

Fallout Equestria: Starlight

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."

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.

“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. I don’t want to, but...”

Violet nodded. “I thought as much,” she replied, snuggling in close to me. “If it comes to that, I’ll protect you, don’t worry.”

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.

“Where isn’t it safe for us?” Violet asked with a shrug. “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.

“You ran out didn't you?” Violet 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.

After most of the day and the dying light of the sun, after much crying and whining (mostly on my part) we finally came in view of the town of New Appleloosa. It was the home of one of the Wasteland’s most prominent figures: Ditzzy Doo. Ditzzy Doo was a pegasus ghoul 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 ghoul’s bright smile. I’d met her shortly after I met Violet, when we were on our way to Fort Knowledge the first time. 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 stallion’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...

* * *

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. They were always here for me.

"Who are you?" I growled, lifting Stargazer up and pointing it at the black pegasus.

"Mmm... you are cute when you're angry," the pegasus replied, licking her lips. She chuckled softly.

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,” I said.

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 nearly got there, but 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.

"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 sense.

“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.”

“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.

"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.

* * *

"Goooooooooooood mooooooooorning 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.

“Why would I be mad at you?” she asked, chuckling softly.

“Because of what happened with Lust... because she kissed me...” I stammered, not knowing really what to say.

“Oh. 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.

“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. 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 Ditzzy 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 Ditzzy 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.

"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 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 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.

"No my dear. We of the alicorn race are all sisters to each other, as we were once all children of the fake Goddess," the other alicorn explained. 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,” she said.

“Well umm... I suppose so...” I stammered, a blush forming on my face.

“And so modest too! What pray tell, can I assist you with, Ministry Mare?” the blue alicorn said.

“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!”

“What?” I scoffed, 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,” Violet said shortly. “If you’d rip your eyes off her flank for one second, you’d see that I’m right.”

“Well... you’re just being jealous and letting it cloud your judgment,” I said angrily. I stared at her indignantly. “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.

“Hold it, you two,” Steeljack interjected, stepping between us. “Let’s just calm down.”

“Right,” Patch added. “We have a mission, remember?”

“Exactly. We have to get to Fort Knowledge, so let’s just keep going,” Steeljack said.

Violet turned to the two earth ponies angrily. Their coats turned white from the glare. They stepped back a few paces.

“Or we’ll just let the two of you talk it out,” Steeljack replied, grinning sheepishly.

“Right, just you know... talk it out,” Patch added.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Violet said, before turning back to me. “Admit it, Star. Your eyes were glued to her plot the minute we walked in.”

“Were not,” I said. “Violet, please. Steeljack and Patch are right. We have a mission here. Remember? This isn’t like you. Please...”

“No,” Violet replied, her eyes cold. “I’m going to go find the inn. I... I don’t care what you do. Go do whatever.”

Before I even knew it she was 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. I started forward, 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.

"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.

"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," the mare said, shaking her head. "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.

“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,” Passion replied. She smiled brightly.

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 clopped 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 told Lust to attack you 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. “It was I who appeared in your dreams, wearing the shell of Twilight Sparkle so you wouldn’t suspect it was me. It was I who turned your lover against you. I wanted to separate you from your friends, and well... it certainly worked. It didn’t take long to worm my magic inside your minds, and force you to say those awful things. Your minds are weak, and my will is much stronger.”

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.

Author’s Notes:

Wow. This chapter really just sort of came out the gate really fast, and then took a bit of a side detour at where I wanted to end it. But, the detour ended up working a lot better than I had hoped for, so it’s all good! Somehow throughout the whole thing, it went from being 13.8k words to the whopping almost 15k it ended up being.

And now we have Lust and Pride entering the mix. Who are these mysterious ponies, and what’s their game? You’ll just have to keep reading to find out!

I am thrilled with the dynamic of Violet and Star’s relationship and portraying both its ups (see Chapter

7.5) and its downs. The two have grown quite a bit. As for Steeljack and Patch, expect more of their relationship to progress as well as more character development on their end very soon.

Once again, if you like what you've read here, leave me comments, upvote if you haven't, and fav if you haven't. And please recommend! I'm always looking for new feedback and new reader's perspectives! Also, shameless plug incoming but I do still have that tumblr, <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com> so please send Star your questions. She'll be happy to answer them!

As always I'd like to thank the IRC folk and the Gdocs people for reading my story. You are all awesome. Huge thanks to Wirepony, whose encouragement has been greatly appreciated. Take a little time after you're done reading all of this to go check out his story "[A Cut Above](#)". It's fun and amusing, and very enjoyable to read, so give him some love!

Big thanks to Kkat for creating this whole thing, this whole world for us to play in and put our hooves in the sandbox. Without you, none of this would have been possible.