

Fallout Equestria: Starlight

Chapter 23: For Honor and Glory

No, Spike. They're not who they are meant to be anymore. Their destinies are now changed, and it's all my fault.

Honor. When ponies say they fight for honor, what are they really fighting for? I believe that when a pony fights for honor, they're fighting for others. They're fighting for those who can't fight themselves. But what if a pony is fighting for glory, instead? Well... that pony is fighting for purely selfish reasons. They fight for their own, not even bothering to acknowledge the existence of the ponies they deem beneath them. They prefer to be exalted for their actions, not humbled.

I often wonder what the ponies of the past fought for. Did they fight for honor, or for glory? Or some strange combination of both? Did they intend for generations later to revere their actions, no matter how bad they were? Or did they not even care? Sometimes... I wish I knew.

And what about myself, what am I fighting for? Am I purely selfish, seeking only to return myself to a normal state of mind and body? Or am I fighting for the ponies of the Wasteland, no matter how poor or hurt they are?

I'd like to think it's the latter.

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The fires in the valley below had ravaged the town completely. Buildings were blackened and charred, the ground burned dark under the hellish fury of the flames. My eyes narrowed as I scanned the valley. I could make out very few bodies amidst the wreckage. Where was everypony? What happened here? Where were the Rangers? I growled under my breath as I tried to process what was happening.

"Where are the Steel Rangers now, Grey?" I said quietly. The stallion standing next to me looked up, clearing his tears with a single swipe of his armored hoof.

"I arrived here yesterday," the white pony replied. "The town was attacked last night, the vile Rangers used some sort of large robot to completely decimate the folk and smallholders. Three of their number opposed me, but I was triumphant and... Withdrew from the field. The Rangers withdrew shortly after the attack. Almost as if they were looking for something but didn't find it."

"I... see," I said, looking back at Violet. She had a horrified expression on her face. I stomped a hoof, getting her attention. "Violet, this isn't your fault. Do not even think it." She glanced up, a hint of tears forming in her eyes.

"But... I made the deal with them," she said.

"Yes, and *they* broke it," I replied. "What happened, happened, and now we just need to deal with it."

"What deal is thine friend speaking of?" Grey interjected. I glared at the white stallion.

"A deal with the Steel Rangers," I said. "We made a deal with them to leave this place alone before we entered Chicacolt." I could see my words troubled the stallion, but I didn't care. I was too pissed off to care.

"Thou made a deal with those vile creatures?" Grey responded, his face a mixture of confusion and disgust. "Why?"

"Because that's how the Wasteland works, Grey," I said angrily. "Or haven't you noticed by now? Moral ambiguity is the defining factor of this place. It doesn't care how good or bad you are, or how you live your life. It'll kill you either way." Grey grew quiet, processing my reply. He looked up at me and grinned.

"I can see that thou has much to learn, good Squire. It is not the land that defines a pony's morals. It is the pony that defines the land," he said. He turned away and looked back down at the burning valley. My eye twitched. *What the hell does he mean, 'Squire'??!!!* I screamed in the back of my mind. I started to speak, but stopped when several flashes of red appeared in my E.F.S.

"Shit, we've got company," I said, pulling out Stargazer. "And not the good kind either." The sharp retort of gunfire answered my warning, striking the rocks nearby. Violet floated out Thunder Flash, shooting off a blast of silver fire in the direction the gunfire came from. I snarled as a contingent of no less than ten Steel Rangers came into view. Several of them carried battle saddle mounted heavy anti-machine rifles.

"Halt!" one of them shouted, taking aim with his rifle and firing. The bullet tore through the air, headed right towards Patch. I growled, throwing up my alicorn shield, deflecting it back into the earth. The ground smoked from where the bullet struck. I lifted Stargazer and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up as many shots as I possibly could. Time slowly resumed, my minigun unleashing hell upon several of the anti-machine rangers. Metal splashed on metal as each round slammed home. Three of the rangers dropped to the ground, calling out in pain. Two of them rushed forward, letting loose with their assault rifles.

"Fan out, and take out as many as possible!" I called out.

Steeljack and Patch grinned widely as the two moved forward, working as one. Their shots struck true, but did very little in the way of lasting damage to the armored ponies. Nixis leaped into action on my other side, followed by Grey Knight. The white stallion carried some strange looking sword-like weapon in his teeth, the blade humming with pulsing blue energy. He reached his first target, a shotgun wielding ranger, and thrust forward with the tip of the weapon. The bladed appendage hit the ranger hard, forcing its way through the armor and right through the other side of the pony. Grey withdrew, dropping the ranger to the ground. They didn't get back up. Nixis slashed the nearest ranger to him, his claws cutting through the armor like a thick butter.

Several shots from an assault rifle came slamming home into my flank, the pain ripping through me like wildfire. I spun about, spraying a line of bullets in the direction the gunfire had come from. The Steel Ranger that had been attacking me dropped as Stargazer rendered his legs unusable. I glanced back at my flank. Pain spiked as a green glow flared inside the wound, and I had just enough time to panic before the bullet popped out of the hole. Violet's magic dropped the spent round and soaked into my hide, cutting off the bleeding and knitting the flesh together. Violet's horn glowed softly, and I smiled.

"Thanks," I said.

My lover nodded, lifting Thunder Flash and tossing more silver fire in the direction of two oncoming rangers. A glance at my E.F.S. revealed what I had dreaded. There were far more Steel Rangers than we could possibly handle. We needed to retreat and find someplace to hide. I knew that one of these rangers had already alerted Cotton Candy to our presence, and I wondered when this supposed robot that they had would show its face. I wasn't about to hang around and wait. We were caught off guard and even I knew when to run.

I glanced over at the others, shouting to get their attention. "Fall back! Everypony, fall back!"

Steeljack and Patch pulled away from their last opponent, supporting each other as they limped back towards me. Each one of them showed various bullet burns and in Steeljack's case several holes in his power armor. I grabbed onto them with my magic and began to carry them along, the familiar tickle of pain rolling into the base of my horn as I started running. Chaos reigned as we tried to escape from the Rangers.

"Over here!" I heard a voice cry through the carnage. I glanced over to see a head poking out from underneath a set of rocks. It was a white mare, her face twisted in fear and concern. It was Nurse Care! She was frantically motioning for us to move to her. I turned to the right, charging across the field towards the white mare. She was still shouting, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. The others were behind me, panting hard. We were starting to drag, and I could feel it in my bones. My horn screamed in pain and I did all I could to let down Steeljack and Patch easy before it flickered out, dropping the two earth ponies to the ground. I stopped and turned back to them. Violet trotted up, helping me to get our two friends up and running again.

"Watch out!" Nurse Care shouted. I looked up to see a glint of metal soaring through the air. My eyes widened.

"Grenade!" I screamed. I tried to reach out with my magic but the pain was too much. My horn flickered and the light around it died just as quickly as it had appeared. The silvery apple struck the ground and exploded, spraying shrapnel everywhere. I hit the ground hard, howling as I felt several pieces pierce my legs. A pair of hooves wrapped around me and began to drag me forward. I groaned, my vision blurred from the pain. I could feel the blood pouring from my sides where the shrapnel had dug in.

"Shit, you're heavy," a voice from above me said. It was Nurse Care. Was she dragging me? I tried to mumble something about how I wasn't fat, but it only came out as babbling.

"Star, just hang on, you're gonna be alright," I heard Lilith say. A loud slamming noise struck my ears and my eyes could only see black. A bottle forced itself between my lips and I felt the healing potion slide down my throat. I sighed as my vision began to return. A short jab of a needle hit my flank and I glanced back. A white mare knelt behind me, working diligently on where the shrapnel had dug in. Nurse Care looked up at me apprehensively, but she was smiling.

"Well, Ministry Mare, I'd be lying if I said you weren't a sight for sore eyes," she said. I rubbed the side of my head as she finished digging the shrapnel out of my wounds. I felt the cold magic of a healing bandage slapped onto my flank. My eyes widened as I remembered the others.

"Violet? The others?" I said.

"They're just fine, if you'll see," Care replied, pointing behind me.

I glanced back, seeing Violet and Lilith sitting with Steeljack and Patch. They were helping the stallion out of his power armor and patching up the two earth pony's wounds. Nixis and Grey Knight stood off to the side. The sounds of more explosions rang in my ears, even muffled by the walls of this hidey hole. Dust shook from the metal ceiling, but we appeared to be safe for the time being.

"Where are we?" I asked.

Nurse Care placed a hoof to my lips. "We're safe, but we need to keep moving. I don't know how long it will take the Rangers to find this tunnel, but when they do the others have orders to collapse it. At the end of this tunnel is the Stable," she rattled on, motioning for us to follow her.

“Stable?” I said, cocking my head as we moved to follow the white mare. “What Stable?”

“I forgot, you've been gone for awhile,” Nurse Care said with a chuckle. “A few weeks ago, we received a message from that fuck Cotton Candy. He wanted us to clear out or die where we stood. We didn't know why, until one of our own found a tunnel. It led down to the entrance of a Stable of all things.”

“So that's why the Steel Rangers wanted this place so bad?” I asked. Care nodded. A large metal door came into view at the far end of the tunnel. Two tribal ponies were guarding it. “So you guys survived the town burning?”

“You got that right, sugar. We knew it was only a matter of time before the Rangers came. So we moved in and locked it up tight. Been hiding down here for a week now,” she said. “But our resources are running thin, and the Rangers are getting closer to the location of the main entrance. Before long they're going to get in, and that damned robot of theirs will lead the way.” The two guards opened the door and we trotted inside. The walls looked just like every other Stable I'd ever been in, drab and gray,

I was worried about going into another Stable so soon after 180, but this place was completely different in feel. The lights were bright and constant, and ponies crossed our path on their errands, nodding to us as they went.

Nurse Care led us through the halls until we found ourselves in the Atrium. I was surprised at how small this particular Stable was. It seemed like we only walked moments to get there. The tribals, at least what was left of them, had gathered in the open area. A few of them smiled and waved.

“So what's this about a robot?” Patch piped up. She winced in pain but continued on. “Grey said that there was a big robot.”

“It's been a huge fucking problem. Every time we've tried to find a way to escape them, that thing has been there. Too many have been lost already,” Care replied as she led us down another hall away from the Atrium and towards where the signs said the Infirmary was. “It's apparently something that's pre-war, but other than that I don't know much more about it.”

The Infirmary was bare, what cabinets there were had been scavenged by the tribals. Care pulled out a few healing potions out of one of the drawers and handed them to Steeljack and Patch. The two drank down heartily, immediately looking much better. I groaned as I plopped to the ground. The others moved into the small room, finding someplace to sit as well. Violet leaned up against me, sighing.

“I just... I feel terrible about this, Care,” I said after a few moments of silence. I glanced up at the white mare.

“Why's that, sugar?” she asked.

“Because, we didn't get here in time...” I said quietly.

Nurse Care narrowed her eyes at me. “Now, don't you dare tell me it's your fault. Nopony knew this place was down here until we found it by accident. You didn't even know it existed until Grey here caught up with you,” she said, motioning at the white stallion. Grey nodded. “It's not your fault. Those fuckers were going to come here anyways. It was just a matter of time.”

“But...” I started to say.

“But nothing, Star. You helped this town out more than you hurt it. Without you going and getting those medical supplies for us, we wouldn't have lasted two weeks. You bought us the time we needed, a second chance,” Care said, raising a hoof. “Now. I want you all to rest for a bit. You're all in bad shape, and you almost bit the dust out there, Star. You're lucky I'm a good doctor.”

“What about the Rangers?” I asked.

“I wouldn't worry about them right now,” she replied. “Rest. Recuperate. We'll come up with a plan to get out of here then.”

“Thou wants to leave?” Grey interjected. “But that is... unfair. Thou should not have to leave thine home because of these vile creatures.”

“I wish I could agree with you, Grey, but we have no choice. Those Rangers are coming in, whether we like it or not, and I'd rather not be here when they do,” Care said.

“Well... then we'll take care of them,” I said. “We'll make them wish they hadn't come here.”

“Star... that's crazy and you know it. You saw for yourself. They're organized and deadly. No matter how good you are, you won't stand a chance,” Nurse Care said angrily.

“She has a point, Star,” Lilith said. “We barely scraped by out there. Even old Nixis over there was having trouble with those Rangers.”

“Then we get organized too,” I said. “This place has an armory right? We can use what we have available to us and get together a counterstrike.”

“And what about the robot? What if it shows up?” Care said.

“I... may have an idea there,” Patch said. “If I can get close enough to it, I might be able to reprogram it. I don't know much about robots, but if they're anything like small terminals and computers I could give it a shot.”

“I'm in,” Steeljack said softly. “But I agree with Star, we need to stock up in the armory. The better our firepower, the better our chances.”

“I'm with Star, to the end,” Violet said, her eyes narrowing at the doctor. “Besides... I owe you too. I made the deal with those fuckers, and I intend to make good on my promise to keep your town safe.”

“Mine Squire is learning, you see Nurse Care. She knows that these Rangers will not stop until thou are all dead. Mine lance and sword are ready for battle,” Grey Knight said.

My eye twitched at this. What was up with this whole squire thing?! I made a mental note to ask him about it later, but instead looked over at Lilith and Nixis.

“What about you two?” I said.

“I didn't say I was out,” Lilith replied. “I can beat up some Steel Ranger assholes any day.”

“You know my answer already, Star,” Nixis said.

Nurse Care rolled her eyes. “Crazy. You're all crazy,” she said, holding up her hooves. “But... if you really want to do this, fine. The armory has been sealed since we got here. We're not sure how to get in, so if you can get the door open, feel free to have whatever is inside.”

“You're in luck then, I just so happen to specialize in *breaking* locks,” I said with a grin.

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“Well... that's... definitely locked,” I said, looking at the sealed armory doors and groaning. The massive doors appeared to be made of a very thick steel, and as hard as I had tried to force them open with my magic, they weren't budging. I growled under my breath, igniting my horn again and latching onto the metal.

“Maybe we should try the terminal, sweetie,” Violet said, pointing at the screen attached to the door. I groaned.

“Alright, fine...” I said, feeling defeated as I let my magic drop. My love stepped up to the terminal, hooking her PipBuck up to it. I sat down next to her, rubbing my aching horn and watching her work. Patch and Lilith had opted to come with us, the others staying behind to rest. I hadn't let myself get too much relaxation. I wanted to get back out and take care of the Rangers. I owed it to Nurse Care and the rest of the townsfolk of Arlington. Patch and Violet tapped at the keyboard, both of them grimacing.

“The security on this thing is locked down pretty tight,” Patch said. “Whatever is in this place, they sure as hell didn't make it easy.” The mare looked back at Nurse Care, who was standing back down the hall next to Lilith. “And you said you couldn't find any way to open this in the Overmare's office?”

“Nothing. We searched all over the terminals, but absolutely nothing,” Care said. “It's almost like they wanted this to be sealed even from the Stable ponies... wherever they went to.”

“There weren't any bones, or bodies?” I said, cocking my head.

Care shook her head. “Nothing. Place was clear. The information on the Overmare's terminal was even more vague,” she replied. “So many of the files on the terminals were corrupted or deleted.”

“I see,” I said, looking back at Violet. “Any luck finding anything?”

“There's references to something, but everytime I try a password it tells me it's denied,” my love said, tapping in another set of keywords. The terminal flashed red. “Shit! Now it's locked out. Looks like we're not getting in any time soon.”

“Great,” I groused. “I wonder what's inside, that they locked it up like this.” Violet shrugged, disconnecting her PipBuck. The terminal suddenly lit up green.

“Well, now that's odd. It was just locked out a second ago. It's back on now.” Violet grimaced and reconnected the PipBuck. The screen flashed red again. “What the...?” My marefriend disconnected the PipBuck again and the terminal went back to its normal state. “Star, give me your hoof. I want to try your PipBuck.” I complied and my own device was connected to the terminal. Surprisingly, the screen stayed green.

"Is that... good?" I said. Violet grinned.

"It's... perfect. Apparently this terminal is set to lock out a specific PipBuck after too many attempts at a password, but if you hook another one up you can use it. I bet they did it like that to make it so ponies could still get in if somepony messed up the password," she said.

"So there's still a chance?" I said hopefully.

"Not much of one, but it's better than no chance," Patch said. "We still don't know how to crack the encryption, though." The green mare tapped a key and her eyes lit up. "Wait... we're thinking about this the wrong way here. The encryption is tough, no doubt about that. But instead of trying to break it, let's see if we can't find the right key."

"And how do we do that?" I asked. "I thought that's what we were trying to do...?"

"Yes... sort of," Patch continued. "Violet, are there any programs on there that are accessible without a password?"

"I... I didn't think to check," Violet replied. She tapped a key, bypassing the login prompt on the terminal. "Huh... there is. Just one, though. It says 'Games'."

"Click it. I bet that it's the right way in," Patch said.

Violet clicked the icon, and what appeared to be a series of foals games appeared on the screen. They were even complete with a bouncy purple pony character that spouted silly catchphrases. I was somewhat surprised that the character wasn't Pinkie Pie. These kinds of games seemed to be her thing.

"Are you... sure about this?" I said looking at the current game, where the player was supposed to match up face down cards from memory.

"Absolutely," Patch said. "Why else would there be this sort of program on here?"

I nodded. It made sense. There was no practical reason for a door terminal to have foal's games on it. It had to be a part of the door lock. "Alright then, how do we beat it then?" I said.

"Well... if it's anything like the foal games we used to have on our old computer, this should be a breeze," Patch said. "Let me sit down here and I'll see if I can take a stab at it." Violet shuffled over, letting the green earth pony at the keyboard. Patch began to tap and click, playing along with the card-matching game. "It looks like I've got three errors before the game restarts itself. So... let's see..." The screen lit up and showed her where all the cards were initially. She clicked two cards, coming up with a match. The bouncy purple pony on the screen cried out in glee as Patch continued on, tagging card after card. The green mare moved with inequine speed, progressing through the game easily. The screen lit up with confetti and fireworks when she clicked the last card pair. The terminal went dark as soon as the game finished.

"Well, did it work then?" I said, cocking my head. Before I could say anything else a loud clicking sound interrupted me. The door began to hiss and whirl, sliding forward and opening. Patch cried out triumphantly as she stepped out of the chair.

"See? Told you we just didn't have the right key," she said, grinning. "Now let's see what the heck was

so important they stuffed it away in here.”

Violet disconnected my PipBuck and we stepped up to the door.

“Care, you might want to stay out here, just in case,” I said. The white mare nodded as Lilith stepped up behind us. She smiled coyly.

“Took you long enough,” the black mare said. “Thought I was gonna have to beat up the door myself.”

I chuckled, stepping around the cold metal and into the dark armory. The massive room spread out in all directions. Shelves of items lined the walls, filled to the brim with weapons and boxes of ammunition. At the far end I could see several glass tubes. Inside of them were suits of combat barding.

“Alright, be on the lookout for more than just whole weapons. If there's any parts, I can use them to upgrade our other stuff. Well, everything except Stargazer. Even I'm not dumb enough to try and crack that thing open,” Patch rambled as she stepped into the room ahead of me. I nodded. A crackle of static greeted our ears and a loud blaring alarm stopped us dead in our tracks.

“WARNING! WARNING! INTRUDERS!! INTRUDERS!!” A computer voice echoed from inside the armory. *“DEPLOYING SECURITY COUNTERMEASURES... PLEASE WAIT...”* Ceiling panels slid away, revealing two banks of three laser turrets each. They circled around, spraying fire across the room at us. I threw up my shield instinctively, causing the first wave to deflect off to the ground. I floated out Stargazer and quickly shot a burst of bullets back at one of the turrets. It sparked and exploded. Five left.

“Everypony, get down!” I shouted. The turrets spun about, tracking where I was moving as I tossed myself to the right and dropped into E.S.A.T.S. Time slowed to a crawl and I started picking targets, queuing up as many shots as I could. When I was satisfied, I released the spell and Stargazer flew into action, spewing hellish fury at the turrets. Each shot struck with a spark, and eventually the entire array of turrets exploded violently. I stood carefully, preparing myself for anymore hostile activity. The alarm was still going off, but there didn't seem to be any more security. I sighed, glad that the only thing we had to deal with was turrets. A few seconds later, the alarm shut off. I glanced over to see Patch at a terminal nearby.

“Managed to find the kill switch,” she said with a smile. “That seemed to be the only security.”

“Seems... sort of lackluster doesn't it?” I asked.

“Well, you never got far enough in to step on the mines or activate the pitfall,” she said. “Now then, let's see what we've got here.”

We moved deeper into the armory, picking through the shelves. Numerous rounds of ammunition, some pulse and frag grenades, and multiple firearms ended up in our haul. Patch started rifling through the pile we had set up, pulling aside any scrap that could be used to modify our weapons. Nurse Care had been moving through the armory herself, picking out anything that the tribals could use, such as spare barding or any utility jumpsuits.

I trotted past the racks of combat armor, floating them out and adding them to the pile. I stopped when I came across a glass tube in the back of the room. A smile came to my face.

“Hey, Patch,” I said. “Check this out. You might want to call Steeljack down here. He'll want to see this.”

The green mare's ears perked up and she trotted over to see what I had found. She grinned widely and called over to Lilith. The black mare nodded and left the armory to go find Steeljack. Moments later, the stallion himself along with the others reappeared. Steeljack glanced inside the tube and grinned ecstatically.

Inside the tube was the most perfect suit of power armor one could have ever seen. Instead of the normally bulky nature of most power armor suits, this one was sleek. It was a stark gunmetal gray color, striped with blue highlights. It came with a helmet that sported two visor-like eyes. Attached to the battle saddle on the suit's back was a scoped assault rifle. Steeljack stepped forward, tracing a hoof on the armor.

"Wow... it's... it's incredible," the stallion said. "It's like... like nothing I've ever seen before."

"I don't think any of us would fit into that, Steeljack," I said, smiling knowingly at the stallion. "So... try it on!"

The stallion looked down for a moment and then nodded. He tapped some of the buttons on the armor, opening it up so that he could slip into the suit. The suit clasped itself around his body like a warm glove, the legs wrapping around his PipBuck as if it were always there. The helmet lowered onto his head, and the eyes lit up a fierce blue. Steeljack looked around for a few moments and then spoke, his voice crackling.

"This is... wow. This suit is so light, but I can feel how strong it is. And this rifle... it's just too much," the stallion said. He took a few steps, and I could just tell he was grinning inside the suit. Patch took a set of combat armor that she had slated for the scrap pile, and motioned for us to follow her. At the far end of the armory was an indoor firing range. Patch set the armor down on one of the target mannequins on the other side of the range. She hit a button on the wall, sending the target soaring back several yards.

"Come on, Steely, try it out," she said.

Steeljack nodded, turning towards the range and stepping up to the lane that Patch had set up the target on. The rifle turned about, aiming the weapon and firing. The bullet sang as it soared through the air, striking home and completely obliterating the mannequin's head and taking the combat armor with it.

Patch cried out with cheer. "Alright, that's awesome! What are you gonna call that armor?"

"What?" Steeljack's voice echoed out of the armor. "I... I don't know."

"Oh come on, you've gotta have a good name for it," Patch said.

"Well... I guess... if I had to call it anything... I think Tempest would be a good name, right?" the stallion replied.

"I think that's an awesome name," I said, smiling. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, how's about we get this stuff distributed. Patch, you do what you can to modify the weapons we have, and fix us up some better barding." Patch saluted, setting to her task. I glanced over at Nurse Care. "Care, if you'll come with me. We have much to discuss. I think I've got a plan to counter attack those Rangers."

The white mare nodded and trotted out of the armory as I followed behind. Violet and Grey Knight followed as well, leaving the others to sort through the armory's stock. We arrived shortly to the Infirmary, which had become our temporary home given the state we had come into the Stable in.

“So... what are you thinking of, Star?” Violet said.

“Well. We know a few things. We know that Cotton Candy probably knows by now who his Rangers nearly killed earlier. I'm almost certain that we can get to talk to him first,” I said.

“Talk? But I thought you wanted to wipe them out?” Nurse Care interjected.

“Yes, but the problem is, if we go out there guns blazing that robot of theirs is sure to show up immediately. No... we need to speak to Candy first, find out what the fuck he wants down here so bad,” I said. “I'm not saying I want to solve this non-violently, but if we can get him to talk, then we can set up an ambush.”

“Ohh... so while you've got him talking, we get ponies into position to ambush the Rangers in case things go south?” Violet said.

“That does... not seem honorable,” Grey said softly.

“And what does, Grey? Does getting these ponies slaughtered sound honorable?” I snarled, before breathing deeply and sighing. “Look, I'm sorry, but you have to understand. We don't stand a chance in straight up combat. I mean, sure... I've got some magic tricks, but even I can't take on a whole contingent of Steel Rangers by myself. Besides... this robot of theirs worries me. If it's capable of that kind of destruction, I'd rather not have to deal with it.”

“Thou art forgiven, Squire,” Grey said with a curt nod. “But if it were up to me... I would see those foul Rangers driven before me in honorable combat.”

“Well, you may just get that wish, Knight,” I said, grinning. “Cuz you're gonna be right there on the front lines with us.” I motioned for the others to come closer with a flick of my forehooves.

“So... here's the plan...”

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“Shit!” I shouted, dodging another spray of gunfire from a particularly nasty Steel Ranger wielding a minigun. Suffice to say, my plan hadn't gone well at all. Cotton Candy had indeed responded to our request for contact, but he wasn't interested in negotiations. We had even tried offering him the transponder the Minotaur gave us, but the stallion had known that it was a ruse after taking one hard look at the device. Thankfully, we hadn't managed to reveal the entrance to the Stable to the Rangers, but that didn't stop Candy from ordering his contingent to attack. Chaos rippled across the battlefield like heat waves from a wildfire, the metallic pings of bullets striking power armor sounding out among the cries of battle. The remnants of the town around us continued to burn as more fires were added due to the fight itself.

My plans officially suck, I thought as I spun about, igniting my horn and casting my gravity spell at the Steel Ranger. The Ranger's armor glowed for a brief moment but nothing happened. *What the...? What, does their armor have protection against magical enchantments or something?* I thought. Snarling under my breath, I lifted Stargazer to fight this pony minigun to minigun. Shot after shot slammed into the Ranger's side, putting the armor-clad pony to the ground. Its own fire sprayed wide as it fell, striking another nearby Ranger. I took a moment to take stock of the battlefield, using the moment's peace to find my friends.

Patch and Steeljack were working together as always, the two earth ponies using Patch's ingenuity and Steeljack's new armor to disable the Rangers. Steeljack would use Tempest's rifle to strip away a Ranger's

weapon, then Patch would flip a pulse grenade directly onto the Ranger's armor with her freaky earth pony skills. Even as another Ranger crumpled to the ground in a shower of sparks, I could tell they were beginning to get overtaken. Lilith soared high above, leveraging her flight abilities to dive and slash above the Rangers arc of fire. Occasionally the shrieking howl of the Bitch would send a missile into a group of Rangers, scattering them in an explosion of dirt and rubble. Nixis lumbered near to me, the hellhound clearly frightening enough of a combatant to keep several Rangers at bay. Grey Knight and Violet stood side by side, my love providing cover fire for the white stallion with Thunder Flash while he charged in, thrusting wildly with his weapon. His energy lance was amazingly effective, shredding weapons almost instantly and drawing huge showers of sparks when it dug into the sterner armor of the Rangers. Beyond our own group, several dozen tribal ponies who had wanted to fight stood vigilantly against the steel-clad Rangers. They were wearing combat armor that had been scraped together from the Stable's armory.

Despite how well it seemed that we were doing, it wasn't going to be good enough. We weren't trying to kill them, just keep them away. But things were beginning to escalate, and the Rangers just seemed to be everywhere. Driving them off was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. A bullet pinged off of my barding and I spun, growling as I floated out Stargazer. The pink stallion at the far end of the battlefield grinned widely. It was Cotton Candy. His visor was retracted, and his expression was... smug. He lifted his hoof in a jaunty wave, smiling as he spoke into his armor's radio.

"Cotton Candy, dammit!" I shouted, charging up at the stallion. "Stop this, already. I told you, we just wanted to talk!"

"I don't think so, Ministry Mare. After what you did in Chicacolt, I'm not willing to negotiate anything with you."

I startled, flaring my wings in shock. "Yes, I know all about you and your exploits. As much as I loathe that disgusting abomination, the Minotaur is still a useful source of information," Cotton Candy said. "No matter, though. What you did in Chicacolt, you won't be doing here. This Stable will be ours."

"There's not even anything good down there!" I cried out.

Cotton Candy sneered. "There's always something good," he said. "Water talismans, weapons, even Stable jumpsuits. Not to mention, more spark batteries and power cells to keep Equestria Prime running."

"Equestria Prime?" I said, cocking my head.

Cotton Candy grinned and pointed with his forehoof. A shadow fell over the battlefield as a loud clunking noise came sounding over the next ridge. My eyes widened.

A massive pony-shaped robot stomped into view, its legs armored with cold steel. It was larger than any other robot I'd ever seen before. Its body was a sleek gunmetal gray, with a single red tracking sensor where its eyes would be. It had no mouth, and I could see the cabling connecting the neck and legs to the main body. Emblazoned on the robot's flanks, much like where a cutie mark would be, was the symbol of two alicorns, one white and one blue, circling each other. The mark of the flag of Equestria. The robot scanned the battlefield for a brief second and took a step into the fray.

"Enemy threat assessment. Initiating strike sequence. Zebra scum must be annihilated," the robot proclaimed, in a voice that thundered across the battlefield. Its tracking sensor lit a fierce red, a blast of laser fire emanating from it. It struck one of the tribal ponies with a flash, turning the poor pony into nothing but sizzling goop on the ground.

"You see, Ministry Mare. I'm going to get what I want, and I want that Stable," Cotton Candy said. "And Equestria Prime here is going to ensure my victory." The robot strode forward, its hooves clunking loudly. I growled loudly, turning back to Cotton Candy. The stallion grinned, not even remotely afraid of me. "Yes, you see how futile your efforts are? We found that hunk of metal in a nearby abandoned pre-war bunker, and now it serves us."

"This isn't over, Candy," I said, pulling away from the armor-clad stallion and flapping my wings and taking to the sky. "Fall back! Everypony, fall back!"

The robot continued to move forward, spraying blasts of laser fire everywhere it looked. My friends began to pull back towards the Stable entrance, doing the best they could to keep the Rangers and the robot at bay. The tribal ponies with us now numbered less than half, many having fallen to the Rangers or obliterated by the giant metal pony.

"Threat assessment: minimal. Acquiring targets," the robot rumbled in its monotone voice. Its eyes flashed, firing another round of lasers and hitting two more unlucky tribals. The thing lifted its head to the sky, where I was flying around and monitoring the retreat. A blast of laser fire whipped past me, and I growled, floating out Stargazer and taking several shots at the massive robot. The majority of them went wide, but a few struck home. Unfortunately they didn't seem to do any good. The thing ignored my fire and took another massive step forward, spreading chaos and destruction wherever it went. Cotton Candy just stood and watched as the metal monstrosity fired another laser beam, melting three more tribal ponies into goop.

"Star!!" Violet shouted, waving at me.

A laser blast struck the ground next to her, causing her to jump back. I snarled, soaring down to my friends and tossing up my alicorn shield. The next blast of laser fire struck the shield with intense force, pushing me back. Thankfully the shield held. It broke under the next blast, but managed to deflect most of it. I reached into the back of my mind, pulling out Shining Armor's shield spell to the forefront. Already feeling my horn begin to sear with pain, I released the spell, the purple wall appearing in front of the retreating ponies. I felt every punch of the laser fire as it struck the shield, but I was able to keep it going. I started shifting backwards towards the burning section of the town that held the entrance to the Stable.

I hissed in pain at the burning in my horn, every step back a mile of effort. I tried to keep moving, but it was difficult. I felt Violet's magic tugging on me, and I spared a moment to glance back. My love was doing her best to keep me moving along, her horn glowing a soft green. She grimaced, but kept up her spell. I looked back at the advancing horde of Rangers, the Equestria Prime robot now at the forefront. I knew somehow it wasn't going to be enough. Eventually I couldn't keep up the shield spell and the robot would get through our defenses. I only hoped that we would make it to the Stable's entrance before that happened.

"Target engaged. Detecting high resonance shielding, compensating," I heard the robot say above the chaos. The thing's eyes lit up a solid blue and fired another blast of fire at my shield. I struggled beneath the barrage to keep the spell going, but I was feeling drained. I groaned as the shield dissipated, holding a hoof to my horn. It burned fiercely, and my vision went black for a second. Shaking the blurriness out of my sight, I growled loudly.

"Keep going!" I shouted hoarsely. We were roughly ten feet from one of the concealed entrances to the Stable. Laser fire hit the ground around us, igniting the earth in a blaze of hell and fury. I could see the ground beginning to lift behind us, the tunnel opening up to allow us entry. Nurse Care stood at the entrance, watching with fear in her eyes. She was shouting at the retreating force as the tribals filed down into the tunnel.

“Hurry up!” Nurse Care called.

Steeljack and Patch dove into the tunnel after the tribals, followed closely by the rest of my friends. Violet helped me hobble into the tunnel's entrance, and I managed a brief smile at the white mare. Nurse Care smiled back.

Then she was gone. She didn't even get a chance to scream. A laser blast struck the tunnel's entrance, completely obliterating the white mare. A pile of glowing goop hit the ground in her place. My eyes widened as the tunnel began to shake around us.

“Care!!!” I cried, scrambling to where the glowing remains of the mare were. Tears filled my eyes and I glared at the advancing Rangers and lifted Stargazer. My horn burned with the fury of a thousand suns, but I didn't care. All I cared about was seeing the Rangers pay for what they had done. “You... I'll fucking kill all of you!”

“Star, get your head together!” Violet shouted, grabbing onto me with her own magic. “There's nothing you can do for her now!”

“I can tear these assholes limb from limb!” I snarled, trying to pull myself free of my love's telekinesis. Violet grunted and pulled harder.

“Star, if we don't pull back down into the tunnel now, we'll lead the Rangers right into the Stable! More will die!” she argued, her eyes flaring with rage as she strained her horn more, yanking me back into the tunnel.

I took one last look at the glowing goop on the ground and sighed angrily before turning to follow Violet. My horn seared in pain, and I panted with the effort it took to just limp along with Violet. We made it eventually to the shaft that would take us back down into the Stable, where Steeljack and Patch waited. Violet shouted something, but I didn't exactly hear what it was. The tunnel behind us began to rumble as the explosives that we had laced inside of it began to go off. Stone and rock tumbled down, sealing the passage and hopefully taking a few of those asshole Rangers with it.

I glanced behind me and gave up a silent prayer before trudging into the shaft after the others. *Luna... if you're even real... please protect her in the afterlife... she deserves that much.* My prayer went unanswered as I turned back to the long walk down the tunnel.

* * *

The Infirmary seemed lifeless without Nurse Care, I had decided. With the mare's demise, the morale of the rest of the tribal ponies had waned considerably. My horn still hurt like hell, and we were currently licking our wounds, so to speak. Violet and the others were sitting in the far corner, looking over the maps of the area. They were talking about a counterattack. I sighed, standing.

“Violet, I'm gonna go lay down for a little bit. Let me know when you've got something,” I said, my voice dull.

Violet looked up and nodded, trying to put on a smile. I trotted out of the Infirmary. I couldn't stay there. All I could see was Care disappearing in a flash of light. I closed my eyes and shook the thought away and began to walk. Finding an abandoned room in the living quarters of the Stable, I stepped inside and plopped down on the dirty but still functional mattress. I sighed and closed my eyes, attempting to meditate. I had tried

several times already without Envy, but every time felt like grasping at mental straws.

I let out a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling to try and slow my thoughts down. Stray thoughts of Twilight and Spark filled my mind, preventing me from getting close to true meditation. I groaned, opening my eyes. Why was this so bucking hard? Why couldn't I wrap my head around this?! Sadly, I knew why. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw them. I couldn't keep my mind off of the two. Twilight... infuriated me as much as she intrigued me. What could have driven a mare like her to the depths that she had plumbed. Was I so different? It seemed like all I had seen lately was death and more death. I had caused much of it myself. I felt horrible, and couldn't even begin to wrap my mind around this whole meditation thing because of it.

I sat up, placing a hoof to my temple. My horn was still burning slightly. I was certain the burning ache wasn't helping me meditate. A knock at the door caught my attention. I looked up, seeing Patch standing there. She smiled.

"Hey, I found something I think you need to see," she said, motioning for me to follow her.

I stood and sighed, but complied. We walked out of the room and down the hall, but not towards the armory. The twists and turns of the Stable's featureless hallways met our steps along the way. I cocked my head as we rounded another corner.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Overmare's office," Patch replied. "I was doing some hunting around the terminal that Nurse Care --" I winced at the mare's name. Patch faltered for a moment, but continued. "The terminal that they had said there was nothing on. Well, they were wrong. There's something on there, and I think it explains why the Rangers want in here so bad." We soon arrived at the office, pushing open the door. The terminal inside was lit up, showing a full map of the Stable. Before I could say anything, Patch hit a few buttons on it, bringing up a menu. "The reason they didn't find anything was because this terminal was just like the one on the armory door. It was locked by a series of foal's games."

"Foal's games?" I said.

Patch nodded. "Perusing the logs on the terminal, this Stable was meant to house children. That's why everything is so much smaller. There must have been some older ponies too, but very few," she said. "Chaperones, probably."

"But wouldn't a foal know how to play these games?" I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

"They would know how to play, but not necessarily how to *win*," Patch said. My eyes widened as I realized she was right. "And for any--"

I held up a hoof. Patch stopped talking, looking at me. I felt my face twist as I tried to make words out of the horror that had just popped up in my thoughts.

"Patch... What happened to the children when they grew up?"

Patch paled, her eyes going wide. Taking a step away from the terminal, she looked down at it as if it was poisonous.

"I... I don't know, Star."

“What? Doesn’t the terminal say anything about what happened to them?” I said, pointing at the monitor.

Patch shook her head solemnly. “The logs only go so far. The rest of them are corrupted,” she said. “I have absolutely no idea what happened to the inhabitants of this Stable.”

We stood silent for a long moment, staring at each other. Patch closed her eyes with a shudder, and I stepped forward to lay a comforting hoof on her shoulder. As much as I hated to just ignore this, the past had to take second place to the future.

“Patch, I hate to say it, but we just don’t have the time. Let’s just worry about this later. Tell me, what did you find here?” I said.

Patch tapped a few more keys, bringing up several diagrams. They were designs for a robot. A robot we were all quite familiar with.

“Equestria Prime?” I asked.

“Designs, schematics, the whole kit ‘n kaboodle. It’s all here,” Patch said. “I think that Candy must only have the robot’s basic functions up and running. If he had access to this...”

“He could get all of its weaponry and functionality working,” I finished for her. The other mare nodded. “So... this is bad.”

“Very,” Patch said. “Based on the logs, Equestria Prime was supposed to be a shining light in the darkness of war. The first of its kind. It was a joint effort between the Ministry of Technology and the Ministry of Peace.”

“But I thought Fluttershy’s Ministry wanted to end the war peacefully? Why help design a tool of war?” I asked.

“My only guess there is that Fluttershy thought if the robot was fighting, it could save ponies who would otherwise be dying on the battlefield,” Patch said. “All of these schematics and data had to have been put into this Stabled before it closed up. It had to have been a backup so that if the original bunker the robot was housed in was compromised the data would be worthless.”

“And of course, with the tech the Rangers have amassed, they mostly figured it out on their own,” I said, drawing the same conclusion Patch had. “So, Cotton Candy found out that there was more to this thing, and wanted more control over it?”

“That sounds about right,” Patch said. “Looking over the designs of it, this thing meant serious business. Applejack really put a lot of thought into its design and what it would do for the war. If the Steel Rangers got ahold of this information... I shudder to think what they could do with it.”

“Does it give you anything on how to reprogram the damn thing?” I said. Patch looked back at the terminal, grimacing.

“Well...” she said. “It’s gonna take me some time to process it all, but if I can get near that thing, I should be able to access its neural network interface and attempt to reprogram it. I really won’t know until I’m

in front of it.”

“I'd say that sounds like a bit of a dangerous plan,” I said. “Getting close to it is going to be no easy feat.”

“If I may, I may have an idea on how to do that,” a voice said from the door, startling both of us. I looked up, seeing Grey Knight standing there. His eyes were cold and he had a smile on his face.

“Grey?” I said. “What idea?”

“It's very simple, mine Squire. As thou have already pointed out, getting near the robot in face to face combat is quite difficult. But...” Grey said, pausing for a moment. “What if I were to give thine friends a chance to sneak young Patch here onto the metal pony?”

“What do you have in mind?” I said.

Grey flashed a smile once more. “I intend to challenge this Cotton Candy to a duel,” he said matter of factly.

“You want to do *what?*!” I exclaimed.

“We will send a message to the vile Rangers, formally challenging Candy to honorable combat. The stakes will be the Stable, with the promise that the robot will be shut down during combat,” he said. “Of course, this is but a ruse. While I am dueling, the young miss Patch will sneak onto the robot and reprogram it.”

“Grey, I appreciate you putting yourself out there like this, but isn't this kind of against your whole... honor code thing?” I said.

“It appears I myself still have lots to learn from thou, faithful Squire. For these ponies, I would lay down mine life to see them safe once more. I owe it to Miss Care,” Grey replied coolly. “Dost thou not think I can handle it?”

“No... I just...” I started to say, my mind flashing back to Nurse Care's final moments alive. “I just don't want to see somepony I consider a friend dead again.”

Grey nodded before closing the door. As he trotted away I swore I heard him say 'Me too.' I sighed, looking over at Patch. The green mare's lip trembled.

“Wow...” she said. I waved a hoof in front of her face, getting her attention. She blinked and stared at me, quickly regaining her composure. “Sorry, just... that was really brave of him.”

“Either really brave or really stupid,” I snorted. “I'd better get back to the others and tell them what's going on. When do you think you can be ready?”

“Shouldn't take me more than a few hours,” Patch said, returning her attention back to the terminal.

I nodded and smiled. “Good, because I have the feeling we're going to need every bit of help we can get,” I said, trotting out of the office.

* * *

"I must admit, I am quite intrigued by your offer," Cotton Candy's smug voice rang out over the Stable's radio. It had taken a few attempts to get ahold of the Steel Ranger, but we finally managed to get him to respond. Grey had done much of the talking, issuing his challenge to the Ranger. "And how do I know that I can trust your word on this... challenge?"

"You have mine word as an honorable stallion, and as a Knight of the Holy Celestial Order," Grey replied. "If you lose, you will leave this place. If I lose, the ponies of this town will vacate the Stable peacefully and allow you access."

"And what's to stop me from just taking it from you?" Candy challenged. I nearly groaned. The stallion was insufferable.

"I would expect better from an honorable opponent such as myself. The Steel Rangers pride themselves on their code of honor, do they not?" Grey said. The radio went silent for a few moments and my breath caught in my throat. I halfway expected the stallion to decline.

"Accepted," Candy said finally, lifting the awkward silence. "Equestria Prime will be shut down, and kept in our camp. We shall each bring three ponies to bear witness to this challenge, which shall take place tomorrow at noon."

"Acceptable," Grey Knight replied, hitting the button and cutting off the radio transmission. "There. It's done."

"I still think you're a mite crazy for doing this," Steeljack said. "But if it gives us the edge we need to beat these Rangers, I'll do what I can to help."

"Have you decided who you want to come with you?" I asked.

"Mine faithful Squire, thou shalt join me as witness," he replied, motioning to me. I rolled my eyes at the mention of me as his Squire once more. "I would also appreciate it if Steeljack and Nixis would join as well." The hellhound and the earth pony nodded in response. "Excellent. Now, if you shall excuse me... I must prepare for the trials ahead." Grey trotted out of the communication room, leaving us alone once more.

"Alright, that leaves Patch, Violet, and Lilith to get into the camp and reprogram that robot," I said. "Based on what we know from Lilith's surveillance, the Ranger camp is located here." I pointed at the crudely drawn map on the table. A red x was marked on it.

"Violet, I want you to hang outside of the camp and stay low. You're backup support in case anything goes wrong," Lilith said. "I'll fly Patch in and drop her off onto the robot. I should be able to fly silently enough to get her in and out."

"Patch? How's progress on the program?" I asked.

"I think I've got a fair idea on what to do," she said. "I won't know for sure til I'm in Equestria Prime's computer core, but I should be able to do it."

"Good enough for me," I said. "Just remember, if you can't reprogram it, use the explosives and blow that thing to kingdom come."

“Are you sure this plan will work?” Nixis said, the hellhound shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I’m not doubting you, Star... I just worry that Cotton Candy will expect the deception.”

“We’re going to have to try, my friend,” I said, placing a hoof on the hellhound’s shoulder. He smiled toothily. “For Nurse Care and for the ponies of this town. We owe them much, and I intend to rectify my mistakes. Now then... I am going to rest.” I trotted out of the room, heading towards the Atrium and the rooms that we had claimed as our own. A few tribal villagers passed by me, averting their eyes as they walked on. The villagers had become noticeably scarce since Nurse Care’s death. None of them had dared approach us, and I understood why. They felt we were responsible. I certainly felt responsible. I sighed, pushing open the door to our room and plopping on the bed. I closed my eyes, letting myself fall away into dreamland.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The same scene kept playing over and over in my dream. Nurse Care was shouting at me one minute, and the next... she was gone. Then she would reappear and it would happen all over again. I kept watching and watching, unable to stop it. I screamed until my throat was raw.

“So... this is what one of your nightmares looks like,” a voice said, cutting through the agonizing pain of watching Care die. I glanced up, seeing a purple alicorn hovering over the scene. She smiled softly at me.

I tried to say something, but my voice was silent. Twilight landed in front of me, placing a hoof up and dissipating the memory. The dream world went black for a moment, returning in a flash with the familiar scenery of the mare’s library. The purple mare turned and ignited her horn, fixing several of the books that had fallen seemingly in her absence.

“I apologize for the interruption into your dreams, Star, but I needed to talk to you and you don’t need to do this,” Twilight said. “You can speak now, by the way.”

“Why? Why did you stop it?” I said angrily.

Twilight snorted. “Because you know damn well that it wasn’t your fault,” she said. “You didn’t bring this upon these ponies anymore than I did.”

“It is my fault! I led them out and I got them all killed!” I shouted.

“Star, please understand. You helped these ponies. You’re helping them now. Don’t let this get you down, you have to keep moving forward,” Twilight said, plopping to her haunches and turning to face me. Her lavender eyes sparkled in the soft light of the library. “Besides, there are bigger things going on that need your attention!”

“Is that all you brought me here for? A pep talk?” I asked, snarling.

“No, not really. I wanted to talk to you about something,” Twilight said. “Your magic. I’m sure you’ve noticed by now that you are running into magical burnout.”

I opened my mouth to scream at Twilight, but stopped and made myself let go of my anger. Yelling at Twilight wouldn’t benefit anyone.

“I... I have,” I said softly. “Everytime I try to access certain spells, it feels like my horn is being set on fire.”

"I figured as much. It's as I suspected. Spark left something behind before she left you. Something that's causing the burnouts," Twilight said.

"She did what?" I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

Twilight nodded. "I believe that whatever it is, it's one of the things that is responsible for the decay of our connection," she said. "Regardless... I felt it was prudent to approach you about this."

"Is there anything that I can do about it?" I said.

"Right now, I'm not sure. I'm still trying to locate the photonic spell resonance that's causing the problem. It keeps shifting between sub-quantum space/time and ---" Twilight started to say before I coughed. She chuckled and sighed. "Right. Equestrian. I'm having problems trying to find the cause of your magic drain. Better?"

"Better," I said. "So why now? Why interrupt my dreams?"

"Like I said before... you looked like you needed it," Twilight replied. "This connection between us... I'm feeling your pain just as much as you feel mine through my memories. This was... this was important to you."

"I watched somepony I made a promise to die, and there was nothing I could do about it," I said, an edge of anger returning to my voice.

"And yet, you are not truly at fault. It was no action or failure to act of yours that killed her," Twilight said. "Here you are Star, still moving forward. Don't ever forget that. You are stronger than you think you are. Now... if we're going to solve this problem with your magic, you are going to have to clear your head and get it in the game. Only you can undo the thing blocking it."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

Twilight smiled coyly. "First things first," she said. "This block is being caused by a foreign matter that Spark left here when she escaped your body. In order to get rid of it, you're going to have to face it. It won't be easy, but I know that you can do it." She motioned with a hoof, pointing at a door in the back of the library. It led down to the tree house's basement level. "There. You'll find the block down in the basement."

"Are you sure about this?" I said hesitantly.

Twilight nodded. "Trust me," she said.

I sighed and trotted past the purple alicorn. I reached out with my magic, grasping the doorknob in a soft purple glow. The door opened, revealing a set of stairs that went down. It seemed like they went on forever. Sighing again, I started down at a brisk trot, making sure to watch where I stepped so that I didn't trip. The stairs curved, turning into a spiral that led down into darkness. The further I moved, the less light that I had available to me. I finally reached the bottom, my hoof striking wet concrete. I nearly slipped as I moved out into the dark and dank room that stretched out before me. My eyes widened.

It was the maintenance level of the Ministry of Technology hub. The sprawling labyrinth of pipework tunnels lay before me. I shook my head, remembering quite clearly what had happened here.

"No..." I whimpered softly. "No, no, no... Not here..." Tears filled my eyes, and I nearly couldn't keep moving. I hung my head for a brief moment before picking myself back up again. No. I couldn't stop now. It was too late to go back. I needed to see this through to the end.

A foul stench assaulted my nostrils from deep within the halls of the complex. Snarling and snapping sounds filled the air as I pressed forward. Water dripped from the old pipes onto the concrete below me, the plip-plip accompanying the soft *clip-clop* of my hooves. Where was this supposed block at? Somehow deep in my heart I already knew where it was. The tunnel I was following rejoined the main shaft, and it was there that I saw it. Two ghouls crouched in the middle of the tunnel, feasting noisily on the body of a green and purple pony. She was whimpering as the two ferals bit into her, her eyes locked directly on me.

"Why...?" the mare choked out through the blood, her voice raspy. "Why did you leave me...?"

"I didn't... I didn't leave you..." I replied, turning my head to try and look away from the green mare. Every time I tried however, I found my attention being brought back to her. She had stood up, the two ghouls still continuing their feast. Her mane was tattered and pieces of her flesh were simply missing. Her eyes were soulless, filled with darkness and rage.

"You **LEFT ME!!!**" the creature shouted. "You're pathetic! A weakling! Failure! You don't deserve to live!"

"No... I'm sorry, please..." I said, dropping to the ground in front of the thing. "It wasn't... Wasn't my fault... please..."

The zombified mare howled, her raspy voice lending an inequity feeling to it. She moved forward, the two ghouls moving with her somehow. She appeared within a few inches of my face, rage painted all over her face.

"Wrong! You're wrong! It's all your fault! You left me... you left Nurse Care... you left Cranky, Diamond, and everypony else that you care about! You left them to DIE!!!" the thing growled.

Tears filled my eyes as I tried to move away from the beast. Was this what was blocking my magic? Did I truly blame myself for everything that had happened to those close to me? I realized that she was right. It was my fault. I was to blame. The thing moved closer and closer, and I sat there, ready to let it take me. Take me to where to I could no longer be blamed.

"No," a voice shouted, cutting through the air like a knife. I looked up, seeing the perfect vision of the mare I had lost. Her purple mane fell in waves across her pristine green coat. Lucky's brief smile was a beam of sunshine chasing away the shadows, a breeze blowing away the cobwebs. All too soon it faded, and Lucky glared at the zombified version of herself. "You're wrong. It was never your fault. I chose to be here. I chose to become Star's friend. I chose my fate. Just like all the others. We all chose. We all chose to believe in the Ministry Mare."

"L-L-Lucky?" I said, scrambling to get away from the ghoulish mare. "What are you...?"

"I'm not *really* Lucky," the green mare said. "I'm the part of your mind that's rationalizing this thing's existence." She pointed at the ghoul-Lucky. "Star. You can do this. Stop her. Show her what it means to know love, to know friendship. All of us, all of those you've lost that you think you are at fault for... we're all here, we're all rooting for you."

"But I... I left..." I said softly.

"And since when did you get to make the decision that included us in the first place? Like I said before. We all chose to be here," Lucky snapped. "We all came of our own volition. Sure, it was you that drew us here, but we stayed because we wanted to. But in order for us to give you strength, you have to learn how to give yourself strength. Now please... let us help you, for Celestia's sake!!"

"Lucky, I --" I started to say.

The green mare stomped a hoof, startling me. "No, Star. No excuses. Stop crying about what's gone wrong, and think for one second! Think about Violet, about Patch, Steeljack, Nixis, and Lilith! Think about all those ponies back in the city," she said. "Most of all, think about me. Don't give up, and don't give in. You have to... for us."

My eyes burned with tears as I stood to face the pristine mare. I nodded silently.

"O-O-Okay," I stuttered. "I... I will."

"Good, now get ready. You need to overcome this thing, and it isn't going to be pretty. But you have to do it, or else you'll never be able to move forward and face Spark," Lucky replied.

I turned away from the green mare, glaring at the ghoulish specter in front of us. It howled and sucked at the air violently, each moment descending further into pure rage and madness. I put a hoof up and flared my horn.

"Stop. Begone foul beast from my mind," I said, grasping the thing with my magic. It howled louder, snarling and snapping as it fought against the telekinesis holding it in place. "I am the sum of my friends. They give me strength. For those I've lost, and for those I still hold dear I will banish you!" The light from my magic overwhelmed the monstrosity, until finally it was no more. The dripping of pipework was all that was left of the ambient sound, and the foul stench lifted from the air.

"Good job, Star," a familiar voice said. "I knew you could do it."

I glanced back, seeing Twilight there instead of Lucky. I narrowed my gaze at the purple mare as I realized I was back in the library.

"You knew?" I asked.

Twilight hung her head and nodded. "I knew that this would test you greatly, but I had every confidence that you would succeed," she replied, smiling.

"So it's gone now?" I asked.

"Yes. Can't you feel it? The connection between us... it's stronger now that the blockage has been removed," Twilight said, nodding.

I closed my eyes, feeling the spirit mare's presence. She was right. Where there had been just a hint of her magic, it was now flooding my senses, overwhelming them even.

“You've given us a bit of time, Star. The connection will still degrade, but now that you've slowed the rate of its decay, we can take care of Spark properly.”

“What about the burnout?” I said, cocking my head.

“You will have to acclimate yourself to using the new power levels available to you, but the blockage being gone should allow you to experiment without fear of burning your horn out,” Twilight said. “However, there is still a chance of damaging or injuring yourself if you overuse such spells, so practice with caution.”

“I... Thanks, I guess,” I said, trying to smile.

Twilight nodded. “Now... it's time for you to awaken. You have much to do, Ministry Mare...” she said as the world around us filtered into nothingness.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke with a start, realizing where I was and wondering just how long I'd been out. The room was still dark, and a warmth next to me made me realize that I wasn't alone. I sighed softly as I glanced down at the green mare snuggling up next to me. I smiled. I felt good. Alert and rested like I couldn't remember being, not since I'd left my home in Fort Knowledge. The encounter with Twilight had given me a new perspective, and the removal of the block had me feeling bursting with energy. I wish I understood the purple mare better, but every time I tried I couldn't quite place where she was coming from. She acted like she wanted to help me, but she wanted to kill Spark. I couldn't just let that come to pass.

“Star?” Violet said as she awoke, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Hello, my dear,” I said softly. “How long was I out?”

“For a while,” she replied. “The others are in the Infirmary, getting ready. It's almost time to go.”

I nodded, pushing myself up away from my love. She stood as well, lifting her things with her magic. I grabbed Stargazer and we exited the room. A short walk later and we arrived at the Infirmary. Nixis and Steeljack stood outside the room with Grey Knight. The white stallion nodded curtly at our arrival.

“Ready to go?” I asked. Grey nodded solemnly. I reached down and nuzzled Violet closely. “Be careful out there.”

“You too,” Violet replied, planting a kiss on my cheek and trotting down the hall after Grey and the others.

The armor-clad stallion led us through the drab gray of the Stable's hallways to the main entrance. None of the tribal ponies dared to approach us as I pressed the button opening up the large gear-shaped door. The door hissed as it slid away, revealing a dark cave tunnel. This particular Stable was cleverly disguised beneath a foal's school in the town. Granted, said school was now burnt to the ground mostly, but even the rubble served to hide the Stable. We moved through the tunnel swiftly, coming to the metal stairs leading up to the hidden door. I checked my E.F.S. and listened carefully, then cautiously pushed it open.

“Coast is clear,” I whispered.

The trap door lifted up and we stepped into the afternoon air. A breeze whipped its way over us, filling

our nostrils with the scent of burning ash. Most of the fires had subsided thankfully, but the damage was extensive. I hoped that there would be enough material to rebuild the town once this was all said and done. There was no way the tribal ponies could stay in the Stable forever. We made our way silently through to the center of the small town, to where Cotton Candy had established our meeting place. Grey pushed forward to the front of our group, his eyes darting back and forth. There was no sign of the Steel Rangers yet. I couldn't tell if this was good or bad. My eyes narrowed as four red blips appeared on my E.F.S. *Perhaps I spoke too soon*, I thought as Cotton Candy and three Rangers appeared at the far end of the area. The stallion was wearing his power armor, a massive sledge hammer latched to his battle saddle. His helmet was hanging from another latch on his side.

"Well, now why I am I not surprised at this," Cotton Candy said, sneering at the sight of me. "Welcome, Ministry Mare. I trust you are here to witness this little... contest?"

"I'm here to support my friend," I spat venomously. "Something you wouldn't know much about, Candy."

The Steel Ranger growled under his breath. "No matter, soon I shall be the victor, and the Stable mine," he said. "But enough of this... banter. I'm certain that you are here for more important business." He glanced over at Grey Knight, who nodded in response.

"Indeed. Let us begin," the silver armor-clad stallion said. "The rules of this battle are quite simple, even for one such as thou, Paladin Candy. There are no rules. This fight is to the death."

I glared at Grey, my eyes widening. "What? You never said --" I started to say.

"Agreed," Cotton Candy interjected. "Did you really think that simple defeat would be enough, Ministry Mare? I know this stallion's kind well enough. He would not be happy with anything less than an honorable death."

"Mine Squire does not understand these concepts too well," the scarred stallion said. I snorted. "Now, my friends. You would do well to stand back."

Steeljack and Nixis nodded, moving to stand next to a pile of rubble. I stopped close to the white stallion, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Be careful," I said.

Grey smiled softly. "I... Thank you, Squi – I mean, Radiant Star," he said.

I trotted across the clearing to sit down next to Steeljack and Nixis. Steeljack was still wearing Tempest, the eye visors retracted so I could see the worried look in his eyes. Candy nodded at the three Rangers behind him, and they retreated to their own corner of the small clearing. The pink unicorn grinned, unlatching his helmet and placing it on his head. Unlike other Steel Ranger helmets I had seen, this one didn't completely cover the stallion's face. It served more as a guard than anything else. He flared his horn and the sledge floated free in the pink glow of his magic.

Grey stepped forward, placing his own helmet upon his brow. His lance came ripping out of its harness, the metal coming alive with blue energy. An eerie silence fell over the clearing as the two stallions circled around each other, waiting for somepony to make the first move. It was tense, and at the same time somewhat serene.

Candy broke the silence first, rushing forward at the white stallion with hellish fury in his eyes. The pink unicorn's sledgehammer came around in a blur of metal, swiping horizontally. Grey ducked as the massive sledge ripped through the air over him, barely missing his lowered form. Grey rolled to his left, using his momentum to come up to Candy's side. The scarred stallion charged, bringing his glowing lance in line with the Ranger. Candy grinned, his horn flaring again as the sledgehammer came up, placing its head in front of the lance. A flash of blue erupted from the clash of the two weapons, forcing the combatants away from each other.

Wasting no time, Candy surged forward again, this time bringing his massive weapon into the air above him for a downward strike. Grey leaped to the side, his natural earth pony ability bringing him out of harm's way. The Steel Ranger roared as the sledgehammer slammed into the ground where Grey had been, several cracks appearing in the burnt rubble. Grey retaliated, bringing his lance about in a slash along Candy's side. The white stallion struck true, showers of hot sparks sheeting away from the Ranger's armored shoulder. Candy snarled, lifting his sledgehammer again with his magic. He batted away the pointed weapon, using his magical advantage to knock back Grey as well. The Ranger glanced down at his shoulder blade, grimacing at the damage to his armor from the blow.

"Not too bad," he said. "I can't quite remember the last time an opponent got that close to me."

Grey said nothing, merely glaring at the Ranger around the lance in his teeth as he stood. He motioned with a hoof at the other stallion.

Candy sneered, lifting his sledgehammer again. "Forgive me, I shall oblige your death wish."

The pink unicorn swung out with the sledgehammer in a sweep, looking as if he was hoping to catch my friend in the legs. Grey grunted and jumped back frantically, thrusting his lance down at the metal blur that was Candy's sledge. Metal rang out against metal, sending Grey spinning through the air as the two weapons clashed. The white stallion struck a pile of rubble hard. He stood shakily, coughing as he spat out the lance. A thin trickle of blood rolled down his chin.

"Do you submit?" Candy said, stepping towards the stallion, his sledgehammer held loftily in the air. "There is no shame in admitting when you've been beaten by your better."

"Thou... thou art not better... thou art vile. You and your kind have no place in this world," Grey spat as he reached down to pick up his glowing lance. "And I will see to it that the ponies of this town are protected from the like of stallions such as thou."

"Do you truly think you can beat me? My, my... how naïve you are," Candy replied casually. "You see, Grey Knight. I've been toying with you. You are weak. Pathetic. A failure. If you want I should be serious, then serious I shall be."

"Do thine worst, foul villain. I shall stop thee!" Grey shouted, latching onto the handle of this lance once more. The scarred stallion snarled, charging forward and thrusting at the Steel Ranger.

Candy sneered, igniting his horn and bringing his sledgehammer around in a wicked slice. The weapon's blow rang on Grey's barrel, sending him flying again. Grey hit a pile of rubble with a grunt of pain. The stallion tried to push himself up, but couldn't in time before Candy was upon him. The Ranger swooped his sledgehammer upwards in an uppercut that caught Grey on his barrel, launching the Knight into the air.

I growled, but a hoof on my side stopped me. Steeljack looked up at me and shook his head. I sighed

and returned my attention to the battle. Grey coughed, sending blood splattering and his lance clattering. Candy's sledgehammer came back around to strike him, sending him into another pile of rubble.

"Pathetic!" Candy shouted, galloping towards the earth pony. Grey tried to get up, grunting in pain. He held a hoof to his side, blood pouring out of his wounds in a pool beneath him. The white earth pony slumped back to the ground as Candy towered over him. "See what I mean? You honorable types are all the same. So idealistic. So *weak*. I shall show you the error of your ways."

"No..." Grey choked out. The injured stallion thrust upward with his hoof, catching Candy across the face and knocking him back.

Candy scowled as Grey pushed forward, spinning on his front legs and delivering a spectacular buck to the Ranger's chest. Grey's hooves connected with a resounding ***thud*** against Candy's power armor, denting the heavy steel chestplate. Candy dropped back again, his horn flickering under the assault. His sledgehammer fell to the ground. Grey used the opportunity to dash past the Ranger, snatching up his lance. He spun about, snarling as he charged. The lance came up, its blue energy arcing from the metal blade to the Steel Ranger's armor. He struck true, the lance's tip piercing Candy's leg. The pink stallion howled in pain, his own life force streaming from the wound.

"Fuck!" Candy shouted, flaring his horn.

His sledgehammer came up in the soft pink glow of his magic, swinging wide of Grey as the white stallion withdrew his weapon. Grey ducked underneath the massive hammer and brought his lance around for another strike. The stallion grunted as he raked the tip of the weapon across Candy's chest, blazing a trail of blue electricity. I narrowed my eyes as I watched the two trade blows. Grey was beginning to suffer, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the stallion couldn't go on. Candy on the other hand, while he was injured, was also doing much better than his opponent. I suspected it had something to do with his power armor's repair spells. An unfair advantage after all, made worse by Candy's nature. As a unicorn, he wasn't slowed as badly by simple physical damage. I couldn't fault Grey's effort, though. I could only pray silently to Luna that he would be victorious.

Grey leaped back, deflecting another of Candy's blows. The stallion winced against the force of it, as his lance was ripped out of his mouth and out of his reach. Candy sneered as he stalked forward, his sledgehammer held loftily in the air.

"How long are we going to play this game?" Candy asked. "Let's end this now, Knight. I'll give you that honorable death you've been seeking."

Grey stumbled, dropping to his knees. I gasped. His wounds were more serious than I initially had thought. He coughed again, blood pouring from his mouth. He gazed up at the Steel Ranger towering over him.

"And I told thou before... do thine worst," he managed to say as he pushed himself up. He extended his legs, no matter how much he looked like he wanted to fall. Grey glared at the Steel Ranger, panting as he struggled to stay standing. Candy grinned evilly, lifting his weapon into the air.

"My pleasure," he said, bringing the sledgehammer down onto the white stallion's head. A loud ***crack*** echoed across the clearing.

Tears filled my eyes as I watched the pony who had called me Squire slump to the ground, his blood pouring from his head where Candy had struck. He hit the ground and lay there, unmoving. I snarled loudly as I

pushed myself up from my position next to Steeljack and Nixis. It was unfair! It was unfair that somepony so selfless had to die like that! Blind rage replaced rational thought as I flared my wings and lit my horn, speeding across the clearing towards the Steel Ranger that had killed my friend.

“Candy!!!” I roared.

The stallion's eyes went wide as I closed the gap, striking the armor-clad pony directly in the chest. My horn burned with intense fury as I lifted Candy's own weapon against him. The sledgehammer came around, striking Candy in the neck and knocking the buck to the ground.

“You... you fucking monster! You killed him... He was a good pony, and you killed him! You... you don't... you don't deserve to live!” I screamed loudly, allowing my anger to cloud every amount of judgment I had ever had. I wanted to see this stallion pay for what he had done. He deserved death for all the pain he had caused. Nurse Care, Grey Knight, he was responsible for all of it. I was going to dismantle him, turn him into paste on a wall.

An explosion shattered the air, shocking me out of my rage for a moment. I glanced behind me, noticing the three rangers that Candy had brought with him. One of them was brandishing a missile launcher. The ranger aimed again, unleashing the payload of the launcher. My horn ignited, raising up my shield spell. The missile struck the shield, exploding harmlessly against my magic. The sharp retort of Tempest's rifle filled the air as Steeljack leaped into action. His first shot took care of the missile launcher, blasting the heavy weapon into two smoldering pieces. His second shot took care of the Ranger's head. Nixis lopez behind the earth pony, leaping into the fray with wild abandon as he sliced into the remaining two Rangers with his wickedly sharp claws. I returned my attention back to Cotton Candy, who was slumped over on the ground, wheezing and gasping for breath.

“It's just you and me now, Candy,” I mused. “You know... you could have tried. You could have done better. You could have worked for the ponies of the Wasteland!” Candy hacked and spat, staring up at me with hatred in his eyes.

“You don't think I tried?” he hissed. “I was there... I was there when Paladin Steelhooves took control of the Rangers. I saw what trying did for them. The Wasteland doesn't want ponies who fucking try, it wants ponies who take. I tried once... and all it ever got me was nothing. I lost... I lost everything I ever cared about, Ministry Mare. I tried to do better, but better isn't me.”

“Then we have nothing more to discuss,” I snarled. “Prepare for the end you gave another, foul beast.” I lifted the sledgehammer above the pink stallion's head. I was very prepared to bring it down, just like he had done to Grey. I struggled against my better self, feeling at war within. Candy looked down at his hooves solemnly, and I understood. If I did this... did that make me any better than him? I wanted to do it so badly, for Grey, but is that what he would have wanted? For me to taint his memory through more senseless violence?

There was no honor in it, I decided. Just like there was no honor in taking revenge for Nurse Care's death. The lesson I'd learned in the recesses of my own mind with Twilight hit home. Grey knew what he was getting into, so did Care. They all wanted to make their own piece of the Wasteland a better one. I thought for a brief moment that I had actually figured this out already, but nothing was ever that easy. I closed my eyes, letting my magic fall away and the sledgehammer drop to the ground beside me. I opened them again to see Candy staring up at me, incredulously.

“Go,” I said, dropping my shield. Battle swirled and crashed behind us.

Steeljack and Nixis had downed the Rangers accompanying Candy, but off in the distance I could hear explosions and gunfire. I prayed that Violet was alright. I glanced back at the pink stallion beneath me.

“Before I change my mind. There is no honor in killing you. Grey would have understood that,” I said softly.

Candy scrambled away, pushing to his hooves and stumbling off with his sledge in tow.

“Star?” I heard Steeljack say. I glanced back at the earth pony.

“I’m alright,” I replied, flaring my horn. Grey’s broken and bleeding body floated away from where he had fallen. I composed the battered warrior and set him on a rough bier of rubble. “We should check on the girls, make sure they’re alright. I’m worried.” I smiled as I placed a hoof over Grey’s glassy eyes, closing them. “Rest well my friend. You deserve it. We will be back for you.”

It didn’t take long to find the rest of the fight. Just over the next ridge, the fires started again. Explosions filled the air and we found ourselves overlooking the remains of the Steel Ranger camp. The Rangers were firing at something. I glanced over at where they were firing. My eyes widened when I noticed a large group of Arlington’s tribal ponies were attacking the camp. At their head was Violet, laying down a steady stream of silver fire. The robot, Equestria Prime, stood tall over the chaos. It appeared to still be shut down. A part of the Ranger’s fire was diverted at the top of the robot, where a black speck flew back and forth to draw their attention.

“Looks like they need some help,” I said. “Let’s go give it to them.”

I charged forward, unlatching Stargazer as I ran. My gun came up, spraying a field of bullets at a nearby group of Rangers, striking the ground in front of them. A few of them glanced up as we launched into the fray, clearly surprised at our presence. I roared, smashing the first Ranger to dare come close in the face with Stargazer. Running through the small group, I managed to catch up with Violet while Nixis and Steeljack took point.

“Star?” Violet said, her eyes wide.

I smiled softly as I came up next to her. We fell back into the ranks of the tribal ponies, taking a minor breather amidst the chaos of the battle.

“You alright?” I asked.

She nodded. “We’re doing our best to try and give Patch the time she needs. I’m not sure what’s going on up there. What happened to you guys? Where’s Grey?”

I averted my gaze. “He... he didn’t make it.”

“What? How?” Violet asked, her eyes wide.

I gritted my teeth, lifting Stargazer and firing at a nearby Ranger. It felt good to let go of a little bit of my anger, no matter how small it was.

“Cotton Candy,” I simply said. “It was... it was how Grey would have wanted it. But there’s no time for that, we have to help Patch.”

Violet nodded, her expression fearful. I moved to open my wings, but stopped after a hoof landed on my shoulder.

“Star... you didn't...?” my love said.

I sighed and shook my head. “I... I wanted to. I really wanted to.” I said. “I... We'll talk later, okay?”

I fled into the sky, pushing all the pain and anger from the duel into my ascent. Equestria Prime was my target. Lilith hovered over the massive robot, firing off missile after missile from the Bitch. I soared towards the pegasus as swiftly as I could, dodging shots from the Rangers below. “Lilith!” I shouted, catching my friend's attention. Below the black mare I could see Patch, her muzzle buried in an open panel on the back of the robot.

“Star? What are you doing here?” Lilith shouted back.

“I came to see if Patch needed any help,” I said.

Lilith nodded. “She's trying her best, but I don't know if she can get it working or not,” she said. “At the very least, we've managed to keep the Rangers from powering it up.”

I nodded in response, folding my wings and landing next to my earth pony friend. She was muttering to herself under her breath.

“Come on... work dammit!” Patch shouted, pounding on the panel with her hoof. “Why won't this stinkin' thing work?!”

“Patch?” I said softly.

The green mare looked up, sighing. She had soot and grime all over her face.

“Star... I'm not sure I can do it,” she said.

“Then I guess it's plan B,” I replied. “If the computer isn't going to bend to your will, let's plant the explosives and pop this thing.”

Patch drooped, kicking a twist of wire off the sloping hull.

“Yeah... I planted the explosives while I was working my way into this thing, but...” she sighed, staring down at the open panel. Wires and electronic thingummies ran in every direction, a cosmic puzzle in literal technicolor. Patch smiled wistfully at the inner workings of the robot. “To think though... a piece of history... gone down the drain.”

“Better that it's gone than in the wrong hooves, right?” I offered.

Patch nodded. “You're right,” she said. Her hooves moved in a flash, switching up the diodes here and there. She closed the panel with a grin. “It's done. I sent the signal to power on the robot. We'd better get out of here, and pronto. This thing is gonna blow up bigger than a skyscraper I'm guessing.”

“Hop on,” I said, extending my wings.

Patch grinned and leaped onto my back. I took to the skies once more, calling out a warning to Lilith to follow us. Equestria Prime's eyes flickered to life, and a steady hum began to emit from the metal monstrosity.

“INITIATING STARTUP SEQUENCE... WARNING... INITIALIZATION SEQUENCE ERROR... POWER CORE CATASTROPHIC FAILURE IMMINENT.” the robot suddenly spouted. A flash of silver erupted from below us as Violet shot off Thunder Flash at the Rangers, who had begun retreating at Prime's declaration. The tribal ponies began to pull back as well. I surged forward, landing among the crowd of tribals next to Violet. Patch leaped from my back to the ground and continued galloping. We had just crested the next ridge when the hum emanating from the robot began to get louder.

“POWER CORES AT CRITICAL TEMPERATURE... OVERLOAD IMMINENT... OVERLOAD IMMINENT... GOOD-BY--” the robot screamed. It never got a chance to finish before its head exploded violently. The rest of the robot's body followed soon after, the metal spraying outward from the epicenter of the explosion. Those Rangers who had been dumb enough to stay near the robot were decimated in a matter of seconds. I glanced back, seeing the rush of debris and shrapnel heading towards our group. We weren't going to make it very far before the stuff impacted. I gritted my teeth, spinning about and igniting my horn. It was as good a time as ever to see if Twilight was right about my magic.

“Everypony, stay down!” I shouted as I released the spell. A massive purple wall flared into existence around the group, Shining Armor's shield spell knocking pieces of flying robot out of the air as it sprang into life. The shield held under the stress of the shrapnel, dissipating the force of the blows across the entirety of the surface of the glowing wall. I grinned. My horn felt perfectly fine! Twilight was right after all! I breathed a sigh of relief as I stood tall against the onslaught of metal and fire.

Then I felt it. It was there in the back of my mind. Something *didn't* feel right about this. The shield spell, while it was no longer causing me pain... was doing something else to me. I couldn't quite place what it was, but I felt all the voices, all the memories, all the emotions... they got stronger. I grunted, sending the message up into my mind to cut off the spell. My horn dimmed as the purple wall disappeared. Thankfully, the chaos that had split the air seconds ago had subsided. The intense feeling I had went away. *What was that?* I thought, shaking my head. Was it some sort of residual energy left over from Spark? I wasn't sure, but I bet Twilight knew about it somehow. Granted, she had said to take it easy with my magic and practice before I did anything stupid. Chalking the problem up to my own inexperience, I slumped to my haunches and gazed out upon the burning ridge. The robot's legs were still intact for the most part, standing absurdly ponylike and smoldering smokily. There was no sign of any of the Rangers. They were gone! I sat there watching the wreckage burn, not sure for how long.

Grey... I thought, sighing. We were victorious... but we lost so much in the process. So many of this town's good ponies died. You... you died. But we helped them.

“You did it,” a voice said from behind me finally.

I turned around, seeing a muddy brown earth pony mare. It was one of the tribal ponies. I managed a soft smile, a soft gasp escaping my throat as I realized that the townsp ponies were carrying a body under a red cloak. It was Grey.

“No,” I said, trying not to cry. I stood shakily, pointing a hoof at the body of the stallion. “He did it. He's the real hero. Now... let's see what we can do to help you get back on your feet.”

* * *

The next day felt like things had returned mostly to normal. A cursory sweep of the area had revealed that the Rangers had indeed fled the area in the aftermath of Equestria Prime's destruction. I was sure they wouldn't be coming back anytime soon. Once we had known for sure, we started helping the ponies of Arlington move back out of the Stable and onto the land once more. Medical supplies, weapons, and even furniture were brought up from the underground bunker. Tribesponies raided the now cooled metal pieces of the robot and had begun working them into crude walls to start rebuilding the town.

I trotted along next to Muddy Waters, the mare who had spoken to me and brought me out of my thoughts the day before. The earth pony had taken to a leadership position amongst the Arlington ponies, and apparently was a close friend of Nurse Care's. Muddy explained how she had sent the force in to assist Violet when she realized that the Rangers had found my friends out.

Our journey led us a short ways outside of the town proper, where a small group of ponies (and one hellhound) waited for our arrival. The group had gathered around two crude stones placed in the dirt. Beyond these two, several rows of the same types of stones littered the small area. I stepped forward into the crowd, catching Violet's eye and smiling softly. My marefriend had a pained look on her face, but she nodded all the same. The silence was unnerving as I stopped finally in between the two stones. I turned to the others, doing my best to keep spirits high.

"I didn't know either Nurse Care or Grey Knight very well, I must admit. I couldn't tell you what their favorite color was, or whether they liked Sugar Apple Bombs or not, which is silly cuz everypony should like Sugar Apple Bombs..." I started to say, breaking the awkward silence. "But I knew the most important thing about them. They had heart. Nurse Care... she did her best to fix us up when we first came here and even when we returned. She was truly loyal and caring to the very end, sacrificing herself to bring peace to us all." I ran a hoof over the stone that belonged to the deceased friend and smiled. I glanced down at the other stone and grimaced.

"Grey... Grey was a good pony. And furthermore, he was a good friend, even if he acted strange or if he said weird things. He strove to do the right thing always. To preserve his honor. I know that somewhere... he's with Celestia. Both of these ponies died to protect this town, seeking only to do what was right and just, not what was fast and easy. That my little ponies... is what we call fighting the good fight. And so... we must carry on, for them. And though it may hurt our hearts to say goodbye, we must remember... you never really do say goodbye. Only 'see you later'." I stopped, tears filling my eyes. The silence of the moment permeated everything around us. The tribals and my friends stepped forward, saying what little words they could to the graves before heading out. Violet and the others waited nearby as I sat in front of Grey's stone.

"Thank you... Knight..." I said softly, touching the cold hard stone with a hoof. "Thank you for showing me the right way to do things. And not the easy way." I steeled my gaze and stood. If I was going to follow an example, I was going to do it the right way. I had to take my own advice for a change, and fight the good fight. And I was going to start by going after Spark.

"Star?" Violet said, placing her hoof on my shoulder. "You ready to head back?"

I nodded solemnly, turning away from the stone and trotting beside her. As we trotted along, I let myself fall back into the familiarity of our little group, my little family. Patch and Lilith were bouncing along, giggling like schoolfillies, while Nixis and Steeljack appeared to be in deep conversation about something or other. Violet strode next to me, keeping close watch over us all. I could see it in her eyes, her resolve. The mare would die before she would let another friend of ours perish. I knew it in my heart. I simply hoped that it would never come to pass.

We made our way back down into the Stable, where our things were still laid out in the Infirmary. We all needed rest from the exhausting trials we had endured. I flopped down onto the bedroll and sighed as I rolled over. Violet laid next to me, while Patch and Lilith watched as Steeljack and Nixis pulled out a board of some kind, playing a strange game of strategy using bullet casings for game pieces. The two mares were discussing the calibers of the casings while the hellhound grinned toothily at the earth pony. Yes... my own little slice of family.

“Violet,” I said softly. “I... I know we talked already, but I want you to know something...”

“What is it?” my love replied.

“When I was fighting Candy, I wanted to kill him. I wanted it so badly I could taste it. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't tarnish Grey's memory like that,” I said, my voice shaking with every word. “I know that sometimes this world... this Wasteland... it makes us do things that we shouldn't do. Was I... was I somehow wrong to not kill him? Would I have been doing the Wasteland a favor?”

Violet rolled over and smiled softly. “That's what makes you a good pony, sweetie. You question yourself, and your own actions,” she said. “You are a good pony, Star. Grey would have been proud of what you did.”

I nodded, yawning. I was more tired than I had realized. Laying my head next to my love, I closed my eyes and let the world drift away into dreamland.

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The library door swung open before me. I wondered just what Twilight was playing at, seeking me out again. Still, I wasn't as upset. I had something I needed to ask her. I pushed through the doorway, glancing about the empty and dark library. The purple mare appeared at the far end of the aisles, her horn bristling with light as she rearranged the books on the shelves. She glanced up, seeing me and smiling.

“Star,” she said curtly. “What are you doing here?”

“You tell me,” I replied. “Why am I here?”

“I honestly have no idea. You must have subconsciously traveled here,” Twilight said, cocking her head.

“I did want to talk to you, Twilight. Something... something happened,” I said finally. “When I used my magic, I felt something... terrible. Something in the back of my mind. It wasn't burnout, but it didn't feel... right.”

Twilight smiled wryly. I found it sort of disturbing at first.

“Oh?” she said. “I'm certain it was nothing, Star. You're probably just getting used to your magic being more powerful again.”

“I... I suppose you're right,” I said, placing a hoof up to my face. I chuckled. It seemed rather silly once I had thought about it. “Alright then, so... I suppose I'll be going then.”

Twilight paused, motioning at me to follow her. “Actually... there is one thing,” she said. “A memory if you will. A rather important one.” She pointed at a book on the shelf. The spine was emblazoned with her cutie

mark. She lifted it off the shelf with her magic, opening it. A moving picture appeared on its pages.

“What is it?” I said curiously.

Twilight pointed at the picture. “Touch it. It will allow you access to the memory,” she said.

I looked at the other mare curiously, but decided to do what she had said. My hoof touched the page, color and light pouring out of the book all around me. I fell into the memory and everything went white. My eyes reopened and I felt myself in a familiar body. My host's wings flexed as she flew through the air. I sensed that this was one of the only times that the mare got to actually fly. She soared over Canterlot's spires, the wind whipping through her mane.

“Enjoying yourself this morning, I see,” a voice from back in my host's mind said. It was a very familiar voice.

“Of course,” my host said. “I never get to just fly. No pony's up, so it doesn't really matter.”

“Don't forget that you have a meeting in a few hours,” Spark said. *“A joint meeting of the Ministry Mares, no less. I'm surprised you six are actually getting together. Aren't we on bad terms with Laughter?”*

“It's just business, Spark,” Twilight said, snorting. “You know that. I'm sure that they'll bring up Shining again though. I don't know why they don't just leave well enough alone.”

“They do care about us,” Spark mused. *“That's why we're doing this, remember that Twilight. When we're done with the spell to bring your brother back, we can help all of your friends.”*

“I know that, I do. But I just can't keep telling them that I'm fine. They know, Spark. They know something is up,” Twilight replied, flapping her wings slightly as she landed on the roof of the Ministry of Arcane Science Canterlot hub. Her wings snapped to her sides, the appendages disappearing with a flare of her horn.

“Let them talk,” Spark replied. *“They'll know the truth soon enough.”*

Twilight snickered as she tapped a button on the elevator that took her down into her office. Twilight sat at her chair, pulling up a document on her terminal. The writings on it were archaic in nature, and I couldn't exactly understand them.

“These artifacts are difficult to translate,” she said aloud. “Even with Daring's notes, I'm not even sure I can figure them out. What the hell do they mean?”

“This is the last crucial piece before you can cast the spell, Twilight,” Spark said. *“I believe you can do it. I know you can.”*

Twilight sighed. “I sure hope you're right,” she said as the memory faded away. The colors and light surrounded me once more and I found myself in front of Twilight in the library once more. I cocked my head at the alicorn.

“That was... rather short,” I said.

“Spark thought she had me figured out,” Twilight replied with a snort. “Right after that was when the

other Elements tried to... you know already..."

"The meeting?" I asked.

Twilight nodded her head solemnly. "I wasn't expecting it. My friends had nothing to do with it, of course," she said. "That was when I really knew that something was wrong with Spark, and that it was up to me to stop her. The other Elements tried, but she was too strong. I felt her in the back of my mind all the time after that, always prodding me, always pushing to finish the spell. I wanted you to see that because you need to remember what you're up against. She sounds nice, and she acts like she wants to be your friend, but she's not. She's bad news, Star."

"Twilight, I understand how you feel," I said. "But that still doesn't change my mind. I'm sorry. I think I have to go now." I turned towards the door of the library, ignoring the mare's cries of indignation. I glanced back at her. "Next time, don't call me. I'll call you." The library filtered away, and I woke up.

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I awoke in darkness once again, sighing as I luxuriated in the warmth of the bedroll. I glanced around the dark room. I was alone. Stretching out my legs, I pushed myself up. It appeared that most of our things had been packed. Stargazer sat next to our saddlebags, looking as pristine as ever. I smiled. I guessed that Patch had decided to keep herself a little busy while I was sleeping. The door opened as I turned to leave, revealing Violet.

"Hey," she said. I waved. "You alright?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Rested, at least. How long was I out? You guys already packed."

"You were out for only a few hours. Don't worry," Violet said, chuckling. "We just figured that you'd want to be ready to head out to Manehattan."

"I... I am," I said softly. "I think that we need to go. These ponies will be fine with all of this tech to back them up. They don't need us anymore."

"You'd be wrong, but I'll understand if you don't want to stay," a voice from behind Violet said. Muddy Waters stood in the doorway, smiling. "We could still use your help, of course. A place to stay, roof over your head. You'd be more than welcome."

"Muddy, I'm sure that would be excellent. But there's some bad things going on out there in the Wastes. I have somepony I need to save," I said.

"Well then, this is where we part ways then," Muddy said with a nod. "Safe travels to you, Ministry Mare."

"And to you," I said, igniting my horn. My saddlebags flew into the air, landing on my back. "Violet. Let's get back to the others. We're getting out of here."

My love smiled, her horn flaring as well. Her bags latched to her back, Thunder Flash attached to her harness. We made our way beside Muddy towards the Stable entrance. I stopped for a second, noticing a familiar green mare sitting in the Overmare's office. I motioned for Violet and Muddy to go on ahead and stepped inside.

"Patch?" I said cautiously, startling my friend. She had tears rolling down her face. "Are... you alright?"

"I... Sorry, Star... I was just thinking about this Stable and reading the logs... it's just..." She said, blubbing. I smiled softly and laid a hoof on her shoulder.

Patch pointed at the screen. "By Celestia, they were only foals, Star. Children. They were children when they were sent into this place, and they didn't understand why... And I still can't figure out what happened when they grew up, Star..." she continued. "It's just... too much."

I laid my wing around the poor crying mare and nodded. I knew all too well how much some of the things I'd witnessed in the Wasteland could be.

"Patch... I know that this is hard for you. We may never know what happened to the ponies here," I said. "But we can take this knowledge and remember them. Their existence will not be forgotten." Patch glanced down at my PipBuck, and I smiled. I connected the device to the terminal, downloading all of the information to it. "There. Anytime you want to read them, let me know."

"Thanks, Star. I just... I just..." she said, tearing up again.

I pulled the mare into a hug. We sat there for several moments before I spoke once more. "I know. Now clear those tears, and let's get out of this place, alright?" I said.

Patch nodded, wiping away the tears with a fetlock. I disconnected my PipBuck and we trotted out of the office. We made our way shortly out into the day ahead of us. The others were waiting outside. Patch silently walked up to Steeljack and gave him a brief hug. The stallion smiled, returning the hug. I leaned into Violet and beamed at the rest of our little group.

"So... everyone ready to go?" I asked.

"As always, my friend," Nixis said, grinning toothily.

The others nodded and we began to trot out of the town. The ponies working waved as we left, moving back into the Wasteland at large. We stopped briefly at the graveyard outside of the town. A few moments of silence later, we were on our way. The sun had risen overhead, shining brightly upon the Wastes. We moved with purpose, heading towards the map marker I had made for Manehattan. We passed through the swampland we had first met Cranky in, making our way back into the main part of the country. We stepped out onto an old highway, the cracked road stretching on beneath our feet as we passed several abandoned buildings. On a whim, I decided to flick on my radio, seeing if I could pick up a certain unicorn's broadcast. After a while, a brash voice filled the air around us.

"Hellooo children! That's right, it's me again, your good old pal DJ-PON3. And it's time for some news!

Wasteland children of the Manehattan area, beware. I'm getting reports of attacks on the outlying settlements of the city. I don't have much specifics on what's going down, but all I know is that the attacker is some sort of rogue alicorn with a green coat and black mane. Now I know what you all are saying out there, are the alicorns bad once more? I don't think so, children. Our friends in the Followers of the Apocalypse are still right here with us. They're good ponies, through and through.

This one though? She's bad news children. Steer clear of the outlying settlements, and keep your assault rifle loaded and handy. Do not, and I repeat, do NOT engage this thing if you have a choice. Run, hide, do anything.

In other news, I've gotten a message from my counterpart up north in the city of Chicacolt. It seems our old friend the Ministry Mare was in the city for quite some time, and boy oh boy did she shake things up! If you're ever in the area stop in, Ministry Mare. We'll share stories of good times.

Thanks for listening children! Now have some music."

I glanced over at Violet, raising an eyebrow. Her eyes were wide.

"An alicorn with a black mane and green coat?" she said.

"There's only one alicorn I know that is like that," I said. "Spark."

"What is she doing down in Manehattan?" Patch asked, voicing the obvious question.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure, but I intend to find out," I said. A rustling noise from a nearby ruined building caught my attention, my ears perking up. "Did anypony hear that?"

"Yeah," Steeljack said, spinning about, Tempest's rifle swinging out onto the stallion's battle saddle.

I looked cautiously at the nearby building, flicking on my E.F.S. Two blue blips appeared directly in front of us. I lifted a hoof.

"Stand down, Steeljack. They're non-hostile," I said softly.

The stallion nodded, stowing away the rifle. I stepped towards the building, when suddenly a flash of fur and feathers zipped out from the ruined entrance. It was a little griffon cub, a female. Her feathers topped out in a light shade of dyed blue. She stopped in front of us, smiling brightly and her eyes wide with awe.

"Touch! It's them! We found them!" she shouted behind her. "Come on out!"

"Who...?" I said, cocking my head in confusion.

Something moved out of the building's only entrance. A purple puddle of ooze lifted out of the ground, forming into a vague shape with holes for eyes and a gaping maw for a mouth. It settled next to the griffon cub, quivering with excitement.

"Featherjoy, it is them!" The thing's voice erupted.

I blinked. "Smooze?" I said.

The Smooze glanced over at me and frowned, extending a pseudopod pleadingly.

"Radiant Star. I'm so glad we found you - we need your help."

Author's Notes:

Well, there we have it. A shiny new chapter. Just for you guys! I certainly hope you will enjoy it. 13 Chapters and an Epilogue to go!

And so we mourn the passing of one Grey Knight. He was fun to work with. While he started as a mere cameo from a contest, in the end he became a great character and an honorable death at that.

Onto the plugs, as we're keeping this short and sweet for one Mittens from #FalloutEquestria. You can continue to ask Star questions at <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com> of course!

My story plug of this week goes to a fantastic story by Ten Mihara. The story of the Wasteland is a long and winding one, and one mare dared to see it all and tell it all. Yes, children, this is the story of the author of the Wasteland Survival Guide, known only as "[Fallout Equestria: The Ditzzy Doo Chronicles](#)". And it is an incredible read. I highly recommend this one.

On a more serious note, I have a reddit user to thank. You see, children, old V here isn't too bright sometimes, and one of the gangs in Chicacolt ended up visually a little more of a negative stereotype that was rather tasteless and racially bad. This prompted me to rewrite them into more of a raider gang. So... thanks a bunch to reddit user Grudir, for being an awesome guy and giving some great feedback. That kind of feedback doesn't come easily in this game, and it's greatly appreciated.

Major thanks go out to Wirepony and McMesser for their work editing and pre-reading. You guys are totally awesome.

Again, thanks to Kkat as always, for creating this crazy little world.