

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 drahonequus.

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 anypony 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.

“Where will you go next?” Kirby asked.

I looked to Violet. She smiled brightly.

“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.

“Let’s go up to our room,” I said with a shrug, 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 draquequus. 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...” he 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 dragonequus 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 dragonequus 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 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,” I said.

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.”

“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.

“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.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

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 couldn't 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.

"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," she 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,” she 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?”

“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. “Freaky as fuck if you ask me.”

“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?”

“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, chuckling.

“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.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

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 fabglorious 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.

Rarity 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.

“Yes darling, I remember,” My host replied, nodding. “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 closer 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?”

“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,” Twilight 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,” she said coldly as she stormed out the door.

My host shook her head and sighed.

“I assume you heard all of that?” she said 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.

“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.

“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.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

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. “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.

“Manehattan 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.

-----

### **Author's Notes:**

Wow, this was a crazy chapter for me to push through. When I started writing this chapter, I was writing this and 7.5 at the same time and quickly outpaced that one (since it's a oneshot). This was a fun chapter to write. We got to see Star having some effed up dreams, Steeljack and Patch getting together, Daring Do and the Stable Adventure, and a hopefully gut-wrenching ending.

About the ending... it's something that has crossed my mind for a really long time since I started this story. An early suggestion from a reader cemented the idea, and I've always wanted to explore the concept of Twilight's spirit finding Pinkie's body and the terminal from the original FoE. Star hearing Pinkie's final message and then finding out that Twilight never received it was an important ending for me to accomplish in this chapter. Now, did Homage intentionally know that is what Star would find there? That my friends, we shall see in the future.

Once again, if you've enjoyed this story, and I certainly hope you have, please toss me an upvote, a comment (I like comments!), and a favorite if you're not favoriting already. It's greatly appreciated and any feedback at all is excellent feedback. I'd like to continue to thank a few folk, the good folks in the Gdoc who have provided fun encouragement to me for my ideas, as well as Wirepony who is always helpful in the IRC. I'd also like to continue to thank Kkat, for this amazing world she's provided to us. I really mean it when I say this has been fun. I'm looking forward now to Chapter 9!