over at her. She grinned sheepishly.

"I heard a voice," she said. "Told me I had to get you out of there... and then Passion showed up."

“Indeed,” Twilight said. “I needed to speak with you, but for some reason I couldn't break through the barrier that Discord placed on your mind.”

“You know about that?” I asked. Twilight nodded.

“I know about a lot of things,” she said. “But we don't have enough time to deal with all of it right now. Right now, we need to get you out of here and back into the real world.”

“Why?” I said, cocking an eyebrow.

“Because every minute you spend here, the closer the other Twilight gets to taking total control,” she said. She smiled softly. “Not to worry though. I can get you out of here.”

“How?” I asked. “No pony else has been able to. Passion and Loneliness both died to get me here.” Twilight smiled brightly.

“Silly filly, don't you know who you're talking to?” She said. “I'm Twilight Sparkle. I can do anything.” I blinked as Twilight's horn began to flare. Magic stirred in the air around us. “Now, I'm gonna need both of you to sit still. When you get back to the real world, I need you to do something very important for me. Can you do that, Radiant Star?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“The other part of me, she needs me. She needs to find me, to merge our minds and memories together,” Twilight said. “I can't do this on my own, Star. I'm tired of all this. I want to rest. I've done so many bad things in my life... things that I can't ever make up for. I only pray that Celestia is merciful with me when I pass on.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I said, looking up at her.

“I need you to give me time. Twilight's become unhinged. She needs to reconnect with her memories, her emotions. She needs to reconnect with me,” the purple mare replied.

“So... what we're supposed to talk to her?” Lucky said. I grimaced.

“We need to convince Twilight that she is no longer needed in this world. I don't want this. I never wanted this,” Twilight said, the magic in the air continuing to stir. “All I want is for this to end. Can you do that for me, Star? No matter the consequences?” I met her gaze and she nodded subtly. I understood her hidden meaning. If Twilight couldn't be convinced... I would have to do everything in my power to stop her. I responded with my own nod. “Good. Now... good bye, Radiant Star. Good bye, Lucky. I do not hope to see either of you ever again.”

Twilight's horn flashed and the entire world went white.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

My eyes opened with a flutter. I stood, groaning from the pressure beating on my mind. Twilight stood across from me, her eyes widened. Lucky stood next to me, a grin on her face. Around us, Twilight's

barrier blocked out the rest of the world. I couldn't hear my friends or anything else beyond it.

"Star? You alright?" She said. I looked down at my body. It was immaculate, and I could move it again! I nodded, the pressure in my mind lessening finally.

"Yeah, I'm much better, thanks," I said, stretching a leg out. I glanced at Twilight. She wasn't moving. I took a step forward, drawing her attention. "Twilight. Looks like you don't get my body just yet." Twilight scowled.

"You... I had you, and then you escaped into thin air. And now you're back here, in my body," she said angrily. "No matter. I will just cast the spell again and take control." Her horn flared, sending a bolt of energy at me. It dissipated harmlessly against some sort of invisible shield. Twilight blinked.

"Sorry, Twilight. This is my body, and you don't get to have it," I said. "I'm in control now."

"I don't understand," Twilight said. "I did everything right! I even accounted for the shift in trinomial equations caused by the resonance from the spirit!" I coughed.

"Equestrian, Twilight. Here in the Wasteland, that's what we speak," I said jokingly. Lucky chuckled. Twilight snarled at us.

"Oh go to **HELL**, I'll talk however I feel like!" She shouted, stomping her hoof. She glared at me. "Fine. You want to play this game, Radiant Star? If I can't have your body willingly, I will just force you to serve as my host! I'll destroy you, and then reanimate your body! It's the perfect plan!" I grimaced. Twilight was pissed. I didn't know how to fix her, how to help her reconnect with her better half. Having been disconnected from a part of herself for the better of two centuries certainly had done a number on her mental state.

"Or you can go, Twilight. Move on," I said forcefully. "This world... it's different. It doesn't need you. It... It needs ponies like the Lightbringer. Twilight, you have to see that. You have to see yourself." I had to try. I wasn't sure if it would work, but it was worth a shot. As I expected, Twilight snorted.

"See myself? What does that even mean?!" She said, her horn flaring. "No, Radiant Star. The time for talk is past. I will have what is mine, if it's the last thing I do!" A beam of telekinetic energy burst forth from her horn, hitting me hard in the chest. I went flying back, slamming into the purple barrier that made up the perimeter of our battle arena. Lucky growled, firing her own blast of magic at Twilight. The purple mare turned to the side gracefully, missed by a mere hair.

"Shit!" Lucky called out as Twilight retaliated with another bolt of magical energy. It hit the green pegacorn square in the chest, sending her rolling to the ground. She disappeared through the barrier. When she didn't return, I worried that Twilight was keeping her out of this somehow. Twilight chuckled.

"Really? Is that the best you can do?" She said. "I thought you were better than that." I grunted, pushing to four hooves. I summoned my blade, charging at the purple alicorn. I slashed out, missing completely as Twilight whirled aside. She struck at me with her forehoof, hitting me in the face hard. I grunted under the blow. I spun about, emitting a wave of telekinesis that slammed into Twilight. She went flying through the air, hitting the barrier.

“Enough of this, Twilight!” I cried out. “You have to stop! This is insane!” I didn't know how to stop her. I had to try and appeal to her better nature, the one I knew was hiding inside. I didn't know what to do if the other Twilight, the mentally unhinged one, won the war I knew was going on inside the alicorn's mind.

“Stop? Stop? Are you crazy?!” Twilight retorted, pushing herself back to her hooves. “You just don't get it, do you, Star? I'm trying to save the world! Instead of fighting me, you should be helping me!”

“You're going about this the wrong way, Twilight!” I said angrily. “Do you think Trixie was right? She wanted to 'save' the world too, but she was wrong. Unity isn't the answer, and neither is slavery!”

“It's not slavery!” Twilight snarled, firing another blast of energy at me that I thankfully managed to dodge. It dissipated into the purple shield harmlessly. “I'm giving the Wasteland what it needs! It needs a Princess to rule it! Without me, there is no society! Trixie was wrong about her aspirations! She wanted everypony to be like her! I don't want that.”

“No... you want everything to be beneath you. To worship at your hooves,” I said, flaring my horn. I reached out, grabbing for Stargazer and the power shard. They jumped into the air immediately, pointed at Twilight. I slid the power shard into the gun's core with practiced ease, the software on the weapon booting up as I aimed. “Well, Goddess... say some prayers for me.” Twilight grinned widely and then broke out into full-on laughter. *What the...?* I thought. Twilight regained her composure, sighing loudly.

“That's funny, Star. It really is,” she said softly. “But you forgot one key thing. I invented that weapon. It was designed for me, and therefore it cannot fire upon me.”

I growled, slamming down the trigger hard on Stargazer. Nothing happened. I hit it again a few times, but nothing came from the weapon. Twilight's horn flared, and a purple sheath of magic grabbed Stargazer out of the air from me. I struggled, trying to hold on, but her power was simply too strong to fight. The minigun turned around, levitating in the air next to Twilight.

“You know... you never really got to see this thing's full potential,” she said. “It's quite clever really. The magical strength provided by the power shard is solely dependent on the user's own magic to power it. Simply put, the stronger the magic of the user is, the stronger the weapon is.” I narrowed my gaze at her as she took aim. “Now, sit still and let me show you just how powerful I am.” My eyes widened as a blast of blazing blue light erupted from the minigun, the bolts coming quicker and brighter than they ever had for me. I jumped to the side, narrowly being missed by the gun's ridiculously fast fire. Twilight turned the weapon slightly, moving to try and hit me as I moved. I growled as a beam of fire struck my tail, singing the end off of it.

Shit! I thought, calling on Shining Armor's shield spell. Twilight fired again, disintegrating the shield instantly, but completely missing me. *Hmm...* I thought. *That's interesting.*

“You bitch!” She called out. “Using my own brother's spell against me? The House of Sparkle invented that spell! Did you really think it would work against my magical might?!”

“Worth a shot,” I snarled, summoning my blade. Twilight's control with Stargazer was... clunky at best. She hadn't wielded the weapon as long as I had. That and Twilight didn't have a PipBuck, so she couldn't use the Enchanted S.A.T.S. mode that came with the minigun. I thanked my lucky stars for

that one. I needed a plan, some way to separate Twilight from the weapon. I racked my brain as best as I could, but I kept returning to the same conclusion.

I'd have to destroy the shard. Which meant... setting Spark free. I wasn't thrilled with that option, but Spark had tried to warn me about Twilight's control. Perhaps I could fulfill my destiny and save her after all... it was the only shot I had left. Twilight would eventually learn finer control over Stargazer and then I'd be well and truly fucked.

Before Twilight could bring the minigun about to fire at me, I made my move. Charging straight at her, I roared as I brought my blade down. Twilight's horn flared, erecting a shield around her body, expecting me to strike at her, but she left Stargazer wide open. *Hah!* I thought. *Gotcha.*

My blade split into five pieces just as it came down upon the shield. They disappeared, each one slamming into Stargazer's side with thunderous fury. The minigun went soaring out of Twilight's magical grasp, sliding across the ground with a clatter. Twilight's eyes widened and the shield dropped. Before she could get a hold of Stargazer again, I jabbed with my front hoof, striking her in the face. She grunted under the force of the blow, her horn trying to light up to push me away.

“Don't think so!” I shouted, lashing out again with a hoof, hitting her horn. Twilight went falling back, hitting the ground with a tremendous crash. I grinned triumphantly as I stood over her. She grunted, pushing herself up on her front hooves.

“Do you really think you've beaten me?” She said, snarling. “I am magic incarnate.” Her horn flared, taking a hold of Stargazer once more. I had to move fast before she could fire it again. I summoned my blade, splitting it off into five pieces. Two of those pieces struck at Twilight, forcing her to adjust her attention to placing a shield around herself. Stargazer hung neglected below the curve of the shield. I turned, sending the other three shards at the gun, tearing at the casing until the power shard popped out of the device.

“No... now I think I've beaten you,” I said calmly. “Face it, Twilight. You're done. It's time to end this.” I turned back to Twilight, smiling at the horrified look on her face.

“Fool! Don't you know what you've done!” She cried out. “If you ruptured the core it will ---”

****BOOM****

Stargazer *exploded*, sending Twilight and myself flying at the barrier surrounding our little arena. I hit with a grunt, my backside searing with pain as shrapnel from the explosion dug in. I craned my neck to see a small crater where the minigun had been. Lying inside of it, smoking and cracked, was the power shard. I scrambled to my hooves, ignoring the pain as best as I could. Twilight lunged at the shard also, but I made it just before she did.

Stomping as hard as I could, I attempted to crush the shard through the center of Equestria. Twilight screamed and shouted as the shard pulled apart, a blast of light engulfing both of us. Another explosion rocked us backwards, followed by the sound of coughing.

“What the fuck happened?” A voice said, cutting through the coughs. I stood, meeting Spark's gaze. The mare looked horrible, but she was alive. “Radiant Star. What is going on? Why are you --?” She saw Twilight. Twilight, the one who had sealed her away, who had betrayed her. Her gaze narrowed at

the purple alicorn. “*You.*”

“Spark.”

“Twilight.”

The two alicorns stared at each other for what felt like eternity. The tension in the air was thick and oppressive. I wondered what I'd just gotten myself into. Releasing Spark back into the world had potential problems for everyone. I hoped and prayed that the spirit of Magic would help me against Twilight.

“I had hoped it wouldn't have come to this, but it seems Star is no longer playing by the rules of this game,” Twilight said finally after several long and awkward moments. I shrank under the might of the two alicorn goddesses, watching to see how Spark would respond.

“She's goofy like that,” Spark replied. “I expected that she would find some way to try and stop you, I just didn't expect that it would involve me.” She grinned at me, giving a wink. I blinked.

“You have a lot to answer for, Spark,” Twilight snapped. “You destroyed my life, killed my brother, and nearly forced me to resurrect him as an unholy abomination!” Tears began to stream from her eyes. “You... You took him from me!” Spark growled.

“I was trying to help you! To win the war! You betrayed me just as much Twilight, if you recall. You nearly let the other Elements murder me, and you refused to even help me!” She spat back. “All I wanted... all I needed was to help you, Twilight! To fulfill my role as the Element of Magic!”

“Liar!” Twilight growled angrily. “You wanted your own body! You wanted to take over the world! I had to stop you! Even Celestia saw through your lies!” Spark rolled her eyes at her.

“I did what I had to do to in order to survive!” She replied. “Since we're airing all our dirty laundry here, Twi, why don't you tell Star about what you really intended for me. I'm sure she'd love to hear all about your own lies.” Twilight murmured something. I looked over at her expectantly. Spark snarled loudly. “What was that? We can't hear you.”

“I said, I wanted you to die!” Twilight replied loudly. “I wanted you gone. Out of the picture. I was *sick* of being the Princess of Magic. I was tired of the war. I wanted out. I wanted to know what it felt like to be free of having so much responsibility laid down at my hooves... I wanted to be free.” I blinked.

“You see, Star... Twilight here lied to you. Nightmare wasn't the one who gave me the idea to jump into my own body. It was her. She did it,” Spark said, turning to me.

“What?” I said, glancing over at Twilight. The mare was seething angrily at Spark.

“I said... *she* did it,” Spark said, pointing at Twilight. “She was responsible for all of this. All because she was too foalish to own up to her responsibility.” Spark began to circle around Twilight. “She impersonated Nightmare, some mystical power she learned at Celestia's hooves or something. She

tricked me into thinking that I could be some all powerful being for her own plans. She wanted me to become this way, to be evil. She *killed* her own brother for this.”

“Fuck you! It wasn't my fault!” Twilight shouted. “You killed Shining Armor, you bitch!” Spark waved a hoof, ignoring her as she stepped on the other side of her.

“You see, Star... She did all this so that one day, she could take over your body. Well, not your body per se, but *a* body. Twilight saw the writing on the wall. She knew the war was going badly. She wanted out. The I.M.P. Project was a means to that end,” She said. “But she needed my power to achieve what she wanted. She needed me to be sealed away before she could use that power to transfer her soul into a new body. And of course, she needed a good reason to do that.”

“She needed you to act like you wanted power... to justify sealing you away,” I said, narrowing my gaze at Spark. “To what end?”

“She wanted a different body. A more powerful alicorn body that would be free of the constraints of being a Princess or a Ministry Mare. To do that, she had to make me look like I was the bad guy. Like I was the evil one. But she never got the chance to get that body...” Spark replied.

“Because the megaspells dropped,” I said softly.

“Right,” Spark continued. “So then, Twilight got stuck with Trixie for the better part of two centuries and finally cracked. She blew her top, lost her mind. Became obsessed with returning Equestria to its former glory. Almost as if the part of her that wanted to be free, to rest... had disappeared. How do you explain that, Twilight?”

“I don't need to explain anything to *you*,” Twilight spat. She growled under her breath, lunging at Spark, her horn flaring. Spark struck back with her forehoof, hitting Twilight square in the face. Twilight fell back briefly, but recovered and surged forward. A massive bolt of energy shot forth from her horn, slamming into Spark and sending her flying into the barrier surrounding the area. Spark groaned as she pushed herself back up to her hooves.

“Still pretty strong, Twilight,” she said, grinning. “You're still denying that it was all you, aren't you? Do you even know? Somewhere inside of you, inside of that big ass brain of yours is the other half of your soul.”

“She's right, Twilight,” I said, realizing where Spark was going with this. I had met the part of Twilight that she was talking about. I stepped over next to her. “When you sealed away Spark, you also sealed away part of yourself. The part of you that remembers, that cares, that loves. The part you need to get back.”

“Liars! Both of you! I am the only Twilight!” Twilight snarled loudly. “And I will become the Goddess of this Wasteland! The ponies of this world need me!”

“They need you like I need a kick in the head, Twilight,” Spark mused. “You on the other hoof, need a kick in the head. One I'll be glad to deliver.” She charged at the other mare, leading with a blast of telekinesis that hit Twilight square in the chest. The ancient alicorn fell backwards and Spark continued forward, pressing her assault. Twilight attempted to counter with her own blast of magic, Spark deflecting it with a flick of her horn.

“Betrayer!” Twilight shouted, disappearing with a ***pop***. She reappeared beside Spark, leveling a hoof strike at the mare's side. Spark grunted under the force of the blow, spreading her wings out to block another strike.

“Bitch!” Spark retorted, taking a swing at Twilight's face with a forehoof. The other mare's magic grabbed the hoof, sending Spark spiraling to the ground below. I stood and watched. Watched as two mares, two one-time friends took out centuries of anger and loneliness upon each other. I didn't know what to do. Neither of them showed any signs of slowing down or even stopping. Would they fight for forever? I didn't honestly know.

Is this thing on? A voice popped into the back of my mind. I blinked. That was new.

Umm... hello? I replied.

Oh good, you can hear me, Star. It's me, Twilight, the voice said. *The other Twilight, that is. Not the one that's fighting Spark at the moment.*

How did...? I thought you were inside the shard? I said. Other-Twilight's spectral voice tittered.

Silly Star. I'm inside your head! That's why Twilight wasn't able to follow you, she said. *Regardless, now's not the time to worry about who's and what's. I need your help to end this, and I know just how to do it.*

What? How? I thought. Spark and Twilight were locked together in a magical grapple, holding each other back by sheer force.

You need to use your memory spell once more, Star. I will aid in the casting of it. We need to bring both Spark and Twilight into the same mind space – your mind space. Only then can we have any chance of reconciling myself with the other half of Twilight, Other-Twilight said.

What will we do then? I asked.

Worry about that after we cast the spell, Other-Twilight responded. *You need to help Spark. She won't last long like this. Once you can convince her to help us, we'll be ready to cast the memory spell. Got it?*

I got it, I said. I was a little worried about doing this, but in the end I decided to go with my gut instinct and trust this Other-Twilight. I leaped into the fray, sending a blast of energy that forced Twilight back to the ground, breaking the magical grapple between the two. I casually stepped in next to Spark.

“About time you decided to help, Star,” Spark said. I glared at her.

“Listen. You can't do this by yourself. We need to work together,” I said. “I have a plan.”

“You? You have a plan?” Spark replied, rolling her eyes. “Color me impressed. What is it?”

“We need to bait her, and cast the memory spell on her. You know which one. Other-Twilight is going to help us.”

“Other-Twilight?” Spark said, raising an eyebrow. “Look, I have no idea what happened after you sealed me away, but I think you’ve gone loco in your coco, Star.”

“Listen to me, Spark. You remember what you said about that other part of her? She’s in my head, and she believes that if she can join back with Twilight over there, she can stop all of this,” I said angrily. “So are you going to help me or not?” Spark grimaced as Twilight pushed herself to four hooves. The purple mare looked ready to explode.

“Fine. What do we do?” She said hesitantly. “Make it quick, because here she comes.” I yelped as Twilight surged across our tiny arena, her wings pushing her at us at high speeds. Spark’s horn flared, lifting a shield that Twilight slammed into hard. Twilight bounced back, her own horn blaring. Spark’s shield burst apart, sending both of us falling back.

“Pin her down,” I said, grunting. “Get me close enough to cast the memory spell.”

“I can try, but she’s pretty pissed,” Spark said. We flared our horns, blasting at Twilight with twin bolts of telekinesis. Twilight took the full brunt of both blasts, falling back to the ground. She pushed up to four hooves, glaring at us.

“Betrayers!” She shouted. “I should have known that you’d recruit her to your own twisted little game, Spark.”

“She has nothing to do with this, Twilight,” I said, taking a step forward. “You need help. Please, let us help you.”

“Oh yes... I need... *help*,” Twilight replied angrily. “I need help like I need a ‘kick in the head’. What I *want* on the other hoof is my body. I will take it by force, and then you will see my true glory, Radiant Star.” I grimaced. This was getting nowhere. Twilight was getting worse. I needed to act.

Twilight, are you ready? I asked the Other-Twilight in my head.

As ready as I’ll ever be, Star. Tell Spark to hold her in place and then you can cast the memory spell on both of them, Other-Twilight replied. I nodded, turning to Spark.

“Alright, here’s the game plan. You hold her in place, and I’ll cast the spell. You know that spell I used to restrain you?” I asked. Spark grinned.

“You mean the tentacle spell? I liked that one,” she said, winking.

“I... I didn’t really need to know that,” I said, graphic imagery filling my mind that I didn’t really want to see. I shook the bad thoughts away and focused on the here and now. “You need to use that one. It should hold Twilight long enough for me to cast the memory spell. She’s not weak, but she is losing grip on reality. We need to help her.” Spark grimaced.

“She’s responsible for every bad thing in my life, Star... why should I help her?” She asked.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I said. “Now hurry up, and let’s end this.” Spark growled, flaring her horn.

“Fine, but I'm not doing this for you,” she said. “You and I, we still have unfinished business. See you on the other side, Radiant Star.” She charged at Twilight, casting the restraining spell. Tendrils of magic erupted from all sides around Twilight, catching her off-guard. The purple mare writhed as the magical bonds grasped her legs and wings. Twilight growled loudly, her horn blaring as she dismissed the spell.

“Going to have to do better than that, Spark!” She shouted. Spark grimaced, charging at the other mare.

“I aim to please, Twilight,” she replied, lowering her horn and slamming into Twilight hard. The immortal alicorn went flying into the side of the barrier, grunting. I moved to the side, letting Spark do her thing while I focused my energy to start casting the memory spell. I felt the gentle touch of Other-Twilight in the back of my mind, gently nudging my magic into an ever-so-slightly different form. Spark shouted and I opened my eyes, seeing her writhing in the air from Twilight's own restraining spell.

“Little help here?!” Spark called out. I growled, firing a blast of countermagic at Twilight. I wasn't sure if it would work, but I had to try. Other-Twilight's magic bolstered my own, blowing Twilight's magic-tentacles away like smoke in a stiff wind. Spark fell to the ground, yelping as she landed. Twilight moved to cast a bolt of telekinesis at me.

“Sorry!” I called out, bringing up my shield spell, not the one that Twilight's brother had created, but my own. It caught the blast and reflected it back at the purple mare. Twilight responded in kind, shielding herself from harm with a mere blink of her horn.

This isn't working! I called out to the Other-Twilight. *We can't drop her defenses!*

You have to try, Star! I know you can do this. I believe in you, Other-Twilight replied calmly. *If you don't this world will not survive the outcome.* I grimaced, nodding. Other-Twilight was right about one thing. I needed to end this, and I needed to end it now. Spark was pushing herself back to her hooves, trying to recover from a very powerful series of telekinetic blasts that had sent her groaning into the side of the barrier. She slumped to the ground, not moving. It was down to me and Twilight. The purple alicorn held a predatory grin on her face as she circled around me.

“So... now it's just me and you,” she said, purring softly. It was...creepy. “Give up, Radiant Star. You will never win. Your body will be mine, and hiding behind your friends, Spark, even that Lucky spirit of yours will not stop that.” Her horn glowed brightly, magical tendrils of energy circling around me. I leaped to the side, avoiding them as best as I could.

Twilight snarled, directing the magical tendrils around the room at me, trying to snare me. I yelped as one of them nearly got me, yet somehow I was able to slip it's clinging grasp. I suspected Other-Twilight was using her own magic from inside my mind to help me. I worried about her trustworthiness, but she hadn't given me much of a reason not to as of yet.

“Is that all you got, Twilight?” I called out, grinning widely. I knew what I had to do. Twilight was smart, but she wasn't so smart that she couldn't be goaded into making a mistake. And this particular half of herself had shown that she was not completely stable, either. Each passing moment the mare degenerated further, her mind seeking only one thing... me. I knew I couldn't let that happen, and I

owed it to the Other-Twilight to do my best to save her.

“I will show you my true power, Radiant Star!” Twilight replied angrily. Her horn lit up brightly, tendrils of purple magic covering every inch of the floor. One of them lifted Spark's body into the air, the spirit still not moving. They converged on me, ready to grab me. I grimaced.

Don't worry, Star. I can stop this, Other-Twilight said from inside my mind. My horn flared with a life of its own, taking a hold of the purple magic. I pushed with my own magic, directing the power back at Twilight. The tendrils grabbed a hold of Twilight's legs and wings instead, one of the tendrils wrapping around the base of her horn.

“No!” She shouted. “I will not let you do this!” I took step after step calmly forward, my horn glowing as I prepared the memory spell.

“Twilight, it's time for you to meet the other half you've been missing,” I said. “It's time for this to be over.” I was deathly close to her now.

“I will have your body,” she uttered as I lowered my horn to hers. Ignoring her threats, I cast the memory spell, reaching out to grab a hold of Spark as well. My entire world went stark-white as I fell into my mind.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I stood upon a crystal plateau, the sky rolling endlessly above me. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd done it. I looked over at Spark. The purple and black alicorn's expression was pure comedic gold.

“Equestria to Spark,” I said, getting her attention. “Glad to see you're with us.”

“What...? Where are we?” She said. “This isn't my mind.”

“No,” said a new voice. “I changed the perspective focus component of the spell. This is Radiant Star's mind.” I followed the voice to see a regal elderly purple unicorn. Her mane sparkled and her coat shimmered. Twilight stepped forward out of the ether. Spark's eyes widened.

“You.” Spark started to move towards the other mare, murder in her eyes.

“Calm thyself, Magic,” Twilight replied. “I am not the Twilight that betrayed your trust.” Spark stopped short.

“What is going on here?” She said, turning to me. “Why is she here?”

“Because this is where things get a little fuzzy,” I said. “Twilight sealed part of her soul, the part that knew goodness and love... friendship. But she didn't seal you away when she sealed Spark, did she?” Twilight grimaced, shaking her head.

“I'm afraid not, no. She sealed me away before that,” she said, looking at Spark. “Had I known what she would have done to you... I never... I never would have...” Her eyes filled with tears. “I'm so sorry, Magic.”

"I... I don't know what to say," Spark said.

"There isn't anything to say," I said. "But rather, there is something to do. We need to rejoin this Twilight with the other Twilight. Only then will this all be over." I started walking forward, across the plateau.

"How do you plan on doing that?" Spark asked, stepping up next to me. Twilight walked on my other side, looking pensive.

"I've been thinking a lot on that one... and I think I know just how to do it," I said. "It's going to take all of us, all working together."

"All of us?" Spark said. I nodded, grinning as I stopped.

"There she is," I said. Laying on her side across from us was the other Twilight. The purple alicorn looked like she'd been through hell and back. Her coat was shaggy and her wings were ragged and bloody. She looked up at us, pushing herself into a standing position. Her eyes were bloodshot red as they pierced at me.

"Come to gloat, have you?" She snarled. "Do you really think that you've beaten me? That I will not stop until I have your body?"

"No, Twilight. I don't," I said. "I think you need help."

"What I need is to claim what is rightfully mine, Radiant Star," Twilight said, growling. The Other-Twilight stepped out from behind me, causing the first one to stop. "What...? What is this? Who are you?"

"I'm you, Twilight," the mare said. "The part of you that you sealed away. You know when."

"No... No. It can't be you," Twilight said angrily. "You're gone." Other-Twilight smiled.

"It is me. Do you remember the day we ascended? The day we became an alicorn? Or do you remember Pinkie's parties, Applejack's apple cider season, and even Rainbow Dash's tricks?" She said. "I remember it all, because I'm a part of you."

"But you don't remember the war. The sacrifices I had to make for Equestria," Twilight retorted. "The things I had to do to ensure that I could be free of the war."

"I remember as much as I needed to," Other-Twilight said. "I remember when she came to us. She promised us a way out. She offered it to us, even. The stress of the job, it was too much for us."

"Who?" I asked, interjecting. Spark sat off to the side, looking bored.

"Luna," Other-Twilight replied. "She saw how the war was affecting us. She came to us one night, telling us that we could be set free of our obligations. The part of me that was irrational and stressed out, the part that wanted so desperately to pass tests and never fail... she took control that night."

"You were sealed away then? Not when Twilight sealed Spark?" I said, motioning at the spirit, who

yawned.

“Indeed I was,” Other-Twilight said. “We became obsessed with passing Luna's test, because that's what it was. It was a test to ensure that we were loyal. The crown was increasingly paranoid after Big Macintosh died, that Luna needed to know with an absolute certainty that we were still hers.”

“She couldn't handle it,” Spark said finally. “She snapped like a twig. Her mind couldn't take the stress.”

“I... I...” Twilight stammered. Other-Twilight smiled brightly.

“It's okay, Twilight. I don't blame you for it,” she said softly. “You needed help, real help, and your friends were in the same situation you were in: hurt, scared, paranoid. You did the only thing you thought you could do... you cut out your feelings. You cut me out.”

“I did what I had to do,” Twilight said, regaining her composure. “I was stronger for it.”

“No, Twilight. You were weak,” Other-Twilight replied casually. “You took the easy route out. All of Equestria did. But no more, Twilight. You need to see the present for what it is. The future for what it can be. You need to stop clinging to the past and face the future, face eternity.”

“Old world blues,” I muttered to myself suddenly, finally realizing after so long that I'd been doing the same as Twilight had been. My mind had been stuck in the past, spending time focused on the world of Equestria that was. I was lost there because I didn't have a past of my own. I was nothing, not even a pony. I looked up, hearing my name.

“Look at Radiant Star, Twilight,” Other-Twilight said. Twilight glowered at me. “She's not us. She's not even as smart as we are.”

“Hey!” I said. “I'm not that bad.” Other-Twilight smiled softly.

“Sorry, Star. I meant no offense,” she said, returning to look at Twilight. “What I mean is... she's not our body. Our body is long gone, Twilight. It's time we moved on. We must, for the good of Equestria and for the good of our soul.”

“I can't,” Twilight said defiantly. “I have too much more to finish here. I... I can't be over!” I sighed. I knew we needed to convince Twilight to merge with her other half, but I was finally at a loss as to how I would actually do that. I had hoped, as I'm sure Other-Twilight had as well, that the two of them finally being able to talk would allow it to happen, but Twilight seemed as obstinate as ever. I did the only thing I could think of to do at the time. I sat down, slumping to my haunches.

“Star?” Other-Twilight said. I shook a hoof.

“I'm fine. Just thinking,” I said. “Twilight's obviously not going to listen to us. I don't know what else to do.”

“My body has the right of it,” Twilight interjected. “I will not listen to you. I am Twilight Sparkle, Princess and Goddess of Equestria. I will not let you stop me.” I rolled my eyes, looking down at my hooves. I supposed it would take some time to think this through, to figure out how to reconcile the

two spiritual mares. As my brain ran through every possible outcome, I got distracted by my own hooves of all things. *Huh. I never really appreciated what I had until now*, I thought. *My hooves are so... amazing. My body moreso. It's a miracle of life. I don't want to lose it. It's what I am. It's... It's who I am.*

I closed my eyes. *No... you're nothing. You're not even a real pony. You were an experiment. A creation. Nothing more*, I thought.

"Silly filly. You're so much more than you know."

I looked up into her eyes. Violet stood over me, her green eyes rimmed with tears. I blinked.

"How...?" I said. Violet smiled.

"This is your mind, remember? I'm not the real Violet. I'm a part of your mind," she said. "*Your* mind, not hers." She pointed at the three other mares, who still appeared to be arguing loudly. I realized they couldn't see Violet, or didn't care enough to look. Twilight looked tense, but they weren't fighting yet. Why weren't they fighting?

"Because they can't, not here," another voice from next to me said. I looked up, nearly falling to the side when I saw him. Steeljack. He looked as healthy as the day I'd met him, and happier than I'd ever seen... except when he'd learned about his children. "You make the rules. This is your mind. And you won't let them."

"S-S-Steeljack?" I stuttered.

"You know I'm not real, but I also know that deep down in your heart, you're always thinking about the real Steeljack," the gray stallion said. "I'm not the only one who's here, either. We're all here." He motioned behind me. I turned my head, my eyes widening.

Standing at the head of the crowd of assorted creatures was Patch, cradling two wonderful foals on her back. Standing next to her was Lucky, who simply smiled and waved. Sunshine Sky grinned widely from next to Nixis, who looked perfectly dapper in an old war suit and top hat. On the other side of Patch stood Lilith, the version of Lilith I'd always imagined she could be. Her wing blades were gone, revealing two beautiful black wings with tinges of gray running through them.

Past them, there were others. Envy, Pride, Sloth, even Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath. Apple Danish. Thin Mint. Gray Knight. The ponies of the MMMM. The ponies of Arlington. Nurse Care. Finishing Touch and Featherjoy. They were all here. Every creature and pony I'd interacted with since the beginning of my journey.

"You see, Star," Violet said as I looked back up to her. "You're *you*. If you weren't a pony, we wouldn't be here. There wouldn't be a Radiant Star. Twilight messed up in one big way. She gave you a life. A life filled with friends who love you, who support you. She made you real, and that's why she can't touch you. You've always been a real pony."

"I... I..." I stammered. I couldn't believe it. Violet was right. I was a real pony! I had to be, or else I wouldn't have all the memories of my times with the others. I blinked, realizing that I knew the answer. I knew how to help Twilight. I stood with some urgency, drawing the attention of the others.

“Something wrong, Star?” Other-Twilight said, smiling. Twilight growled at her. I looked back for Violet, seeing that she and the others were gone. I muttered a small prayer to Luna that this would work. Turning back to the others, I grimaced.

“Spark,” I said. “You might want to stand back from this, please.” The spirit mare scowled at me, but started inching away from us. My horn began to glow brightly, startling the two purple alicorns.

“Star, what are you doing?” Other-Twilight asked.

“I’m fixing this,” I said, releasing the magic in my horn. “From one to another, another to one. A mark of one’s destiny singled out alone, fulfilled...” Magical energy swirled from my horn, engulfing the two mares in a blaze of glorious light. Both mares yelped in surprise as the light embraced them, then froze into immobile stillness. As I poured more magic into the spell, I started filtering in the true payload of this most potent weapon: memories. Memories of me, Violet and the others. Memories of Twilight and her friends. Days of joy, sorrow, love, and even pain filled the void around the two alicorns.

“Friendship. Remember it. Remember how it makes you feel,” I intoned, gritting my teeth at the intensity of the power surrounding us. “Remember its power. Remember what brought you together!”

More memories filtered into the spell. I felt the gentle and loving touch of Violet’s hoof, the rough smile of Steeljack. The warmth of Patch’s foals. The laugh of Pinkie Pie. The kind softness of Fluttershy. Rarity and her generous heart. The striking loyalty of Rainbow Dash. The brutal, but fair honesty of Applejack. It was all with me, every moment of the spell.

“From all of us together, together we’re friends. With the marks of our destinies made one, there is magic without end!”

As the last of my magic sputtered out, I gasped loudly for breath and fell to my front knees. The images of my mind began to flicker in and out amidst the swirling tornado of energy that was surrounding the two alicorns. I couldn’t see through the veil it created, only pure light.

And then suddenly... it was gone and she was there. She was laying on her side, breathing hard. Her wings were old and ragged, but her coat was still shiny and warm. She opened her eyes, violet orbs that were now rimmed with tears. She looked... sad. I pushed myself up and she cringed.

“Don’t hurt me!” She called out, shrinking away from me. I sat down in front of her, saying nothing. Twilight looked down at her hooves and began to cry. “I’m... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

“Twilight?” I said softly, getting her attention.

“You must hate me,” she said, trying to catch her breath with every sentence. “The things I did to you... I hurt you more than I hurt... oh Goddesses I hurt my own brother... I killed him... I don’t... I can’t...”

“No... I don’t hate you,” I said softly. “If anything... I have to thank you. You ultimately gave me what I needed to stop what was happening to you.”

“H-H-How...?” Twilight stammered.

"By giving me a life," I said. "You see, Twilight. By allowing me to have a mind, a soul, a body... you gave me a life. It's... almost like you knew what would happen."

"I..." Twilight tried to say, pushing herself up a bit so she could sit.

"A life is nothing though... without friendship. They saved me. I was more than just a replacement body to them. I was, and still am... Radiant Star," I said. "And for that, I thank you." Twilight looked back down at her hooves once more.

"I ruined so many lives. The war... Shining Armor... I don't know that I can face them now," she said. "I don't know if I have the strength..." Something past the mare caught my eye and I smiled.

"You may not have the strength, Twilight... but I know that *they* do," I said, pointing behind her. Twilight craned her neck back, seeing what I had seen. I don't know if they were really real or not. Hell, I was pretty sure I was still having some sort of screwed up fever dream after drinking too much. From out of the mist, several ponies had appeared. One of them was a white unicorn stallion with a brilliant blue mane. Behind him... it was them. The Ministry Mares.

Twilight gasped softly, standing. The stallion stepped forward, stopping in front of the purple mare.

"Twily," he said simply. Twilight's eyes filled with tears and she started to sob uncontrollably.

"No... No I can't... I can't..." she said. "I can't do this..."

"Twily," Shining Armor said. He rested his hoof on his sister's shoulder, pulling her close. Twilight sobbed wildly in his embrace. Shining smiled, patting her. "Little Twily, it's okay. It's okay."

"No... No it's not..." Twilight cried out. "I... I did so many bad things... I killed... I *killed* you..."

"Twilight," Shining said. "I forgive you. We all do."

"Right-o-rooni!" Pinkie Pie called out from behind the two. The other mares nodded, smiling brightly.

"But I... I hurt all of you..." Twilight said, pulling back from her brother. I took the opportunity to make my way next to her.

"I think that's the beauty of it, Twilight," I said, smiling. "No matter what happens, your friends will always give you a second chance." She looked up at me, nodding.

"I... I'm so sorry for everything," she said, glancing back to Shining Armor. "If... if I still can, I'm ready to go, now."

"Let's go home," Shining replied, grinning. He turned, nodding at me before disappearing into the mist. The rest of the Ministry Mares nodded as well, turning silently away. Twilight looked at me and Spark, who was just sitting there, staring at what had just happened. Twilight trotted over to her.

"I know that some of the things I did... I can never take them back, Spark," she said. "I... I'm sorry. I wish that I could take them back. But I can't. All I can ask is that you remember me and hope you

forgive me.” She turned away from the other mare, looking at me. “I’ll be ending your spell now. Once we’re back in the real world... I will leave. You were right... this world doesn’t need me. It needs ponies like you. Ponies willing to do the hard things for others. I wish I’d have been strong enough to see that at first.”

“I... Thank you,” I stammered. “Does... does this mean that I’ll get to look like myself again?” Twilight chuckled as the world around us began to fade.

“Yes. Yes it does.”

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

My eyes fluttered open and I groaned. My head felt like it had been placed into a refrigerator and the door slammed upon it repeatedly. I placed my forehooves in front of me, pushing myself up. It was then that I saw her. Twilight Sparkle. Not the half mare that had tried to take my body over, but the real mare. She stood over me, a soft smile on her face. She lowered a hoof, which I took gratefully.

“Hello, Radiant Star,” she said. “I do not have much time left before I must go.” I looked over at Spark. The mare was still unconscious, lying on the ground. The barrier that had surrounded us had disappeared. I could see my friends watching with rapt awe. They appeared to be unharmed.

“What happens now?” I asked. Twilight smiled.

“Now, you get to be rid of me. I’m sorry for everything, Star,” she said. She looked down at her hooves. “You know... I’m proud of you. I think this world is in good hooves if there are ponies like you watching over it. Just promise me that you won’t ever stop fighting the good fight.”

“I promise...” I said. “Twilight? Can I ask you a question?” The mare nodded. “The resurrection spell... did it really ever exist?” I glanced back at Lucky. Twilight smirked at me and stepped up next to me. She whispered in my ear, and I smiled as she explained exactly what I’d needed to know.

“I can’t give you anything more than that, Star. Once you use the spell, it will be stricken from your memory. I can understand your intentions, but the knowledge is too much for normal ponies to bear,” Twilight said. I nodded. “Now then... before I go... there’s something I need you to do for me.”

“What’s that?” I asked, cocking my head. Twilight reached in and whispered in my ear again. I nodded as I listened to what she wanted me to do. When she was finished, she pulled away. “I... I can do that.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Radiant Star. Now I owe you one final thing,” she said. Her horn flared, sending a wave of purple magic over my body. I blinked as I felt... tingly and twitchy. Twilight’s magic stopped after a few moments and the mare nodded. She turned to walk away. I looked down, seeing two blue hooves in front of me. I glanced back at my flank. My cutie mark was back! I was me again! I couldn’t believe it! I looked up to thank Twilight, but she was gone. Disappeared.

“Star!” Violet shouted, breaking the silence that followed as she grabbed a hold of me and squeezed. “You’re... you’re...”

“Yes, Violet... I’m alright,” I said softly. “It’s over.” I pulled my love in close, holding her. Nothing in this world would ever separate me from her ever again.

“Not completely,” a voice said, cutting my reunion short. I looked up, seeing Spark back on her hooves. “We still have unfinished business you and I.”

“Spark,” I said flatly. I pulled away from Violet, stepping forward to meet the other alicorn despite the protests of my marefriend. “It's over, Spark. It's time for you to move on as well.”

“Ehh... I don't think so,” Spark said. “Despite everything that Twilight did to me... you have to admit that ultimate power is a pretty choice goal. I'll be taking your body.” The purple mare growled, charging at me with her horn blazing. I sighed softly and pooled my magic, before releasing it with a grunt. I was done. I didn't want to fight anymore. I needed to somehow make Spark see that there was a better way.

I opened my eyes and rushed forward to meet her. Instead of a hoof strike or a magical energy blast, I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed Spark with both forelegs and I pulled her into a hug.

“What the--?” Spark yelped. She stopped completely, caught off-guard by my embrace. I held her there for what felt like eternity, the mare thrashing in my grip.

“Spark,” I said softly. “I know it hurts. What Twilight did to you... what she turned you into. I can't even begin to imagine the pain...”

“You don't know me!” Spark snarled, writhing in my grasp. “You don't know how much she hurt me!” I squeezed harder.

“I know. I don't. But I do understand,” I said. “You have a chance Spark, to be more than what Twilight made you out to be. You have a second chance. You deserve that chance.”

“But I --” Spark started to yell before she sighed loudly. She stopped fighting back. “Do... do you really think so?” I smiled softly.

“I know so. The world needs you, Spark... but not as a Goddess. As the Element of Magic. It needs its bearer. They're out there, Spark. They're waiting for all six to be discovered, but they're out there,” I replied. “Can't you feel them? They're good ponies, working towards a bright and better future.” Spark's eyes widened.

“I... I've known for some time about them,” Spark said. “I refused to believe it, but I knew they were out there. Some of them have been found already. I... I was so scared, Star... I was scared that it would be like Twilight all over again, that I'd be betrayed again.” I nodded, placing a hoof on her shoulder and rubbing it softly.

“It's okay, Spark,” I said. “It's okay. Everything will be just fine. Trust me when I say that you will find a new bearer, one who will love you for who you are. Just like Twilight did.”

“Twilight? But she... she did this to me!” Spark protested.

“And yet, in the end, she was apologetic. She sought your forgiveness. She loved you, Spark. With all of her heart. She was your friend. And no matter what, friends deserve a second chance,” I said. Spark nodded, pulling out of my embrace.

“What about us?” She said. “Are we... are we friends?” I chuckled softly.

“Yes. Yes, we are,” I said. “I’m not your Bearer though. There’s somepony else out there that’s better at the job than I am. I’m just Radiant Star.”

“Thank you... Radiant Star,” Spark said. “I... I suppose I should go. I have a lot of... catching up to do with the others.”

“Absolutely correct, darling,” a voice said from behind us. We turned and looked, seeing five alicorns: white, orange, blue, yellow, and pink. They were translucent, but ultimately they were there. The white one stepped forward. “Magic, dear. It’s time for you to come home.”

“Generosity?” Spark said, a twinkle of tears forming in her eyes. “But you... you all...”

“We believe in Miss Star’s assessment of the situation,” Generosity said. “You deserve a second chance. We miss you, dear. Come be with us once again.”

“Are you... are you sure?” Spark said sheepishly. Generosity nodded, smiling.

“Of course, darling. After all... the Elements of Harmony cannot exist without their Spark. We have eons to make up for this tiny little transgression. Right now though, the world needs us,” she said. “Are you ready?” Spark nodded, turning to look at me.

“I guess... I guess this is goodbye,” she said. I smiled.

“It’s never really goodbye, Spark. How’s about when you find your bearer, you come look me up?” I said. “We’ll call it... ‘see you later, radigator.’”

Spark chuckled, turning to walk back to the group of alicorns. They surrounded the poor mare, hugging her and talking amiably as they disappeared into nothingness.

“What in the frickity frack just happened?” Lilith said, whistling. I turned to face the others.

“It’s over, for good,” I said. “Well... not quite. There’s still one more thing left that I need to do.” I trotted over to the stone circle, using my magic to gently lift the alicorn bodies back onto the slabs. There were two left that were intact. It would do. Violet came over while I was examining the second one, her eyes questioning.

“What are you doing, Star?” She asked as I prepared the body.

“Something I promised, Violet. Something I promised,” I said. I cocked my head at her. “Violet? Can I ask you something?”

“I suppose,” she said, sitting down on the floor near me.

“When you and I first met... was I... different?” I said. Violet grimaced, but nodded.

“You were a little robotic at times, almost like you were in some sort of shock. When you told me later

that it was right after the Goddess' death, I figured that had something to do with it," she said, looking down at her hooves. "This is about what Twilight said, isn't it? Star, you don't --" I cut her off with a hoof.

"Don't worry, Violet. It's alright. I was just curious," I said softly. "Besides... Twilight was a lying bitch. I wouldn't worry about anything she said."

"Are you sure?" Violet said, looking surprised. I nodded.

"Sure. Now, go and join the others. I have to do this alone, I'll be back as soon as I can. I will be along shortly," I said. Violet nodded and kissed me before returning to our friends. I turned back to the body on the slab. I wondered if I'd looked like this at one point when Twilight had... had made me. Violet's recounting of my actions post-Unity confirmed the basic similarity, but I didn't care. Whatever Twilight had expected to create, she'd messed up. She'd created not an empty vessel, but a pony. A pony with flesh and blood, and with friendships that would last forever. I knew deep down in my heart, *my* heart, that it was true.

I flared my horn and I set to work.

The journey back to the surface was long and arduous, but thankfully we were able to avoid anything particularly nasty. Twilight's final message burned into my thoughts with every step. She certainly had laid a big burden on my shoulders with her passing on. I wasn't quite sure where to begin with it, but I knew I wouldn't let her down. I owed her that much. We'd destroyed all access to the nadir, and all the passages down as we passed. No pony should ever go to that place ever again.

The others were fine, Twilight's shield had protected them from the effects of our attacks as well as it had kept us in. None of them had moved the entire time that was going on, intent on trying to find a way through the shield barrier and save me. Lucky, as it turned out, had indeed been unable to gain access back inside the barrier once Twilight had removed her from it. Thankfully the excess energy that Twilight's barrier gave off allowed the rest of my friends to actually see her. Small miracles, I suppose.

Violet clung to my side the entire way back up. I wasn't surprised. She'd seen me at my worst, bleeding out on the floor. I doubted she would ever let me out of her sight ever again. Lilith was unhappy that she wasn't able to get a blow in during the fight, but was as happy as could be that I was okay and it was all over. Nixis still looked terrible, the stump of his arm was no longer bleeding, but he was still in a bad way. He carried on though, not letting anyone else see the pain in his eyes. Sunshine was the least damaged, but she was still breathing hard with every step back up the Cathedral. She'd tried several magical attacks on the barrier, all of them failed. She was suffering some burnout effects, but nothing that couldn't be cured by a little rest.

After an eternity, but was really an hour by my PipBuck's time, we found ourselves in one of the main halls of the Cathedral. Soft light filtered through the windows of the main hall, the smell of fresh air assaulting our senses. I pushed open the door at the end of the hall, revealing it to be an offshoot from the central courtyard of the complex itself. I took several steps out into the sunlight, reveling in its warmth upon my coat.

I was me again! I danced a tiny jig across the rocks, stopping dead in my tracks when a shadow formed over us. A massive dragon landed in the courtyard in front of us. For a brief moment I thought it was the dragon that we'd found where Steeljack had died, but it wasn't the same color. I panicked all the same, reaching for Stargazer... and then realizing that it was gone. I blanched white as the dragon regarded us curiously. He was purple with green spines, and wore an eyepatch. Why did he look familiar to me? The others pulled back, Lilith ready to fight at the drop of a hat. The dragon opened its mouth, and surprised us by speaking.

"Who are you? Where is she?" He said, his voice rumbling across the courtyard. I took a few hesitant steps forward.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," I said timidly. "If we're intruding upon your property, we'll be out of your spines and on our way." The dragon snarled.

"Where. Is. She?!" He shouted. "I haven't felt her magic in so long. Not since before... before..." *Her magic?* I thought. I carefully scrutinized the dragon's face, searching for some sign of recognition. My eyes widened when I realized that I did know the dragon, just not at this size.

"S-S-Spike?" I said. The dragon looked down at me, taken aback by my outburst. The others looked at me with incredulous stares as well.

"How do you know that name?" He said. "Where is she? I felt her. She's here."

"Spike the dragon," I said. "I know that name because I knew who you're talking about. You're talking about Twilight Sparkle, aren't you?"

"Yes! Where is she? Is she here?" Spike crowed, thundering the ground with his massive legs in place in what I assumed was a jig of some sort. I lowered my head.

"I'm sorry, Spike. She's not here anymore," I said. "She's gone." Spike stopped his dance, his good humor falling away as he swung his head back down to glare at me.

"Where did she go? Why was she here?" He said. I grimaced, meeting his steely gaze.

"I will tell you the whole story, Spike the dragon," I said. "Soon. Not now though. We are all tired, hungry, and we need to get back to our friend in Ponyville." Spike started to say something, closing his mouth before nodding silently.

"You need to get back to Ponyville?" He said. I nodded in response. "I can take you there. I have been away from my cave for too long as it is. I will provide you with the coordinates on your PipBuck... what should I call you?"

"Radiant Star," I said. "My name is Radiant Star."

"Radiant Star," Spike echoed, glancing down at the rest of us. "I should be able to carry all of you. Climb on." He hunkered down on all four legs, revealing ample enough space to fit several ponies. The others walked up tentatively and began to climb up onto the dragon's back. Spike met my gaze as Violet and I walked past him. "As we discussed, Radiant Star. I will bear you to Ponyville. But you will come see me, and soon. You will tell me why she was here, *how* she was here, and why she is

gone.”

“Of course. You have my word,” I said as I helped Violet up onto his back. I climbed up next to her and Spike lifted into the air, his massive wings beating hard. The Everfree Forest, the Cathedral itself all became specks on the ground. Violet sighed and leaned back into me.

“So... what now?” She asked. I smiled softly at her.

“Now? Now we go home,” I said.

Epilogue: Second Chances

The magic of friendship doesn't just exist in Equestria. It's everywhere. You can seek it out, or you can forever be alone. The choice is yours.

"I think that just about covers everything," I said, taking a sip of the scalding hot tea in front of me. I looked up into the one good eye of my dragon host. After starting into my tale, Spike had pulled out a length of scroll and had begun writing it down. He said it was for posterity reasons, that somepony needed to know what had happened. It had taken us several days to reach the part of the story where Spike entered in. In that time, I'd had to correct him several times on certain aspects of my story, but eventually he got it down on paper properly. There were several times that Spike had to stop writing, as he began to look a bit pale. I imagined that hearing these things about a mare that was like a mother to him was very hard. The dragon looked down at me, dumbfounded.

"I can't believe that Twilight..." he said. I lowered my cup, cocking an eyebrow.

"Twilight... she wasn't perfect. She was a pony, just like anypony else was. She knew weakness, much like I did," I said. Spike nodded silently.

"It's just hard to believe that she's finally moved on," he said. "The last time I saw her... she was still okay. It was just before the war ended. I went into hibernation, and when I woke up... everypony was gone."

"That must have been incredibly hard on you," I said. Spike nodded in response. "I assure you, what I just told you is the truth. I'm just sorry it took me so long to come see you."

"I believe you, Star. I truly do," Spike replied. "Besides... four months isn't that long. If anything that's a blip in the life of a dragon."

"Yes... well, I think that is all there is to it then," I said, standing and stretching my legs.

"What happened afterwards? What happened to your friends? I had to return to my cave so soon after we met," Spike asked suddenly. I cocked another eyebrow at him. "It... might make for a good ending if everypony who reads this knows that the heroes turned out okay in the end. Sort of... a happily ever after, you know?"

"Well..." I said, sitting back down in my seat as Spike poured me some more tea...

Chicacolt

"Auntie Star, Auntie Vi!" Starry Night shouted up at me as I pushed open the door to the dwelling inside Theater. I smiled softly at the filly. Lightning Chaser was on top of me before I even could move any further, his wings buzzing rapidly. The two foals had gotten much bigger than the last time I'd seen them.

"Hey you two, give Auntie Star and Auntie Violet some room," a voice said from inside the room. I looked up, seeing Patch. She was smiling brightly.

"Hey, Patch," I said, looking down at the green mare. Patch trotted over to us, collecting her super excitable foals, depositing them in the old play pen she'd managed to scavenge. They quickly moved to their toys, having completely forgotten we were there. I smiled softly, watching as the twins played together.

"Those two are a hoofful, it seems," Violet said from my side. Patch giggled.

"They are, but they're my life now," she said. "After a long day's work here, I really need their company sometimes. Why don't you two take a seat? You in town long?"

"Not for too long," I said. "We're here to discuss setting up branches for the Followers with Danish."

"Ah... well he's been in some meetings all day long. He and Lilith have a date tonight too, I think," Patch replied.

"How is Lilith?" I asked. The door opened up at that, revealing the black mare.

"Lilith," she said. "Is just fine and dandy. Sorry I'm late, Patch. I got caught up on a shift." The black mare wore a different set of power armor than what she had previously worn, this one with a badge and the word 'Security' emblazoned on it. Her wing blades were painted a flat black, invisible unless you knew what to look for.

"No worries," Patch said, grinning. "I don't even think they missed you." Lilith's eyes widened.

"What?!" She said, trotting over to the play pen. "You guys didn't miss me?! You always miss me!" The foals squealed happily as they latched onto Lilith's neck, hugging her close. I smiled at the scene.

"She's good with them," I said. Patch nickered.

"Everypony is," she said. "I'm just glad for Lilith's help. I don't know what I would do without her."

"Don't forget me," a voice said from behind us. Apple Danish stepped into the apartment, grinning widely. The stallion looked as happy as ever. He trotted up to Lilith and kissed her on the cheek before turning to us. "Howdy, you two. Just got done with my meetings. Moose was fuckin' crazy again. Heard you was looking for me."

"Danish," Violet said. "Yes. We have some business to discuss, on behalf of the Followers." Danish nodded.

"Follow me to my office. We'll see what we can hammer out," the stallion said. Violet started to follow him, but stopped and looked back at me. I was watching Lilith playing with the foals.

"Star? You coming?" She said. I waved her off.

"Nah. I want to spend some time with my godfoals," I said. "I think my Senior Priestess can handle this one." Violet rolled her eyes, following after Danish. Lilith chuckled as I grabbed ahold of Starry

Night with my magic, rolling the filly around in the air as she giggled at me.

“So... when are you two gonna have one of your own?” Lilith crooned. My eyes widened.

“What.”

“I see,” Spike said. “And how are your godfoals doing?”

“Oh, you know. Kids. They're pretty adorable,” I replied, taking another sip of my tea. Spike grinned toothily.

“And have you indeed thought about having one of your own?” He said. I shrugged.

“Violet and I have talked about it a bit,” I said. “I’m not sure if I’m ready for that kind of commitment though. I love Violet dearly, just not sure about foals. It’s kind of nice to live vicariously through Patch, you know?” Spike nodded in response. He finished penning the entry on the scroll and looked up at me.

“And what about your hellhound friend? Nixis?” He asked.

“He's still in Ponyville, actually,” I said...

Ponyville

“Welcome to our home, Radiant Star. You are always welcome in our town,” Avira said, opening the door to the library. I stepped inside, smiling brightly at the female hellhound.

“Thank you, Avira. Is Nixis around?” I asked as I trotted after her into the library's common room. Two other hellhounds were in the happy and open space, working on cleaning up the tables and shelves in the library. They waved at me, smiling widely.

“He's... around. I think you'll find him upstairs,” Avira replied. I nodded, trotting up the stairs. I pushed open the door at the top, the hallway beyond dark. I took a step inside.

“Hello? Nixis?” I said. Two yellow eyes opened at the end of the hall. Nixis stepped forward where I could see him better. His prosthetic limb clacked as he moved. It wasn't a perfect replacement, but Nixis had not wanted any cybernetics. He claimed they felt funny. The hellhound smiled at me widely.

“Radiant Star,” he said. “It is quite good to see you. What brings you to my home?”

“Just passing through on my way to Manehattan,” I said. “Figured I'd see how you and Avira were doing.”

“We are well, thank you very much,” he said. “In fact, Avira and I have some good news.”

“Oh? What's that?” I asked as I followed the hellhound down the stairs. Nixis grinned toothily.

“I am to be a father, Radiant Star,” he said. “Avira is pregnant.” My eyes widened.

“Nixis! You old dog,” I said, playfully hitting his shoulder with my forehoof. “Seriously... I'm really happy for you. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Star,” Nixis replied. “Would you like to stay for the evening? I'm sure that we can find room for you.”

“I don't know...” I said, putting a hoof to my chin. “Let me think about it... okay! You got me. I'm not expected back at Fort Knowledge for a few days or so. Plenty of time to kick back and relax.”

“Indeed,” Nixis said, following me down the stairs of the library. Avira looked pensive, but smiled widely when I gave her a great big hug. I could tell they were going to be great parents. I just knew it.

“That's beautiful. I'm happy for your friend,” Spike said, penning down the entry on the scroll about Nixis. “Let me see here... what about your friend Sunshine?”

“Sunshine... she's helping us out now,” I said, tracing the rim of my cup with my hoof.

Manhattan

“Are you ready to go?” I said to the pink mare. Sunshine looked up at me and smiled softly.

“Yep, just finishing up packing my things,” she said. Violet sat off to the side, packing together her gear as well. “The Twilight Society didn't exactly like my resignation, but they understand how important the work the Followers are doing is.”

“So they're okay with you joining the Followers?” Violet said. Sunshine nodded, zipping up her pack.

“Yeah, I mean they're not thrilled, but what you guys are doing is worth it,” she said. “Setting up schools, helping ponies. It's something I've always wanted to do. I should be ready to go, now.”

“Good. We've got a good amount of ground to cover,” I said. The three of us made our way out to the train line outside of Tenpony Tower. Sunshine looked back up at the place that had once been her home.

“How far is it to Fort Knowledge?” She asked.

“Couple days at best,” Violet said. “Don't worry. We're sticking strictly to NCR established routes. We'll stop in Glyphmark and then make our way up to the Fort after that.” Sunshine nodded.

“I really appreciate this, you two,” she said. “Letting me join the Followers and all. I'm excited to get to work.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “How’s the horn workin’?” Sunshine smiled, tapping the appendage with a hoof while we walked.

“It’s alright. Doctors said I’m likely to still experience burnout, but it’s getting better,” she said. “So what’s Fort Knowledge like? You never talked much about the place.”

“Books,” Violet said flatly. “Lots and lots of books.”

“Violet’s exaggerating just a tad,” I said, pushing open the door to the line station that would lead us down to street level. Several NCR guards nodded at us as we made our way through. “It’s nice. A little nicer since the NCR got trade routes set up between there and Mall. Yes, there are a lot of libraries. It’s where Twilight stuffed a bunch of her books during the war, after all.”

“So you’re back with the Followers as well?” Spike said, humming to himself as he penned the entry in. I nodded.

“The Followers are really trying to help ponies. I realize that now. I want to help ponies. I want to continue the work that Velvet Remedy started,” I said. Spike placed a claw to his chin, humming softly.

“You know... there’s one friend I’m missing here,” Spike said. I nodded.

“Lucky,” I said, smiling. Spike raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, the green mare,” he said. “Whatever happened to her?”

Ponyville

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I have to. I want to see the rest of the Wasteland, do some adventuring... help some ponies out along the way,” the green mare said. She smiled. “I still need to get used to this whole body thing.”

“That’s alright,” I said, grinning. Lucky stood across from me on the road outside of Ponyville. She wore a brand new set of barding, complete with holes to allow her wings to poke through. A revolver hung loosely from a harness around her neck. Spike had just left us, and the green mare had stated her intentions to leave as well. “I kind of owed it to you.”

“Well... I appreciate it,” Lucky said. She bowed to the others. “It was a pleasure to meet all of you. I wish we could get to know each other more, but I have my own journey to begin.”

“Take care of yourself, Lucky,” Violet said from my side. Lucky grinned and turned to start walking

off into the Wasteland. I pulled away from Violet's side, reaching out for the green mare. I stopped her in her tracks.

"Lucky. Just remember... life is what you make it. You've got a second chance here to do something incredible with it," I said. Lucky smiled.

"I plan to," she said. "Hey, maybe I'll make some of my own friends along the way."

"I'm sure you will," I replied. "Hey, maybe you'll meet someone cute. You never know what you might find." Lucky rolled her eyes at me.

"Oh sure, like that'll happen," she said. I poked her in the side.

"Oh come on, you're thinking too negatively. What's your poison? Pony, or something else exotic?" I asked, chuckling. Lucky's face went beet red.

"Star!" She exclaimed.

"Just trying to help!" I said, lifting my hooves. "I can't help if you don't tell me!"

"Well, if you must know... I'm kind of partial to griffons," Lucky said.

"Hmm... griffons... got nothing, sorry," I said, sticking my tongue out at her. "You know, in a different life, maybe we'd have..."

"Eww, no," Lucky said, playfully gagging. "No offense, but not the way my barn door swings."

"Eh, to each their own I guess. You like griffons. I like chocolate." I winked at her. Lucky groaned.

"Yes well, I really must get going. Can't have an adventure if you're standing around grossing me out," she said. I narrowed my gaze at her.

"Well... take care of yourself. I don't wanna have to come find you and help you again," I said. Lucky grinned.

"Yeah, last time you tried to do that, I died," she joked. I frowned. Lucky waved a hoof. "Uh... sorry. Bad form, I suppose. Too soon?" I frowned some more. "Oh come on, Star. I was only kidding." I broke out into a wide smile.

"So was I," I said. I reached in and hugged her close. "Thanks... for everything that you did. I never would've..."

"You don't need to say it," she said. "Thank you, Star. For everything as well." She turned and started walking, disappearing over the hill into the Equestrian Wasteland.

"Interesting," Spike said. "So the resurrection spell... it worked?"

"Like a charm," I said. "Don't ask me if I know it, though. Like Twilight said, as soon as I cast it, I forgot it. It was a one-time thing."

"Of course," Spike replied. "I think that about does it, doesn't it?" He put down his pen and scroll.

"I guess so," I said. Spike smiled, pushing up from his sitting position.

"Come with me," he said. "I want to show you something." I cocked my head at him in confusion, but followed him anyways. We made our way deeper into his cave, following a tunnel along next to a massive cable. It opened up into a gigantic cavern befitting Spike's great size. In the center of the cavern was a tree-like structure, a monitor and several pedestals. I gasped softly as I recognized them. The Elements of Harmony. They were all here. The necklaces shined in the light, along with the Element of Magic, its gleaming crown perfectly at home among the others.

"How long have you had these...?" I asked. "What is this thing?"

"This... is the reason to continue fighting the good fight," Spike said. "I haven't shown many ponies this... this device. This is Twilight's legacy to the world. In some strange moment of lucidity, she designed this... the Gardens of Equestria."

"The Gardens of Equestria?" I said.

"It's a megaspell," Spike said. "Designed to purge the Equestrian Wasteland of taint and magical radiation. I thought you should see it... to know that not everything Twilight did was bad." I smiled as I looked down upon the Element of Magic and then back up to Spike.

"And it requires the Elements to power it?" I said. "The Bearers?" Spike nodded.

"Once all the Bearers have gathered, they'll be able to power the spell. They'll fix the Wasteland," he said. I looked down at my hooves. Spark would have the power to save the world, just like she wanted... but it would be done the right way. In a roundabout way... she would give Equestria back to the ponies who needed it the most. It was poetic in a sense. I very nearly cried.

"There's one more thing I have to ask your favor of Spike," I said, glancing back up at the dragon. "I need to know about... about Celestia." Spike closed his good eye.

"It isn't pretty," he said. "Celestia left her body a long time ago at the end of the war. She transferred a copy of her consciousness into the S.P.P.'s Crusader Maneframe where Littlepip is." I shuddered at this. I remembered Stable 39, and the ponies who had been trapped by a crazed pony who had transferred her mind into the maneframe.

"Does that mean that she's... she's dead?" I asked. Spike shrugged.

"No telling, really. I've spoken with Celestia many times through the MAS Broadcast Systems, and she seems to be normal," he said. "I can even still send her things with my dragon flame."

"Can you... can you send her a letter for me?" I asked softly. "Twilight... Twilight wanted me to deliver a message to the pony she loved the most. I know... I know from all of what I remember of Twilight's memories... that was Celestia."

“A letter? I can do that,” Spike said. He lifted a claw, blowing a stream of green flame. It coalesced into another scroll, complete with a giant quill. I took a deep breath and I started to speak.

Dear Princess Celestia,

Once upon a time, there was a unicorn named Twilight Sparkle. A shut-in and introvert, her wise mentor sent her to Ponyville to learn the Magic of Friendship. And for a time, these friendships shaped the mare and provided her with the foundation she needed to become a Princess.

Then came the War. The war that killed Equestria, The Princess of Friendship was thrust into a conflict that corrupted even the virtues of Harmony.

We all know how that went. The megaspells dropped, killing millions. But Twilight... Twilight did not die. Stuck in the entity known as the Goddess, Twilight became a cold shallow image of herself. She did terrible things and corrupted many lives. Not only that, she allowed herself to become enthralled with the concept of old Equestria, of the harmony that we once shared. She became obsessed, driven by the past. It was that obsession that led to my existence.

I fell victim to Twilight's obsessions. I allowed her to guide my actions, and for that I nearly destroyed Equestria. It wasn't until faced with her own true nature that Twilight did the right thing in the end and moved on. She recognized, I believe through my adventures, what I now know to be true in my heart.

Friendship. Friendship never changes. The friendships that I have made over the course of the past year have shown me that everyone, no matter who they are, deserves a second chance. If we trust in our friends, and let their strength heal us, we can do anything. And though friendship in the Wasteland is difficult, if we extend our hoof and allow for that second chance, friendship will find us. There is no greater power in the world than the power of true friends.

And so, with my final words, I give you the final message of the mare known as Twilight Sparkle.

'I am at peace.'

Radiant Star, the 'Ministry Mare'

When I finished, Spike smiled, rolling the scroll up. He breathed a blast of flame onto the rolled up scroll. It disappeared in a flash of green light.

“That's all there is to it,” Spike said, wiping a stray tear from his good eye. “That was... beautiful, Star. Very moving. Twilight would have approved, I think.” I nodded.

“Thank you, Spike,” I said. “I think it's time for me to go now.”

“Safe travels, Radiant Star,” Spike said, saluting me. “Keep in touch.” I turned and began trotting towards the entrance of the cave. Violet and Sunshine sat waiting for me outside, keeping watch.

“Everything good to go?” Violet said. I nodded, looking back at the entrance to Spike's cave.

“Never better,” I said.

THE END

Author's Notes

The End. It's such a strange thing to finally be saying after two long years of writing. When I first started writing *Starlight*, I did not actually expect to still be writing it two years later, let alone to have it grow to the enormous 660k monster that it has.

If anything... I expected to not finish it whatsoever. I have a classic habit of starting things like this and then abandoning them. I'd gather to say that *Starlight* is the first thing I've truly finished in a long time.

The story has had its up and its down, for sure. It's not perfect. I don't think it ever will be. There will always be decisions I regretted (introducing Greed first in the way I did comes to mind), things I wish I'd have done differently, and items I wish I had covered more of. I realized pretty early on though, that if I spent all my time reworking things so they were absolutely perfect that I'd never finish the thing in the first place. So I pressed forward, continuing to work as hard as I could on it, to keep improving as I went along.

And then somewhere along the line, I found that I had an audience. You wonderful, wonderful readers that really enjoyed the stuff I was writing. It galvanized me in a sense. I was motivated to push forward.

And push forward I did. I met an incredible person who took such an interest in *Starlight* that not only became my editor, but more or less my co-author in this venture. This is as much his baby as it is mine. So here's to Wirepony, who's not just a random name on the internet. He's a true friend, and one I hope will continue to be so for a long, long time.

I was inspired to write this because I really enjoyed the alicorns in the original Fo:E and after having read both *Misfits* and *New Beginnings* (both of which were spiritual inspirations for *Starlight*). There weren't many fics out that had alicorns as protagonists, and I will admit that I chose Star to capitalize a bit on that. I don't recall where the idea of Twilight possessing a pony came from originally, but it certainly grew a lot along the way. Originally the major villain was going to actually be Discord, but after looking at it more objectively, the true villain of the piece became Twilight herself, something I am ultimately happier with. It lent itself better to the moral themes of second chances, of the power of forgiveness, and of something I hadn't truly realized was a big subtle theme of the whole story until the very end - Old World Blues.

I've been a Fallout fan for a long time, but I had only ever played Fallout and Fallout 2 when I originally read FoE. Playing through Fo3 and New Vegas the first time... it was exhilarating, and Old World Blues quickly became my favorite NV DLC. I think somewhere along the line, I channeled the meaning of that story - to have one's mind so stuck in the past that you can't see the present or the future - into *Starlight*. I'm not upset with this. In fact, I'm glad it ended up this way.

Before I get to my thank you's, I'd like to talk a little about characters. Some of them came out of inspiration from other sources, while others I came up off the top of my head. While I previously stated I regret introducing Greed the way I did (because it led far too many people to assume that I was crossing in Fullmetal Alchemist), I ultimately enjoyed what I did with the Seven Deadly Sins because they were fun themes to explore. The transition from Lust to Lilith came about when I knew that I was going to explore how the Sins became what they were (being one of the major players in the Chicacolt

arc), and I've never been happier to see a character grow like she did. The interactions between her and Patch as they went from antagonistic to full on friends was among the most awesome things I've ever put down to words.

And then of course... there's Steeljack. I knew pretty early on that somepony in the story wasn't surviving the end. Originally I had planned this to be Steeljack and then Patch died later while foaling, leaving Star and Violet to care for the foals. I realized later on that I wanted Patch to live, that having both die was so tragic that I didn't even want to write it. As well, Patch living gave me leave to be able to write a "Tales of Chicacolt" chapter starring her kids in the future.

I've got a few people to thank of course. Primarily, McMesser. McMesser joined this crazy ship after he started reading it and lended his creative talent to making clay figures of Star and the gang. Eventually he became a pre-reader, and along with Wirepony made his way to my home where we finally got to meet in real life. He's a great guy, and his choice of OC character inspired me to place the Smooze into *Starlight*, which led to McMesser wanting to write himself. I feel humbled a bit, knowing that I helped breathe another fic into life. McMesser probably has the least violent FoE fic out there, and it's really well done. I highly recommend it.

Then we've got Heartshine. Heartshine is a fairly recent addition to the pre-reader team, but she's been reading the fic for longer. Heartshine is another one of those awesome people that I got to meet in real life at the meetup we attended in Ann Arbor, MI, and she's a super wonderful person. She has a really awesome voice, and has recently started to lend that talent to recording a dramatic reading of *Starlight*. It's amazing, and you all should go check it out.

And last but not least, my wonderful wife, Lucky Star. As some can gather, the character of Lucky in *Starlight* is based on my wife's unicorn/pegasus character Lucky Star. She'd bugged me for a little bit to put Lucky in, and I originally had intended to only have her as a cameo. In the end, she actually became a fun character in addition to being somewhat crucial to the story, and I really enjoyed working with her. As for my wife herself, at the moment that I write this, she is pregnant with our firstborn, due in September 2014. I love my wife, I truly do. She has been incredibly supportive with this venture, and I thank her so, so much for sticking with me on it.

That being said, I only have one final group to thank. You guys. The readers. If you're here and if you're reading this, you've stuck it out. You've helped *Starlight* become what it is. Peeps like Mad_Modd, Deathpony, Aria, Solis, the infamous regolit, the incredibly super talented RinaSunshine (for his absolutely super incredible art, if you haven't seen it, you really should), and so many other people whose names I have probably forgotten but have all helped me along just the same.

Never forget that you are all awesome. All of you. And I thank you so much for reading this jaunt into the Equestrian Wasteland. I certainly hope you have enjoyed it. I know I have.

With that, it is time that I sign off. Star's story has finally come to a close, and while I am ultimately a mixture of sad and happy about this, as they say... all good things must come to an end sometime.

See you kids on the flip side,

- Volrathxp

Editor's Note:

Within shootin' distance of 670 _thousand_ words. I can't believe it. I've been chewing on this for just shy of two years. I've seen Star grow and progress, and volrathxp also. My own work has gone on hiatus, mostly due to job hopping, but I've been able to keep up the work on Starlight, and I would like to think that I've made it a better piece of fiction than it would have been. Vol has been an excellent person to work with, and a good friend. Even if he is chronically unable to ship things on time.

One of the biggest things I tried to do for Starlight was punch the action sequences into a more coherent form - this was inspired by the amazingly solid fight scenes from *The Ambassador's Son*, *For Want of a Dawn*, and *Treasure In The West*, all of which are highly recommended (though none are FoE fics). Aside from that, all it's taken is little nudges here and there to make Star the best presented lady she could be.

39 chapters, including the prologue, 7.5, and the epilogue. It's amazing to put the 'done' sign on something this large, even if we aren't done - we're going to go through with what we know _now_ and knock the worst of the dust off the first few chapters.

And then we're gonna stuff it through Heartshine, and time willing, she's gonna turn it into an audiobook. *Awesome*.

Seeya on the next project!

-Wirepony