

## Fallout Equestria: Starlight

### Chapter 25: Return to Dust, Part 2

*If he's staying calm and collected, I bet he's doing a terrific job as a leader.*

Kindness. Everypony needs a little kindness, deserves to be shown some compassion. One day, it might even save the Wasteland. Even in these dark times, kindness prevails. It prevails every day in the hearts and actions of these ponies. You only have to look closely to see it. The ponies of Arlington, with their care and treatment of others. The MMMM, with their stalwart assistance of me and mine. These are the ponies who will shape the future of the Wasteland. They will give the land hope, and offer kindness.

I look forward to the time when ponies can set aside their hate for each other, when kindness and compassion rules instead of hatred and violence. As Nixis has told me on many occasions, the lessons of the Lightbringer live on past her sacrifice. Maybe one day. I only wish that I could see it, but right now... all I can see is failure. All I can see is Spark, Twilight, and the end.

I wonder... will I make it? Will I be able to see this through to the end?

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Silver fire streaked across the clearing, the vector of the attack carrying it unerringly to its intended target. Truth Seeker's eyes widened as the fire veered through the air, and his horn began to glow black. Before the stallion could finish his spell, the blast slammed into his cape and knocked him to the ground. He grunted under the pressure of the silver flame, which dissipated as his spell took form. A large hole was left in his cloak, his crimson coat unscathed under it. His eyes narrowed as he moved to stand.

"I had hoped you would see reason, Ministry Mare," Truth Seeker said angrily. "But I see that I was wrong. You are a child, trying to be a grown mare in an adult's world. You will pay for your insolence."

His horn flared fiercely. I dropped Thunder Flash into Violet's very surprised hooves, letting my own legs carry me forward. I accessed my magic, despite the fact that my entire forehead seared with pain, and fired first. A brilliant purple shield appeared, Truth Seeker's blast spattering off it as I wrapped my telekinesis around Finishing Touch.

"Come on, Touch. There's no sense in this. He's crazy, and you know it," I said. Touch's sunken eyes widened as I floated him before me. "I know that you think that you are bad, but you're not. But right now, if you don't do something, we're all going to be dead. Including Featherjoy."

"F-F-Featherjoy...?" Touch stuttered.

The shield shimmered as another black bolt of energy struck it. Truth Seeker roared as he unleashed his magic canceling spell, the shield dropping instantly. My horn seared with pain, and I growled. Touch appeared to be frozen in place as the crimson unicorn strode forward, flanked by his guards.

"I told you, Ministry Mare. I can keep canceling your magic all day if I so desire. You won't get away from me," Truth Seeker proclaimed.

"No!" Finishing Touch shouted. "You won't touch her. You won't touch any of them!" The Smooze creature leaped in front of Truth Seeker, expanding himself to shield us. "You won't touch Featherjoy!"

“And what do you think you are going to do to me, creature?” Truth Seeker challenged. “I can destroy you without thinking about it. Or did you forget that I have all of my guards with me?” Two unicorns appeared on each side of the crimson stallion.

“I only need to distract you long enough to let my friends go,” Touch snarled. A face appeared in the creature's back, shooting me an intense look. “When I tell you to run, you run.”

“But... this isn't what I meant at all!” I wailed.

The face winked, before submerging back into the Smooze's body. “Please hurry, Star. And keep Featherjoy safe for me,” the purple being said as its mouth disappeared. “Now... run!”

The gelatinous mass that belonged to my friend began to expand at a rapid rate. My eyes widened and I spun about, charging back towards the group of ponies behind us.

“Come on, you heard the Smooze, let's hoof it!” I shouted.

The others swiftly abandoned their own fights to follow behind me. Violet scooped Featherjoy up onto her back, the young grifflet glancing back at her friend with tears in her eyes.

“Touch!” she shouted. “What's he doing?!”

“Making a pretty big boom,” I said under my breath as the purple thing expanded to its breaking point.

With a splattering crack, Touch's body exploded. Sheets of slimy purple covered the Magisterium's guards. The purplish goo blinded the guards, and even Truth Seeker was forced back by the wave of smooze.

I turned my head back, continuing to run. I motioned towards the ruined city. “Head into the city! We'll lose them there and regroup!” Shots rang out behind us, indicating that the guards were attempting to give some form of chase.

“I hope you know what you're doing, Star,” Violet said from my side.

I smiled hesitantly. “I... I hope I do too! I hope HE does!” I replied. “Sorry for snatching Thunder Flash like that. I just couldn't think of anything else to do.”

“For what it's worth, I agree with you,” Lilith said from above us.

“Yeah, that Truth Seeker guy is bad news,” Patch said, a small hint of her joyous nature showing through the adrenaline of our escape. Eventually we slowed down to a trot once we realized that the Magisterium's guards were no longer following us. I huffed, my horn searing with pain thanks to the void magic in the air. A small abandoned crystal building appeared on our right, and we took the opportunity to step inside. It appeared to be somepony's home... once. Now it was just a dead mausoleum; a morbid reminder of how bad things had really gotten.

“Do you think Touch will be alright?” Violet said as I slumped to my haunches, rubbing my horn.

Featherjoy looked at me expectantly. I smiled softly.

"I'm sure he'll be alright," I said, rubbing the base of my horn. "But for now, we need to trust that he knows what he's doing and get the hell out of here. My horn feels like it's going to explode any second."

"I know what you mean," Violet replied. "I feel the same way. It must be this place."

"The touch of dark magic fills the air," Nixis said. "These... black crystals. They are sapping energy from us all."

"That's... bad, right?" Steeljack chimed in.

I sighed, nodding. "It means our magic is slowly being drained by the void crystals Truth Seeker mentioned. They're everywhere in this city, even the very foundation of the buildings are made out of them," I said. "Even with the distraction that Touch has given us, if we don't get out of here we'll be easy pickings for Truth Seeker and his guards."

I groaned, pressing on my forehead. I certainly hoped that our friend was going to be okay, but I knew that we couldn't stay here for much longer. We had to keep moving.

"We should get going," Lilith said, echoing my thoughts. "We've got Magisterium guards incoming."

I stood, using what magic I could to lift Stargazer out. It was beginning to get hard to hold things with telekinesis even. I nodded and we exited the small home. Several guards shouted from down the street at us, firing their assault rifles our way. I let loose a stream of bullets from Stargazer, forcing several of the unicorns to duck. How in the Sorrel Hells were these ponies capable of using their magic so easily when I found it increasingly difficult to do simple things like lift a gun? I pushed the thought from my mind, taking the opportunity to follow the route my friends took through the ruined city.

We moved swiftly down the street, hearing the shouts of the guards as we ducked down into a dark alley. Had Touch somehow failed? I grimaced, when suddenly a voice began to sound out amongst the crystal buildings. It reverberated off the hard crystal all around us. The guards were all but drowned out by their leader's voice.

"I know you are out there, Ministry Mare," the voice said. I narrowed my eyes. *Truth Seeker*, I thought. "Yes... Your friend gave us a great surprise, but it was ultimately for naught. I have captured him, and soon his power will be extinguished from this world. You are free to try to stop me of course. I will even give you a sporting chance of it, not that it will make any difference. In the ruined palace is where you will find me, preparing the ritual to remove the creature's existence. I invite you to come, come and witness the ultimate demise of this ancient evil."

I growled under my breath angrily. I hated bad guy who spent their time prattling on about how powerful they were. It nearly made me wish for Discord.

"They... they have Touch?" Featherjoy said, her voice tiny from her spot on Violet's back. I looked down at the small griffon, and nodded solemnly. "But... but..."

"Don't you worry, Featherjoy," I said softly. "We're going to get him back, and put an end to this for good."

Violet smiled brightly. "That we will, we owe that much to him. He's a friend, after all," she said.

I nodded in response, glancing over at the others. They responded in kind.

“We won't let him down,” Patch said.

Steeljack pressed a button on Tempest's leg armor, sliding his helmet's visor back over his eyes. They glowed a fierce blue and he swung out his rifle.

“Let's show these Magisterium ponies what happens when they mess with our friends,” he said.

I sighed, chuckling. Everypony glanced at me, giving me a bit of a funny look.

“I'm... I'm sorry, I just... I'm really glad you're all with me, you know that, right?” I said. “Just... thank you.”

“Don't sweat it, Star,” Lilith said. “Now, let's get moving. If we head down through into the city, I've got an idea. If we can get into the broken portion of the tower, we can take Truth Seeker by surprise.” The black mare pointed out of the alley towards the massive palace, its broken spire laying across the rest of the city.

“Sounds like a good a plan as any,” I said, glancing in the direction the pegasus had pointed. I cocked my head, listening for any sounds of Magisterium guards in our area, but heard nothing. “And if we're going to go, let's do it now. There's no guards around.”

We stepped out of the alley, cautious but confident that we could get to the palace and save Touch. As we trotted deeper into the crystalline city, I noticed that the roads and buildings around us began to get darker in color. What felt like night in the middle of the day surrounded us as dusty crystal rubble and even darker buildings rose up on each side of us.

I moved forward down the dark street, feeling as though something out there was watching us. Was Truth Seeker spying on us perchance? I couldn't tell. The feeling didn't feel like it was anything magical, but then again my magic was beginning to feel much more difficult to access. The drain of the void crystals in this area was far more potent than in the rest of the city. My horn burned with throbbing pain, but I pushed on regardless. A few glances over at Violet revealed she was feeling the same way. I stepped over to my love, placing a wing over her back. Featherjoy had taken to walking alongside since there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. Violet looked up, smiling.

“You okay?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah. Horn hurts like a bitch, though,” she replied with a nod. “You?”

“Same. Probably worse,” I answered. “I hope the others are okay. Nixis said this was affecting us all.”

“Well, we can probably feel it more because of our horns,” Violet said. “Pegasi and Earth ponies have inherent magic, but seeing as how Lilith can still fly it might not be affecting her as badly.”

“I have a sneaking suspicion that has to do with a certain set of statues,” I whispered. “Still... how long can we even last out here? We're no good if we can't use our magic, Violet.”

“We'll have to make do, I guess. Until we can save Touch and stop Truth Seeker,” she replied.

I sighed, nodding. The streets we found ourselves on now were deathly silent. My eyes traced the lines

leading up to the ruined section of the palace. It was so close and yet so far away. The silence was killing me. There weren't even any guards chasing after us like there was before. What was Truth Seeker playing at? Why drive us into this part of the city?

A sucking sound from all around us told me everything I needed to know. *Ghouls*, I thought. *Of course*. A few red blips appeared on my E.F.S., showing up on each side of us. I unlatched Stargazer, struggling to hold the minigun up with my magic. Two crystalline feral ghouls appeared out of nowhere, sucking and howling. I fired a stream at the lead ghoul, hitting it directly in the chest. The bullets pinged off of the feral ghoul, and it continued to charge. My eyes widened. My gun had literally no effect on it! The sharp retort of Tempest's rifle cracked through the air, knocking the ghoul to the ground. It twitched, and stood back up. Patch leaped next to her armor-clad love, letting loose with Para Bellum. The massive rounds from her rifle took the legs clean off of the monstrosity.

"Violet, grab Featherjoy!" I shouted.

My love nodded, scooping the little griffon onto her back, while unlatching Thunder Flash. She unleashed several blasts of silver fire at the second ghoul, the crystalline creature falling back into a pile of glowing ooze. More sucking sounds came from all around us. We were surrounded by these things.

"Lilith, Nixis, take point. Patch, Steeljack, take the rear. We'll keep Featherjoy here, and protect her. And keep moving towards that tower!" I yelled.

My friends nodded, the lumbering hellhound moving to the forefront alongside the black pegasus.

We trotted through the streets, keeping as close as we could to each other. My hooves clipped softly on the crystal streets, while the sounds of the ghouls surrounded us. More and more red blips popped up on my E.F.S. I grimaced. A pack of the deadly beasts burst out of a nearby building. They charged, snarling and snapping as they were met by a barrage of fire. It took several minutes before the ghouls were dispatched. I wasn't sure how long we would last at this rate.

We continued forward, the ruined section of the palace tower looming closer. We were beginning to drag at this point. I groaned under the pressure of the void magic in the air. A cursory glance at the others indicated that they were beginning to feel it too. A loud roar followed by an explosion cut through the air behind us. I glanced back to see the largest ghoul I was pretty sure I'd ever seen in my adventures. It stood easily three times my size, larger than even Ahuitzotl. It was made of the same onyx crystal everything else was made of. It had burst straight through the wall of a building, and it looked *pissed*.

"Shit, everypony, run!" I shouted, feeling my strength return in a surge of adrenaline burst throughout my entire body. I began to run as hard as I could, the pain in my horn echoed by my aching legs. The others galloped next to me, the thunderous sound of our hooves ringing down the street. Nixis loped ahead of me, leaping into the air onto a building that had fallen over at an angle onto the tower's broken section. He motioned to us to follow him. The ghoul snarled, its onyx hide shining amongst the crystal streets. It plowed through the buildings behind us like they weren't even there. It was getting closer.

"Nixis! Take Featherjoy and get up to the palace!" Violet shouted. "I've got an idea!"

The hellhound nodded, lumbering back down to grab onto the young griffon. Featherjoy's eyes were wide with fear as she wrapped her claws around Nixis' neck. The canine charged up the side of the building as fast as he could move. I turned to Violet.

“What's on your mind, sweetie?” I said. “We don't have much time before that thing plows its way up here.”

“Right,” Violet said, grinning. “And we're gonna use that to get rid of it. Lilith, Patch, we're gonna bait that monster into the building and then blow the building out from under it.”

“I've certainly got enough explosives to do the job, but are we sure it'll get rid of it?” Patch asked.

Violet smiled amidst the roaring of the monster. “Not enough time to second guess, girls,” she said. “Steeljack, Star, follow Nixis and keep watch. Patch, you and I will set those charges and Lilith, you'll be the bait. I don't know anypony else that can fly fast enough to escape. No offense, Star.”

I nodded, flapping my wings to join the armor-clad stallion up on the ledge overlooking the ruined city. The ghoul was getting closer to the base of the building. I watched while Violet and Patch descended into one of the open windows, disappearing from view for several tense moments. Lilith stood ready, the Bitch sliding out of its harness.

“Come on!” she shouted down at the ghoul, getting its attention.

The onyx beast snarled and roared, placing its hooves on the base of the building. It started climbing up, growling and snapping. Lilith calmly waited as Violet and Patch reappeared. The two green mares galloped up the rest of the building as hard as they could, making it just in time as the ghoul loomed over the black pegasus. Lilith simply grinned, flapping her wings to push herself back as she unleashed the Bitch's payload. The missile shot forth from the launcher's barrel, striking the monster in its midsection. It howled in pain as it fell backwards, landing on the side of the building. Lilith shot into the air immediately, looking back at Patch and nodding.

“Got it!” Patch yelled, pulling out a small detonator out of her shoulder pocket. She pressed down on the button with a gleeful shout, and the whole world fell out beneath us as the explosive charges went off. The building began to crumble into pieces, the large ghoul falling through an open crack to the streets below. The tower section we were standing in shifted, groaning under the stress caused by the force of the explosion. Patch's eye widened. “Umm... that might have been a little too much...”

“What?!” we all exclaimed, glancing at her. The mare grinned sheepishly as pieces of crystal from the building below us cracked and began to fall. The tower section groaned before falling away under us. We all flinched as it smashed into the ground below.

“Shit!” I shouted. “We need to move, now!”

My hooves moved before my brain could even process what was happening. The others were right next to me as the shelf we had been standing on fell away. The ruined tower shifted beneath the pressure. We galloped fiercely across ornate crystal walls that were now floors. They groaned beneath our weight, before cracking and disappearing as well. I tried to get a grasp on the situation as we ran. We'd somehow managed to single handedly destroy the point that the tower had been resting on. The blast was just enough. I flared my horn, the pain obvious but lessening. The void magic in the air was small here, it seemed. I reached out with my magic, tearing a hole what appeared to be a floor in front of us. Beyond that, a massive spiral staircase stretched out horizontally towards the main base of the palace.

“Keep running!” I shouted, adrenaline pounding in my veins. My legs burned from the action, but I pushed forward. I had to keep going. I only hoped that we would be there in time to save Touch. We moved as

fast as we could, plowing through the crystal stairs that blocked our path. The tower seemed to stretch on forever. When was this thing going to end? Behind us the path fell away to the city below. The tower section shifted again, shuddering under the stress. I was worried that the whole thing was going to fall, but it held up as we ran.

I blasted through a large rotunda with a telekinetic blast, revealing that there was a large gap where the tower section had broken off from the rest of the palace. Below us a large room lay a good ten to fifteen feet where the rest of the crystal tower was. It was apparent that the shifting had resulted in the tower completely separating from its base. I glanced back, seeing that the tower was still crumbling behind us.

“We're gonna have to jump!” I called out. “I'll try and guide us down as easily as I can. Lilith, you take Featherjoy and fly down!”

Lilith nodded, snatching the young griffon and flipping her between her wings. She leaped from the broken tower and flew down towards the room, landing with grace. Nixis followed, jumping off with reckless abandon. He landed with a grunt next to the black pegasus.

“Steeljack, Patch, you're next!”

The two earth ponies leaped off at the same time, and I flared my horn, holding onto them with telekinesis to slow their fall. They landed on the crystal floor safely. I looked over at Violet.

“Ready whenever you are,” she said, fire alight in her eyes.

I grinned, igniting my horn again and wrapping my magic around the green mare. We jumped just as the rest of the tower fell away, spraying shards of crystal everywhere. I hit the ground with an **\*oomph\***, groaning as I rolled over, a particularly nasty shard striking the floor next to where my head had been. The air above was filled with crystal debris. My eyes widened and I reached into my mind for the magic. I could feel it much more clearly here. I cast Shining Armor's shield spell, extending the purple bubble over the top of the room. Crystal shards struck the shield hard, but it held.

“Is everypony alright?” Lilith said.

I grunted in response, finally dropping the shield spell when I was reasonably sure that the debris was gone.

“We're alright,” Patch said.

“I'm fine, too,” Nixis said. “This place... it feels different.”

“I can feel it too,” I said, pushing myself to four somewhat steady hooves. I began to feel something of my magic. It was better feeling than those void crystals. “It feels better, like there's none of those black crystals.”

“Yeah... I can feel my magic coming back,” Violet said, looking back up at where the tower section had been. “That... was not exactly something I'd like to do again, thank you very much.”

“Me neither. Now then, let's go pay Truth Seeker a visit,” I said, turning towards the only entrance in the room. The crystal door hung off the hinges, leading deeper into the palace. I stepped forward, unlatching Stargazer from its harness.

*Time to set you free, Touch.*

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The stairs leading down from the room we had ended up in were quiet. As much as the cliché irritated, they were a little too quiet. I stepped into the hallway, cautiously looking around for where to go next. A few blips shimmered into my E.F.S, and I motioned for the others to follow me. The hallway ended in a large staircase that rounded down towards what appeared to be the old palace's throne room. An eerie light shone through the massive hall. I grimaced. In the center of the room, floating in air, was Finishing Touch. He appeared to be bound in a cage of magic energy. He looked... pained and forlorn. Standing next to an altar was Truth Seeker. The crimson unicorn was grinning as he pored over several scrolls in front of him. He was surrounded by his unicorn guards. There was no easy way to do this, I figured. I stepped forward onto the balcony overlooking the throne room.

"Truth Seeker!" I shouted, revealing myself.

The red unicorn glanced up, a wry smile appearing on his face. "Welcome, Ministry Mare. I've been expecting you," he called out. "Did you enjoy your little adventure through the city?"

"Not particularly," I snorted. "I'm here to end this. *Now.*"

Truth Seeker chuckled. I hated villains that laughed like that. It was seriously annoying.

"It's a funny story," he said. "This place used to be a mighty empire in the days before the war. It was ruled by a loving princess, defended by a powerful artifact. But as they say, war never changes. It was during the war that the regime fell. An ancient evil, once defeated by this very empire, took root, and on the final day he struck. He spread his influence throughout as the megaspells dropped, raining chaos and death over everything. Even he was unable to survive the end of the world... well... he didn't, but many of his works did."

"This is lovely and all, but you're stalling, Truth Seeker," I snarled.

The unicorn's eyes flared a deep black. "Oh, I'm not stalling. I'm merely siphoning off the energy I need off of the creature," he said, licking his lips. "You see... that evil left his mark on this very land. I found its power, taking it into myself. Imagine the possibilities! Imagine how much power I will wield when I use this beast to destroy everything!"

"What?" I said, blinking. "What did you say? I thought... I thought..."

"I can be quite the actor sometimes," Truth Seeker said. "Yes... I am going to siphon off your friend's energy and then use that power to fuel a megaspell of epic proportions!"

"Star!!" Touch shouted from his magical cage. "You have to stop him! Don't worry about me, I'll be alright!"

The others fanned out on each side of me. Featherjoy looked upset. I didn't blame her.

"You're crazy," I said. "You can't be allowed to do this."

"It's far too late for that, Ministry Mare. I'm going to do it, and you can't stop me," Truth Seeker said.



One of the unicorn guards suddenly stepped out of the shadows, lifting his rifle and firing, cutting off the Magisterium leader from moving forward. I looked up, seeing a blue unicorn with a black mane standing on the other balcony. One of his legs was cybernetic.

“No, Truth Seeker. You're not going to do that,” he said.

Truth Seeker snarled, and Finishing Touch cried out in surprise.

“P-P-P-Professor?!!” he shouted.

Featherjoy whipped her head around, her eyes lighting up. “It's you!! Professor!” she called out.

“Touch, Featherjoy. It's good to see you both again,” the other unicorn said with a stiff nod. “I only wish that it were under better circumstances.” He glanced over at me. “Professor Osmosis, at your service.”

“Hello, Osmosis. It's been a long time. I thought you were dead,” Truth Seeker interjected, his black eyes glaring hatred at the other unicorn.

“You heard wrong, Truth Seeker. I've been following the Magisterium since you attacked me at the Museum,” the Professor said. “And now it's time for us to end this little game. Let my friend go, now. Let all of them go.”

“All of them?” I questioned.

Osmosis nodded. “Truth Seeker is well versed in the art of mind control, or rather, the power that he holds is,” he replied. “He's holding the Magisterium in his thrall. The group I helped build would never have sunk to this crude grave-robbing.”

“What? Professor, you never said anything about that!” Featherjoy exclaimed.

Osmosis hung his head and paused for a brief moment before meeting the young grifflet's gaze.

“I am not proud of this. But the Magisterium used to be so much more. We used to be the Seekers of Truth, dedicated to the secrets of the Wasteland, and how they could be used to help everypony,” he said. “Until Truth Seeker assumed control, that is.”

“I had grand designs!” Truth Seeker roared. “Grand plans for the future!”

“Your grand plans all ended in the destruction of ponykind as we know it,” Osmosis said calmly. “When we found this place... Truth Seeker changed. He accepted the void magic as though it were a part of him. He took control, and I left. I started my caravan, seeking the secrets of the world.”

“And then you met me?” Finishing Touch interjected.

Osmosis smiled softly. “You are an amazing creature, my friend. You have the potential to be incredibly good, or to be incredibly evil. You only have to take the right path,” he said, his voice light and happy. “I wanted to see you have that chance.”

“And now, you never will,” Truth Seeker spat. “You'll never stop me, Osmosis.”

His horn glowed a vicious black, firing a blast of energy at the blue unicorn. Osmosis leaped to the side, dodging the blast. He grunted, hitting the ground hard. I started to move forward to help him, but the blue stallion lifted a hoof.

“No, I'm fine. Let me handle this. It's my responsibility. I let him get this far,” he said. “You see about freeing Touch.”

“Fine, but don't get yourself killed,” I said, flapping my wings and taking to the sky.

Osmosis turned back to send a blast of raw magical energy at Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion jumped back, the blast striking the ground in front of him.

“Let's end this, Truth Seeker!” Osmosis yelled as he leaped off of the balcony, flaring his horn to slow his fall.

“Yes.. let's,” Truth Seeker replied.

He stepped forward, striking at Osmosis viciously with his hoof. The other stallion lifted his cybernetic leg, blocking the strike with a grin. He pushed back with a telekinetic wave, forcing Truth Seeker back. The crimson stallion's horn lit with that unnatural black light, firing his magic cancellation spell. Osmosis' telekinesis crumbled beneath the void magic.

“Still fighting dirty, eh Truth Seeker?” Osmosis said, narrowing his gaze.

“Fighting dirty? No... I'm playing for keeps, my friend,” Truth Seeker replied, flaring his horn again. It glowed black once more, a blast of dark energy whistling through the throne room.

Osmosis dove to the side, countering with his own blast and striking Truth Seeker in the side. The dark stallion cringed as the energy hit. Osmosis stood, a smile on his face.

“Give up, old friend. You know as well as I do that I could research better than you,” he said.

“You're going to pay for that, Osmosis,” Truth Seeker snarled. “What could you possibly know more than I? The great Inquisitor!”

“I know that the void magic in this place is slowly rejecting you. You're not the only one who can harness its power,” Osmosis replied wryly.

His horn ignited, glowing a deep navy color. He unleashed his magic, knocking the crimson stallion to the ground. I pulled my attention away from the fight to look over the magical cage holding Finishing Touch. The cage was simple in its construction, made of the same onyx crystal that had littered this entire fucking city. I groaned, reaching out with my magic to blast the lock open. The feedback from the crystals was immediate. I nearly dropped out of the sky from the pain. Grunting, I threw my willpower against the pain and started fighting back.

“Come on... open up!” I shouted angrily, blasting at the cage again. The crystals resisted even more. I glared at Touch. “Can't you just slip out of there?”

“I tried already. Something in the cage won't let me out,” Touch said. “Sorry...”

"Listen, I know this is a bad time and all," I said, flaring my horn again. "But I really appreciate what you did earlier. It took a lot of guts not to just give in."

The purple being smiled. "I only wanted to protect you and Featherjoy," he said. "That's all I ever wanted..."

"I knew you had it in you," I said, smiling widely. "Now... let's get you out of there."

I ignited my horn, beating as hard as I could against the void magic inhabiting the black crystals. This time, I focused on simply freeing my friend, instead of trying to crack the magic shell. I thought about how much I wanted to be in his company, about how he made me feel. He was a friend, and I wasn't about to let that friend down. I had to free him. The onyx cage began to crack and shudder under my assault, and my eyes widened. The key to beating the void magic wasn't brute force. It wasn't overpowering it with your magic.

It was friendship. Pure and unadulterated friendship. It was a magic that worked wonders. I grinned, sending an image of Touch and Featherjoy, happy and laughing at some joke of Steeljack's. The cage sprung into slivers, shattering completely and freeing my purple gelatinous friend. Touch leaped from the broken cage, landing on the balcony with a splash next to the rest of our friends. Featherjoy jumped off of Violet's back, rushing forward to tackle Touch in a fierce hug. I smiled. A flash of light drew my attention to the fight below us. Truth Seeker snarled, hurling another bolt of dark energy towards the good Professor. Osmosis smiled and simply stepped to the side, letting the bolt pass by.

"Why... won't... you... just... DIE!!!" Truth Seeker roared, igniting the darkness of his horn once more. Another magic cancellation wave appeared from its tip, this one much larger than his previous blasts. The magic poured forth, moving to capture Osmosis in its deadly grip. The blue stallion stood tall with nowhere to go, holding his head high against his enemy's assault.

"Osmosis, no!" I shouted.

The blue unicorn smiled softly as the magic wave struck him.

Nothing happened. Osmosis stood there, his horn glowing a brilliant blue. The dark magic surrounded him on all sides, floating in the air as he directed it back towards Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion fell backwards, hitting the ground with a **\*crash\*** as the magic wave slammed right into his side. The void in the air fell away around Osmosis, who stood over his rival triumphantly. He moved next to Truth Seeker, who appeared to be unconscious and still breathing. I flapped my wings, landing next to the blue unicorn. He glanced over at me briefly and then back down to Truth Seeker.

"I'm sorry, brother," he said. "But you never did understand the nature of friendship. That's the secret to beating the void magic, after all."

"Brother?!" I said, my eyes wide.

Osmosis nodded. "Yes. Truth Seeker wasn't always so bad," he replied. "He was too impulsive however. Never one for staying in one place and researching. In my time searching this place, I found out quite a bit about the magic here. The void crystals... they are rough on everypony. But with good friends and a goal in mind, one can survive their effects."

"P-P-P-Professor?" a voice said from behind us.

The blue unicorn turned, seeing Finishing Touch standing there. The stallion smiled.

“Finishing Touch,” he said. “It's so good to see you again, my friend.”

Before Touch could respond, several unicorns that belonged to the Magisterium charged into the room. I snarled, lifting Stargazer.

Osmosis lifted a hoof, stopping me. “No. They will threaten you no longer. They are now remembering who they once were.”

“Osmosis?” one of the unicorns asked from the balcony. “What is the meaning of this? What's going on?”

“My dear friends, you have been under control of one who was thought to be trusted,” Osmosis said, addressing the group of unicorns. He motioned to Truth Seeker. “Truth Seeker controlled your minds. He made you do things to steal the secrets of the Wasteland for himself and himself alone. He is to blame.”

“Then we should kill him!” the unicorn shouted back angrily. “Dispose of that traitor, now!”

Osmosis shook his head in negation. I could see that he was firm in his conviction, in his belief that his brother could be better.

The stallion continued, a thread of compassion softening his voice. “Look, I know he's your brother, Osmosis... but even you can't ignore this.”

“No. Truth Seeker deserves punishment, but he also deserves our kindness. He should be taken back to Canterbridge, where we can help him. This place, this magic, it has poisoned him,” Osmosis said. “I beseech you to see reason, and do the right thing.”

The assembled unicorns mulled over the Professor's words for several moments. They fell silent as a group before another unicorn spoke.

“How do you know we aren't going to just get mind controlled again?” the unicorn said.

Osmosis smiled, lifting an item out of his saddlebag. It was a horn ring, made of metal.

“An inhibitor ring? Are you sure it will work?” the unicorn asked.

“It will if we all work together to keep him under wraps. Now, will you help me?” Osmosis said.

“Fine, fine,” the other unicorn replied. “We'll do as you say, honored Professor. Or should we call you Inquisitor now?”

“No no. The Magisterium is no more. The honor of the Magisterium is tainted, perhaps ruined. We were just simple ponies once, my friends. It is time that we return to our simple roots, and use our knowledge to help others,” Osmosis said.

The other unicorns nodded, stepping forward. They collected the ring from Osmosis and fit it to the unconscious form of Truth Seeker. The crimson stallion was lifted into the air and placed in a set of manacles.

“We shall prepare the caravan for travel, then,” the lead unicorn said as the throng of former Magisterium ponies filed out of the palace doors.

I cocked an eyebrow at the blue unicorn. “I’m not sure exactly where you’re heading, but there’s a town north of here called Arlington. They’ve fallen on some rough times, dealing with Steel Rangers and all. They could use a little help,” I said.

Osmosis nodded in response.

“I believe we can make a stop there and lend some assistance,” he said. “Provided that I have my two favorite helpers with me.” He glanced over at Finishing Touch and Featherjoy and smiled.

“You mean... us?” Featherjoy asked, her voice tiny.

She looked up at me as if asking permission. I nodded, and the grifflet charged forward, wrapping her little claws around Osmosis’ leg. The blue stallion chuckled.

“Of course, Featherjoy. I always prefer to be in the company of my friends, after all,” Osmosis said, lowering himself to the young griffon’s level. “Featherjoy... I’m so sorry about what you had to go through, about what you had to see. When Truth Seeker’s guards came to us at the Museum, I thought maybe that I could get you two away so they couldn’t capture you. I was ready to give my life to protect you both.”

“About that...” Touch said, interrupting. “How did you get out of there? When we were running away, it nearly looked like your leg was shot clean off.”

Osmosis grinned, tapping his cybernetic leg with a hoof. “They hit the wrong leg, of course. I had wanted to tell you about my... affliction, but I never really had a good time to approach the subject. Not many ponies like cybernetics, but if I hadn’t been this way, I really would be dead right now,” the Professor said. He looked up at me. “And you must be the Ministry Mare that Touch has told me so much about.”

“That would be me,” I replied. “And this here is Violet, Patch, Steeljack, Nixis, and Lilith. My friends.”

The others waved, smiling at the blue stallion. Osmosis smiled in return.

“Professor Osmosis at your service. I do apologize for the actions of my brother. He never used to be so bad,” he said. “I suppose now we should get things in order to leave this dreadful place. Touch, Featherjoy, I would like for you two to join us in Canterbridge. There, you can both have a home.”

“I... I don’t... I don’t know, Professor,” Touch stammered. “What if I –?”

Osmosis stepped forward, placing a hoof on the gooey creature’s shoulder, stopping him.

“Touch. I’ve seen you at your best and at your worst. Do not let some predetermined notion of destiny tell you what you should become. You make your *own* fate, my friend. You. Not some goddess up in the sky,” he said. “Be who you want to be. Not what you - or others! Think you should be.”

Touch fell silent, thinking on the Professor’s words. He looked over at me, and I nodded softly.

“Yes,” Touch finally said. “I’ll come with you. I want to be good, Professor. I want to spend time with

Featherjoy, and I want to work more on my art. I want to be your friend.”

“Excellent. We will leave in the morning, then.”

\* \* \*

I trotted along, following behind the others as we migrated out of the palace and back into the plaza. The air was thick still with the void crystal's magic, making the journey rather sluggish. The rest of Osmosis' group was waiting for us to arrive. They had managed to rustle up a few carts, one of them holding Truth Seeker. The crimson unicorn had yet to awaken since his fight with Osmosis. The blue unicorn motioned to a route leading outside of the ancient city that would safely keep us out of ghoulish territory.

Within the hour we had made it out of the city proper and on the road. Just up the road from the massive empire we left behind was an abandoned power station which would serve as a resting place for us. I dragged myself into the office of the station, slumping down in the corner. Despite the fact that I had been able to overcome the cage holding onto Finishing Touch, I was still having problems with the void magic that had been present in the city. I glanced up, seeing the Smooze himself. He sat down next to me, a crude smile formed on his face.

“Hey,” I said, lifting a hoof.

Finishing Touch nodded, and plopped next to me. “We're leaving at first light,” he said wistfully. “I wanted to get a chance to talk to you before we left.”

“What about?” I said, cocking an ear in his direction.

“I... I wanted to thank you. For taking care of Featherjoy,” he said. “And for believing in me.”

“Touch... I never stopped believing in you,” I said, facing him. “You are good, and you have a wonderful friend in the young griffon.”

“I have a wonderful friend in *you*, Radiant Star. You of all ponies kept reminding me of how good I can be,” Touch said with a goopy smile. “I wish we could stay around and help you.”

“You don't want to go where we are headed, Touch,” I said. “The road ahead... it's going to be long and hard. But it's a road I must travel if I am to stop Spark. Besides... you're getting a home! Life will only be looking up for you and Featherjoy.”

“I am happy for that,” Touch replied. “But I cannot help but worry that the others will regard me as Truth Seeker did, as a tool to be used...”

“They won't,” I argued. “You'll show them. You just have to trust yourself. Yourself and your friends, Touch. Trust the Professor and Featherjoy. They'll be right there with you.”

“I know, I guess I'm just overthinking things,” he said, chuckling. The purple creature stood, a sigh rumbling from his wobbly body. “I think that I am going to turn in for the night. I will see you in the morning, Star.”

“Sleep well, my friend,” I said.

Touch slid away as Violet trotted up. My little mare laid down next to me, nuzzling my neck.

"I'm glad that everything turned out okay," she said quietly, pulling away and rubbing the base of her forehead.

I kissed her softly on the cheek. "Feeling alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a little sore still. My horn is still a little raw from that void magic," she replied with a nod. "I've never felt anything quite like that before."

"Me neither. It was kind of crazy," I said, extending my wing over my love's back. "Don't worry, the feeling will go away after a while. I'm already starting to feel way better."

"You're an alicorn, silly," Violet said, rolling her eyes. "I'd be kind of scared if you weren't healed up by now."

I chuckled, resting my head next to hers. "Well," I said, yawning. "I think I'm gonna try and get some sleep. Goodnight, sweetheart."

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I looked up, groaning loudly. The door to the library lay open as always, a soft light beckoning for me to enter. I stood, stretching my legs out. I trotted into the treehouse, wondering what Twilight wanted next for me. I found the purple mare sitting at her desk, her back turned to me. I coughed softly to get her attention. Twilight's head cocked back slightly, regarding my presence. Her eyes were a bit red and puffy, as if she had been crying.

"Twilight?" I said. "What's... what's wrong?"

The other alicorn sighed heavily. "I... I wanted to talk to you," she said. "About your last visit... I wanted to apologize for how I acted."

I smiled softly, settling onto my haunches in front of the mare.

"Aww, Twilight," I said. "It's alright. If our positions were reversed I probably would have done the same."

"Still... I owe you a lot. Seeing what you did for your friends... you reminded me of a long time ago," Twilight said.

"Speaking of that... I want to ask you something," I said, narrowing my gaze at her. "I want to know about the intervention. When the Elements tried to kill Spark."

Twilight's eyes widened, and she glanced away. I could tell this was a sore subject for her.

"My friends... they were so worried about me that they thought they needed to confront me over my brother's death. They didn't quite understand how bad things had really gotten," she said. "The war was stressing all of the Ministry's resources, and the I.M.P. Project was in full swing."

"And Spark's plans?" I asked. "How did she figure into that?"

“Spark... I didn't know at the time what she really wanted. I didn't find that out until... well, until I cast the spell,” Twilight said. “At the intervention, I was in the middle of discussing with my friends how I was just fine when Spark overloaded my mind. I felt a pain like no other. I only knew that I had to escape.”

“What did Spark tell you?” I said.

“She... she said that the Elements tried to kill her. That they tried to sever the connection between us,” Twilight replied. “I was frightened. I was worried that it would happen again. From that point forward; I focused on - no, I hid my projects at the Ministry.”

“I... I see,” I said softly.

“My friends tried to do what they could, but the war was taxing them as well. The harder we all worked towards a brighter future... the worse our friendship had become,” Twilight said. “Then the end of the world happened... and I found myself inside the Goddess.”

“What exactly happened to Spark after that?” I asked. “I never did truly understand that.”

“I don't think I have the answer for you on that one, Star. I only know what's happened since the connection between us was established,” Twilight replied. “Trixie never really let me out that often. I suspect that she was jealous of the attention I had received... before. I mean, I was a Princess, and then the Ministry Mare.”

I sighed, glancing at my hooves. This mare... she was just like me in a lot of ways. I looked back up at Twilight.

“What was it like?” I said, catching the purple alicorn off guard.

“What do you mean?” Twilight said.

“Being a Princess. Being the Ministry Mare. Being you...” I said.

“It... It was something that I'd rather not talk about right now,” she said. “Life in Equestria... in old Equestria... it's something I miss dearly.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Fair enough,” I said. “What now?”

“Now? Well, now we get on our way to finding Spark. You mentioned before that we were going to Manehattan?” Twilight said.

“There's a group of ponies there I believe can help us,” I said. “They're called the Twilight Society.”

“Good. The sooner we find Spark, the sooner we can end this,” Twilight said.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke to the soft light of the power station office, sighing. Violet lay next to me still, murmuring in her sleep. I chanced a tiny smile, the scene was simply too cute. I laid there for several moments, listening to her breathing. When I tried to concentrate on the peaceful joy of the moment, my thoughts turned to Twilight. I



wasn't quite sure what to make of the purple mare. She seemed like she was trying to help me, but at the same time I wondered just how bad things had gotten for her. Violet shifted next to me, yawning as she awoke. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled as she looked up at me.

"Morning, sweetheart," she said.

A smile crept along my face. "You're cute when you talk in your sleep you know that?" I said.

Violet's face flushed red. It was highly adorable and totally worth it.

"I-I-I am not!" she stammered.

"What were you dreaming about, eh?" I said, dropping my head closer to her. "Some hot sexy flank? Or just me?"

Violet's eyes popped open wide, and her blush ran deeper. I was having fun with this.

I chuckled, nuzzling her close. "I'm just messing with you, Violet. You can turn down the blush. Glad to see you're feeling better."

"I... I umm... Yeah. I'm feeling much better," she said. "The headache is gone, at least."

I nodded, lifting my wing off of my lovely mare. I stood, stretching my legs out. I looked across the room, noticing that Steeljack and Patch were sleeping on opposite sides of the area. In fact, it seemed as if Patch was sleeping apart from even Lilith and Nixis, who were situated in the same side of the room as Steeljack was. I narrowed my eyes at this. At some point, I was going to need to talk to Patch about what was going on. But right now, I needed to speak to Osmosis and the others.

I trotted out of the substation into the brisk morning Wasteland air. The former Magisterium ponies were packing up their supplies already. The rest of my friends appeared from the depths of the power station as I trotted up to Osmosis and Touch. I smiled widely.

"Radiant Star," Osmosis said. "I wish that we could stay longer, but unfortunately... we've been gone from our home for far too long."

"You deserve it, after going through so much," I said. "Hopefully one of these days we'll meet again."

"One can only hope," Osmosis replied.

"What about Truth Seeker?" I asked.

"My brother is currently under heavy sedation. I plan to keep him there for the duration of the trip. Despite my feelings towards him as family, I cannot afford to be careless in his imprisonment," Osmosis said. "It is going to take some time to treat him. The void magic of that place made significant alterations to him."

"Is there any hope for him?" Violet said.

Osmosis smiled. "There's always hope. It will take all the effort of the Seekers of Truth to find a cure for him, but we will find it. I will see to it personally," he said.

“Seekers of Truth?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Yes... it is time for us to go back to the ways of the past, and help others because they need help. The Magisterium was a grab for titles and structures of the past. Now, we must adapt if we are to meet the needs of the Wasteland,” Osmosis said. “Besides, the Magisterium and the High Inquisitor was Truth's deal. It leaves quite a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Understandable. It is a good change. So you'll be going back to where you're from, then?” I said.

Osmosis nodded. “If you ever find yourself in the area of Canterbridge, please feel free to stop in. You will be more than welcome. Now then, I have business to attend to, so I will leave you to say your goodbyes.” The blue unicorn turned and trotted away to talk to the other unicorns. Touch and Featherjoy stood to the side, bright smiles plastered all over their faces.

“I want to tell you all about how thankful I am for what you all have done,” Finishing Touch said. “You helped us when we needed it the most, and you helped me most of all.”

“You're a friend,” Violet said. “We couldn't turn you down.”

“Exactly,” Patch said. “You helped us get out of that Museum, after all. We owed you a solid.”

Touch chuckled at this. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Featherjoy inching closer to me. I grinned, reaching out with my magic and lifting the grifflet into the air. Featherjoy laughed loudly as I set her down onto my back. I trotted away from the group while they were saying their farewells.

“I'm going to miss you, little one,” I said quietly. “You have such a long journey ahead of you, I hope that your travels with Touch go well.”

“Thanks, Missus Star,” Featherjoy replied. “I'm gonna miss you too. Are you... are you gonna be okay?”

“I shall be fine, Featherjoy,” I said with a nod. “I have my friends. They will give me the strength I need to move forward. You must promise me something.”

“What's that?” Featherjoy said.

“Do the same. Move forward. Draw strength from your friends. Give strength back to them. It is all we can do in this world, to keep each other safe. Can you do that for me?” I asked softly.

Featherjoy's eyes widened and she nodded. “I... I will... I promise,” she said. “Missus Star?”

“Yes, little one?” I replied.

“Promise me you'll be alright? I don't want anything bad to happen to you,” Featherjoy said.

I smiled, looking away from the young griffon and back at the others.

“I... I promise. I'll try to do my best, Featherjoy. Don't worry, little one. You'll hear about me on the radio,” I said. “Just keep your ears dialed to DJ-PON3.”

"I sure will!" Featherjoy said enthusiastically. The young griffon jumped off of my back, running over to meet her friend. I lifted a hoof and waved at the two as Violet stepped up next to me.

"Think they'll be alright?" Violet said.

I looked down at her and back at the two friends. Osmosis smiled brightly as they started down the road. They followed behind the caravan, chatting as Featherjoy zipped around them happily.

"I think they'll be just fine," I said. "Now then... we have a city to get to."

Violet nodded, a smile forming on her face. "That's right," she said. "Manhattan it is!"

We started down the road, the morning air keeping us in halfway decent spirits. I noticed that Patch was still keeping to herself, but I was in no position to address that at the moment. Patch deserved her time to come to me on her own. I couldn't force her to tell me what was going on. All I could do is hope she would talk to me. My mind turned to the road ahead. What was Spark up to now? And where did our road end? Could I keep my promise to Featherjoy?

My mind swam with all these thoughts and more as we walked down the road. I nearly missed the blinking marker on my E.F.S. I stopped dead in my tracks. I turned my head to the left of the road, the marker coming into full view. I flipped open my PipBuck's automap function. The blinking arrow was pointed towards a map marker labeled *Ministry of Arcane Science – Branch Hub*.

"Hold on... Violet, did you get a map marker too?" I said.

My marefriend cocked her head at me. "No?" she questioned. "Why?"

"I just had one show up. It's for a M.A.S. Hub," I said. "It wasn't there before. And it's blinking. I don't like that it's blinking."

"Weird. I don't know, Star. We're still days away from Manhattan. We should probably stay on task," Violet said.

"You're probably --" I started to say as my horn ignited, blazing a brilliant purple. My hooves started sliding beneath me as I was physically dragged by my horn towards the blinking marker. My eyes widened as I tried to cut off whatever spell I had instinctively cast, but I couldn't get it to drop. I resorted to the only thing I knew how to do. "Violet!! Stop this crazy thing!"

"Star! Try and cut off the spell!" Violet shouted, giving chase after me.

I couldn't even shake my head in response. "Tried that!" I called back, as I bumped into a big rock in my path. The rock dragged and rasped my hide as I was drug over it. "Ouch!! Watch it would ya?!"

I heard my friends shouting as they ran after me, and I groaned. *I guess they did always say that unicorn magic works in mysterious ways*, I thought as I floated over the next hill. I couldn't even see where I was going! I tried to turn my head, but it wouldn't turn. I closed my eyes, sighing. My horn stopped as quickly as it had started, depositing me onto the ground with a **\*thud\***. I sat up, groaning. The building in front of me was huge. It's four spires towered above the Wasteland, standing vigilant against the world. One of them was missing its top, having been destroyed by either the megaspells or by the change of time. The map marker on my E.F.S. was blinking intensely now. I narrowed my gaze at the Ministry hub. Something wanted me to come here. I wasn't

quite sure why.

“Star! There you are!” a voice from behind me exclaimed.

I turned back to see the others appearing over the ridge. I breathed a sigh of relief as Violet came galloping up to me. I lifted a hoof in greeting.

“Looks like we're here anyways,” I said, glancing back up at the building.

“Yeah,” Violet said. “I have a bad feeling about this, Star.”

“I am in agreement with Violet,” Nixis said. “This place is... ominous.”

“Still... I have to find out why I'm here. There has to be a reason for it,” I said, unlatching Stargazer from its harness. “Besides, maybe we'll find some clue to locating Spark. It's a Ministry of Arcane Science hub after all.”

The others nodded, preparing their gear. I grinned. It was nice to know my friends were always behind me. I turned back towards the M.A.S. Hub, trotting up to its entrance. The doors were hanging off the hinges, revealing a large lobby. I stepped inside cautiously. When nothing tried to zap, electrify, blast, shoot, or stab me, I trotted in further.

The lobby was completely ruined. Skeletons littered the floor, and black scorch marks covered every discernible wall. Propaganda posters hung from the ceiling, burnt and charred. The image of Twilight Sparkle looked out from each one, a smile on her face. The smell of death lingered in the air. I stood there, taking it all in. The room was eerily quiet. The soft hoof falls of me and my friends were the only sounds. I moved forward, the blinking arrow on my E.F.S. beckoning me towards the large set of double doors in the back of the lobby. The doors swung open without issue, revealing a long branching hallway. A set of offices lay on the left as we stalked down the hall. The terminals sitting on the desks were lit up still, each of them bearing the sigil of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I narrowed my eyes as I focused on where the arrow was pointing.

“Any idea why we're here yet?” Violet said.

“I'm more concerned as to why there's no security active,” I replied with a shake of my head. “Most Ministry hubs we've been to are loaded to the teeth with active Ponitrons.”

“Yeah...” Lilith said. “Usually I'm cracking robot skull by now. Something here doesn't add up.”

I nodded. This whole thing was weird, and getting weirder. We had to be here for a reason, so where was it? We continued forward to the end of the hall, where an open door leading to a set of stairs lay. The arrow on my E.F.S. blinked faster and faster. I glanced up the stairs, hoping that nothing was going to come screaming down at us. When nothing happened whatsoever, I stepped inside and started up the stairs. The stairs were in pristine condition, despite how bad the rest of the Ministry hub was. The stairs led past many visibly locked doors, giant padlocks adorning each one of the entrances. The only one that wasn't locked lay at the very top of the stairwell. I pulled open the door, and gasped.

“What the...?” I said, cocking my head. The door had opened up into a large office, one that looked fairly familiar. It bore the same motif as all the other offices that had belonged to Twilight Sparkle that I'd seen. The carpet held the cutie mark of the Ministry Mare herself, and a massive purple crystal sat at the far end of the office. What was worst however, were the signs. Large arrows, blinking bright neon green and purple, were

pointed towards the desk in the center of the room. I blinked. This whole thing reeked of a certain god of Chaos.

“Discord...” I said under my breath. “Engineer for the Equestrian Railroad Company.” I drew a deep breath and shouted. “Show yourself! Are you there?!”

There was no answer. I narrowed my gaze and followed where the signs pointed. In the center of the desk, lay a plush pillow. Sitting on it was a memory orb. A sign above it read *Watch me if you dare...* My mind clicked, and I realized that it was him. He was the one leaving the memory orbs. It had to be him. But... why? Why was he doing this?

“What the hell?” Violet said. “Why would he...?”

“I don't know but I know he's here somewhere,” I said angrily. “Discord!! Come out here and face me!” I stepped into the center of the room, unlatching Stargazer. “Where are you?!”

The answer I got was something that I didn't expect. The crystal at the other end of the room began to crack, steam pouring forth from its seams. My eyes widened as the crystal shattered completely. Whispers emanated from the remnants of the crystal.

*“She's here...”*

*“Yes... she's here...”*

*“Let us... greet her...”*

I suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this. Four ghostly white alicorns appeared from the remnants of the crystal. Their manes were blonde, and their eyes were blood red. They licked their lips in unison as their wings flared out.

“Umm... Star?” Violet said. “I think we should... you know... maybe run now?”

The four ghostly mares started forward, grinning evilly.

*“She cannot be allowed to leave... she is the Goddess...”* the four mares said at once. They opened their mouths at once and began to... sing?

*“The Goddess Twilight cometh... behold... behold...”*

*“A Goddess here before us... behold...”*

I shuddered at the sound. Their song was haunting, and that same time the creepiest fucking thing I'd ever heard in my life. I staggered backwards, my eyes widening as the four leaped into the air. They screeched like bloodwings, their mouths opening and revealing rows of razor sharp teeth. *What the fuck are these things?!!* I thought as I frantically dove to the side, just barely dodging the first of the white monsters as it swooped over. I grimaced, lifting Stargazer and firing a blast of fire at the ghostly alicorns. The bullets struck, but appeared to do absolutely nothing. Violet chimed in with a stream of silver fire from Thunder Flash, but even that had no effect.

“Everypony, out!” I shouted.

We turned to find that the door had shut closed tight. Steeljack yanked at the door handle. It refused to budge. The monstrous alicorns hung in the air above us, cackling wildly.

*“The Goddess Twilight... she is ours...”*

*“Yes... ours... she will be ours...”*

I narrowed my eyes at the four mares.

“Nixis, get the door. I'll see if I can draw their fire and grab that memory orb,” I said.

The hellhound nodded and lumbered towards the door. I growled, unleashing a steady stream of bullets at the white creatures. They hissed violently, their attention turned away from the canine tearing the door apart at its seams. My friends quickly exited the office as the white alicorns dove down at me. I jumped back as one of the monsters snapped at me, sinking a bite into my shoulder. I howled in pain, igniting my horn and pushing the ghostly mare back with a blast of telekinesis.

“What the hell are you?!” I yelled as another one of the monstrous things attacked, buffeting me with her wings. I fell back, hitting the ground hard next to the desk. I pushed myself off the floor, glancing over at the memory orb. I quickly scooped it into my hooves, letting the PipBuck inventory spell do its work. I would have to view it later, it seemed. A flash of wing hit me in the face and I growled as I felt one of the ghostly mares lift me into the air. I struggled to escape her embrace. “Let me go!!”

*“You are the Goddess Twilight... you are ours...”*

*“Yes... The Goddess...”*

The mare's face was inches from my own now, her blood red eyes flaring. A snake-like tongue lashed out of her mouth, caressing my cheek lovingly. I roared, flaring my horn and casting my gravity spell at the mare. The spell took hold, jerking the alicorn away from me and bouncing it off the ceiling. I spread my wings, dropping to the floor. The white mare struck the ceiling with intense force. The other three mares snarled as they moved to fly after their companion.

“Go find yourself another Goddess,” I said, charging up my horn. “I'm not interested.” I released the magic into a teleportation spell, reappearing on the other side of the door next to my friends. I turned to Violet. “Run!”

The flight down the stairs was terrifying as the first of the ghostly beasts appeared at the top. It screeched loudly as it flew down after us. We hit the bottom of the stairwell hard, charging into the main Ministry hub hallway. The sounds of panicked hooves hitting the concrete accompanied the frenzied screams of the three remaining alicorns.

*“Come back... Goddess...”*

*“Come back...”*

*“You are ours... Goddess...”*

I galloped as hard as I could, flaring my horn and breaking through the door to the lobby. I grimaced,

reaching out with my magic and picking up a nearby chair. I tossed it at the doors, breaking them apart at their hinges. We landed back in the Wasteland with a **\*thud\***, groaning loudly. The monsters struck the front wall of the Ministry hub, screeching and howling. I narrowed my eyes as they sat in front of the open door, hissing at us.

“They can't leave,” Violet said breathlessly. “Why can't they...?”

“I don't know, and I don't care,” I said. “Whatever those things are... I don't even want to know.”

I stood, grimacing. What in the hell was Discord thinking, sending us in there? My mind drifted back to the signs and the obvious nature of the trap in that office. The God of Chaos had to be behind it. But then... why didn't he show himself? It wasn't in his nature to hide like this. What was his angle? “We should go. We need to get to Manehattan.”

Violet smiled and I turned away from the Ministry Hub. I glanced at my PipBuck's automap. The blinking icon that had led me here was gone, and Manehattan was still roughly two days away. It was going to be a long trip.

\* \* \*

We started the long walk back towards the road, nopony talking much. My mind swam with thoughts of the past several days, of Twilight and Spark, and of the realization that Discord had been leaving the mystery memory orbs. That last part really scared the hell out of me. Several hours into our trudge, I decided it would be a good idea to flick on the radio and see if there was any more news about Spark. The rough and tumble voice of DJ-PON3 came through the PipBuck's speaker loud and clear.

*“Hellooooo kiddies out there in the Equestrian Wasteland! This is DJ-PON3, your voice in the darkness! I've got some news out there for all you fine Wasteland folk.*

*We've got some more news about everypony's favorite Ministry Mare, friends. It seems that the Mare herself has been seen up north assisting a group I only know as the Seekers of Truth. Their leader, the friendly and fantastic Professor Osmosis, told us all about how the Ministry Mare saved him and his friends in some dark and scary ruins of an ancient empire. The Professor expresses his gratitude to the Ministry Mare! Good on you, Ministry Mare. Way to fight the good fight.*

*And now... some more news on that mystery alicorn that was seen attacking some of the outlying settlements in Manehattan. It appears that this mystery-corn has moved on, with no real reason as to why she has disappeared. Thankfully, nopony was hurt in the attacks. Sources say that the mysterious alicorn is out of the city now and moving east towards the Everfree Forest.*

*And that's it for the news! I'm DJ-PON3, and now it's time for some music! We've got a little Velvet Remedy lined up for you, so sit back, and relax!”*

I narrowed my eyes at the radio broadcast. The Everfree Forest? Why would Spark be going there? Regardless, we needed to go to Manehattan in order to speak with Homage and the Twilight Society. They had to know something about Spark. She couldn't just waltz through their city and them not know anything. My thoughts drifted to the memory orb in my bags. I was going to have to view it soon, I knew that. It had to have some information, otherwise why put us through the trouble of getting it?

Further down the road we found ourselves near an abandoned set of office buildings. The sky was

beginning to darken, and I motioned for the others to follow. After checking out one of the buildings, we decided to hunker down for the evening and make camp. I ignited my horn, setting fire to the debris we had assembled. Our makeshift campfire illuminated us as we settled into our first break in what seemed to be weeks of running and shooting and hiding. I watched on as Steeljack and Nixis played their unusual game, chatting amongst themselves while Lilith sat nearby. Patch sat off to the side by herself, staring sadly out the window. Violet lay next to me, snoring softly as she slept.

I opened my bags, pulling out the memory orb from the Ministry Hub. I glanced back at the others, and back to it. I reached out with my magic, taking a hold onto the orb, feeling the world fall away into nothingness.

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I knew immediately the body that I was inhabiting. By now, Twilight's body had become second nature, probably because it felt like that body was my own. It was weird... the longer I journeyed to get myself back to being me, the more I felt like... her. Was I losing myself somewhere along the way? I didn't have much time to think more on this as I adjusted to my surroundings. The purple mare was walking along a rope bridge, a massive ruined castle looming in the distance. She stepped onto the stone steps leading up to the gates.

*So... this is it*, a voice said from behind Twilight's thoughts.

My host narrowed her gaze at the doors leading into the ruins. "All this planning, all this plotting," she said. "It's all led up to this. Are you ready, Spark?"

*I was born ready, Twilight*, Spark said. *Let's get this show on the road.*

Twilight nodded, reaching out with her magic and pushing open the gates. The mare stepped through, trotting through the hallway that extended deep into the castle ruins. Thunder sounded from outside the castle, and the soft pitter patter of rain filtered in through the holes in the massive ceiling, causing water to splash up from the cracked stone. Twilight stopped at one of the sets of stairs leading up into one of the spires and started a slow trot up them. My host exited the stairwell into what appeared to be a throne room. Two broken thrones sat at the end of room, emblazoned with the visages of the sun and moon.

"When Sun and Moon meet, Twilight connects them both," my host whispered as she stepped down into the center of the throne room. "It seems like so long ago that we defeated Nightmare Moon here."

*Those times are long gone*, Spark mused.

"Still, I miss them, Spark. I do wish the days when all I had to worry about was how many tickets my friends would get to the Gala would come back," my host said.

Spark tittered in the back of her mind. *After we do this, we will be able to make that happen*, she said.

My host narrowed her eyes at the ground, nodding. She paused for a brief moment before continuing forward.

"Right," my host said. "Time to get ready."

Her horn flared a majestic purple, opening what appeared to be some sort of dimensional pocket. An altar fashioned from obsidian appeared from within, floating over to lay in the middle of the room. A black casket followed closely behind, resting comfortably upon the stone slab. Twilight smiled painfully, continuing



the spell as she floated out several more objects of note. Four braziers rested in a square around the obsidian slab, while a small table with several items on it sat outside of the ritual area. Twilight closed the portal and trotted over to the table.

“Now, let's see,” she said, levitating out a clipboard with a checklist attached. I nearly died of laughter. Even while committing a spell that for all intensive purposes could be considered evil, the Ministry Mare was still ridiculously organized. “Blood of a changeling, mane of a zebra... thank you Zecora, the essence of a rainbow, the scales of a dragon... and finally, the Element of Magic...” Her hoof ran over the familiar gold tiara. She smiled as she levitated the crown to her brow. “I think that's everything.”

***Yes... everything is in place,*** Spark said.

Twilight looked over at the casket, tears forming in her eyes. She trotted over and ignited her horn, lifting the top away from the box. Shining Armor's body lay inside of the casket, as clean and pristine as the day he lived.

“It was difficult to get ahold of your body, my brother,” she said. “I had to really work to keep it a secret, after all. But no matter. I will do what I must, and bring you back.”

My host smiled as her horn worked, lifting the various ingredients into the air above the casket. With a flash, the four braziers lit, illuminating the throne room with a soft light. Thunder roared from outside the castle walls, adding to the dark nature of the ritual. A vial of glowing green blood floated in front of Twilight.

“The blood of a changeling, to charge the body with the magic of form...”

The vial tipped over, pouring its contents onto the body below. A small packet of hair came next.

“The mane hairs of a zebra, to charge the soul with the magic of life...”

The mane hairs dropped onto the glowing blood covering the stallion's body. Another vial, filled with what appeared to be a rainbow colored liquid, appeared.

“The essence of the rainbow, to charge the mind with the magic of clarity...”

The rainbow colored liquid splashed onto Shining Armor's form, mixing with the blood. Several purple and green scales levitated into the air.

“The scales of a dragon, to charge the horn with ancient magic...”

The scales dropped onto the body, which had begun to glow a soft blue. Magic filled the air around my host, crackling and snapping like lightning.

“Finally... the Element of Magic, the spark which holds together Harmony itself... to charge the life with the soul of the dead,” Twilight said finally. A purple glow emanated from her brow, the gem set into the Element tiara blazing brilliantly. A beam of energy erupted from it, engulfing the stallion in the casket in its wave. Twilight smiled as the energy poured forth into the body.

***Yes... you're doing it, Twilight! You're*** – Spark started to say as the magic in the air suddenly shifted direction. Spark grew deathly quiet, while Twilight's grin widened.

“Yes... you can feel it, can't you, Spark?” My host said. “You can feel the magic. You know what this is.”

*No... you... you can't!* Spark shouted.

Twilight shook her head. “I can, and I am going to. I told you before that I was going to stop you,” she said. “And I was right. It took so much time to set all of this into motion, and now... now there's only one more piece and it will be complete.” Her eyes drifted back down to the wings at her sides.

*Don't you dare, don't you even think about it, Twilight. Don't --*”

*\*RIIIHHP\**

The shock of pain blurred my host's vision as her magic took a hold of the two feathered appendages on each side of her body. Twilight grunted and pulled hard, separating bone from body. Blood poured from each wing and purple flesh hit the ground with a sickening *\*splat\**. My host glanced down at the shredded wings. They were broken and bloody. Twilight swayed, trying to keep her balance. Her front legs spread out, steadying herself. She grinned as her vision got hazy.

“I win Spark,” she said shakily. “I win, and you lose. You're not getting your body. Time to end this.”

*No!!!!* Spark roared in her mind.

Twilight ignited her horn, lifting the broken appendages into the air.

“The wings of an alicorn, given freely to purge evil from the world,” my host said. “Blood and bone and flesh and feather, give root to my magic... free me of this accursed spirit!”

A howl of pain erupted into the darkness, as a roar of thunder sounded overhead. A purple glow emitted from Twilight's brow, forming into the rough shape of a pony across the throne room. Spark screamed as she came into being, the familiar purple alicorn with a black mane. Her eyes flared red and she stomped an ethereal hoof.

“No, Twilight. You cannot beat me,” she growled. “I am an Element of Harmony! I am the Spark that gives power to the others! I have lived for centuries, and I shall not be denied my destiny!!”

“You sound just like her,” Twilight said, grinning wryly. “So melodramatic.”

“I am *NOTHING LIKE HER!!!*” Spark shouted.

“And yet here you are, spouting off the Royal Canterlot Voice,” Twilight countered. “You're misguided Spark. She led you to this, led you to do all these horrible things... you killed my brother, you... you bitch!!!” My host stomped forward, blood trailing from her sides as her horn blazed. “And I'm going to end it.”

“You can try,” Spark said, clearly amused at the mare's insolence. Twilight snorted, pawing at the floor. Spark chuckled. “You're kidding. You're kidding, right?”

“She said that too,” Twilight said, surging forward.

A blast of purple energy spat from her horn, striking the black-maned alicorn in the chest. Spark fell

backwards, hitting the ground with a thunderous **\*crash\***. The Element stood, her expression fearsome. She retaliated with her own blast of telekinesis, missing Twilight as the purple mare dodged to the side. Twilight stomped her hoof and glared, standing her ground.

"I will get my body, Twilight. You will not stop me!" Spark yelled.

"No, Spark. You lose," Twilight replied. "You lost from the moment I finished the spell. You see, the spell was never intended to bring Shining Armor to life. I figured that out right after you gave it to me. I saw what it would do. You wanted me to give you life from the get go. But by adding my wings to the formula, the spell has the opposite effect."

Spark narrowed her eyes at the other mare. Twilight grinned wryly.

"In short, the spell will trap you back into the Element you so hate. You will remain there, forever."

"No... that can't be..." Spark said as she looked down at her hooves. They were beginning to disappear. She howled with rage. "No!! You didn't... **NO!!!!**"

A flash of light erupted from where the alicorn stood, engulfing her in its brilliance. Within moments, the mare had disappeared. A purple jewel fell to the ground in her place. Twilight sighed and slumped to the ground. She glanced over at the casket in the center of the ritual area. With a blink of her horn, the casket and the slab vanished from sight too. My host smiled softly.

"We sure fooled her," she said. "I'm sorry Shining. I had to do it. Thankfully, I didn't need to use your real body. This war provided me with plenty of unicorns I could dress up to look like you." She groaned, looking down at her wings. "I'm... I'm sorry..." Her vision went dark and she fell over. The memory faded to black.

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I groaned, my eyes fluttering open. It was dark, as always. I sat there for several moments, trying to process what I had just seen. Twilight's betrayal of Spark, the sealing of her inside her own Element... what had Twilight done to her? Spark's plan was evil, but Twilight's methods almost seemed... too extreme. As I pondered the memory, I realized that I now knew where Spark was headed. The Everfree. Spark had challenged me to find her where it all began. I had been considering the locations in my mind for some time now, even thinking that maybe Maripony was one of those places. After all, I had only been thinking of where it all began for me, and that was obviously with the Goddess.

I hadn't fully figured it out, but some part of me instinctively knew that the Everfree was where Spark's story had begun. It started with the defeat of Nightmare Moon, and the binding of the Elements to Twilight and her friends. Spark's corruption had taken root there. Only one thing kept coming up that I was missing. Nightmare Moon. What had really happened to the spirit of hatred she once was? Was Luna secretly her all along, despite having been purged by the Elements? Or was she something else entirely, playing her pawns and making her moves carefully? The piece that I had defeated in Chicacolt was but one small piece of the overall being... what had happened to the rest of her? Twilight had spoken in the memory as if Nightmare was already gone by the time she cast the resurrection spell. What did she know that I didn't? I considered asking Twilight about it the next time I spoke with her, but I wasn't sure how to approach it. Perhaps the Twilight Society would have some information on that. Despite how much I wanted to run to the Everfree right then and there, I knew that I couldn't do that without knowing what I was getting myself into first.

The soft and gentle patter of rain began stirred me from my thoughts, and a second series of noises drew me from my bedroll. I swore that amidst the raindrops I could hear... crying? I scanned the room, not seeing a particular green mare. I stood carefully and tip-hoofed through the room, gently flapping my wings so as to not wake the others. I cocked my head to one side, listening as best as I could for the source of the sound. It started again, and I glanced upwards. It was coming from above, from the roof. I made my way into the stairwell quietly and started up the ruined stairs. They led to an entrance to what was now the roof of the building, which was in reality just the next floor. The actual roof lay in the ruins nearby, having been sheared off at some point.

The crying continued, piquing my curiosity as I stepped forward. A few drops of water matted my coat as I walked into the light storm. In the center, sitting in the middle of the rain, was Patch. More crying came from the mare as I walked. I hesitated, but finally gave in and spoke.

"Patch...?" Patch stopped immediately, her good eye turning slightly to regard me. It was puffy and red, like she'd been crying for hours.

"Go away, Star," she said softly.

"No. There's something wrong. Please let me help you," I pleaded.

"I'm fine, now please leave me alone," Patch said. "It doesn't... it doesn't concern you."

"I don't care," I huffed. "You need somepony to talk to. And it doesn't seem like you want to talk to Steeljack at all, or anypony else for that matter."

"It doesn't concern them either," Patch replied, her voice hoarse and raspy. "Now please, just... just go."

I narrowed my eyes at the green mare. "Fine," I said. "But remember what I said, Patch. I'm here for you... you know that. I just... I just want to know that you're alright." I turned away, seething with anger. Why couldn't she just accept that I wanted to help?! I could have screamed right then and there, but I didn't. Patch's voice cut me off as I started to walk back, stopping me cold in my tracks.

"Wait. I... Okay."

I turned back, seeing Patch looking right at me. Now that I could fully see her in the light of the evening, she looked like hell. Her mane was ragged and her eye was swollen red. Tear streaks matted the fur on her cheeks. She was also shivering slightly. *How long has she been up here?* I thought as I came to her side. I slumped to my haunches next to her.

"I... I'm sorry, Patch," I said. "I shouldn't have been so forceful. I'm just... I'm worried for you."

"I... I'm sorry, too," Patch replied. "I just... I don't know what to do, Star!"

"I'm here now," I said. "What is it?"

Patch sighed, looking down at her forehooves for several long, awkward moments.

"I... I'm pregnant," she finally said.

My eyes widened at her confession. I looked over at her, noticing that tears were forming once more upon her face.

"You mean...?" I said softly. Patch nodded. "How... how long?"

"I... I'm not exactly sure... since Theater, maybe?" she said.

"Does... does Steeljack know?" I said. Patch nodded again silently. "Patch... I didn't... but this is good, right? You're going to be a mother. A foal..."

Patch finally relented, her crying beginning again in earnest. *What did I say?!* I thought frantically. Patch choked on her tears, forcing them back.

"But... I'm not. There's something wrong, Star," she said. "I thought it was nothing, but I can't... I can't..." She broke down again into tears, sobbing hard against the rain pattering upon us.

I scooted closer to the mare, extending a wing over her for warmth. "Take your time," I said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I CAN'T FEEL THE FOAL!!" Patch erupted, breaking into another round of sobs. "I can't feel it there, Star... it's like... it's like it's just... gone!"

"But... what happened?" I started to ask, but then I realized I already knew the answer to the question. The temple had happened. My eyes widened. "Oh... Oh, Patch... I... I'm so sorry. The radiation..."

"I thought at first..." Patch choked out. "I thought at first that it was just me being silly. I should have let Steeljack take care of me. He tried so hard to help, but I was too stubborn. I... I wish... I wish that I'd... I wish that I just died down there!!" She turned to me, burying her face into my shoulder as she began to cry again. Tears had begun forming in my own eyes and I lifted a hoof to pull the mare closer into a firm embrace.

"Patch... you don't mean that... please..." I said soothingly.

Patch cried harder, pulling her head away to look up at me. "You... you're right... I just... I wish I knew what happened," she said. "I was... I was looking forward to it, you know. When I first found out, I only told Steeljack. He was so excited, Star. I'd never seen him that happy."

"Have you told him about, you know... this?" I ventured to ask. Patch only shook her head once. I sighed. "I think that you should. He deserves to know, Patch."

"But what if... what if he hates me for it, Star? What if he resents the fact that I was too stubborn and that I killed our baby?!" Patch blubbered.

I placed a hoof on her shoulder, patting it softly. "I know Steeljack well enough to know that he would never do that to you, Patch. He loves you, very much I might add," I said. "We all do."

"But..." Patch started to say.

I lifted a hoof, stopping her.

"Patch, I know that this is hard, but I have to ask... you said that you can't feel the foal. Are you sure that it means what you think it means?" I asked.

Patch was deathly quiet for several moments. She glanced down and back up at me and sighed.

“What do you...?” she said. “Do you think that you could... you know... look inside and tell me? You can do that right?”

I sighed again. While there were many magical talents that I seemed to be privy to, viewing the inside of a mare's womb was not one of them.

“I wish that I could, Patch. But unfortunately, I don't have that ability,” I said softly. “But the unicorns at Tenpony might. Life Bloom might know how to do it. When we get there, we'll go see them, and have you looked at.”

“And if I'm right?” Patch said hesitantly. “What if... what if the foal is lost?”

I stopped for a moment. I didn't have any true experience with any of this, personally. I'd never been pregnant, thanks to the fact that my entire race was still currently all female. I choked back my own tears for a moment, and looked down at the green mare.

“I don't know, honestly,” I said. “But whatever happens, Patch. We'll be there for you.”

I pulled the mare close again as she began to cry more. A crushing despair weighed heavy on my heart. If not for me, we wouldn't have even been in that Celestia-forsaken temple. I couldn't quite escape the nagging war in my mind that she knew what she was doing being there opposed to the feeling that I was ultimately responsible. I looked up at the sky. Clouds obscured the moon, the precipitation falling a little harder now. I opened my mouth, feeling the rain hit my coat. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so instead, I thought of Patch and reminded myself of a Sweetie Belle song that I had once heard on the radio. I'm not sure why I did it, but I began to sing it softly to the crying mare.

*“Into each life... some rain must fall...*

*But too much is falling in mine...*

*Into each heart, some tears must fall...*

*But someday, the sun will shine...*

*Some folks will lose the blues in their heart...*

*But when I think of you... another shower starts...*

*Into each life some rain must fall...*

*But too much is falling in mine...”*

My voice trailed off and I felt Patch cling closer to me. Her crying had subsided, for now.

“Star?” I heard her say. “Will you... will you stay here with me? I don't want to be alone tonight. I really need a friend.”

“Of course I will,” I said. “Of course I will.”

“Thanks,” Patch said. “You have a lovely singing voice, you know that?”

“Thank you, Patch. Now, lay your head down and rest, and I'll sing the rest of it, okay?” I replied.

Patch nodded, moving her body so that she was lying next to me. I flared my wings out, wrapping them around the earth pony. I looked to the sky once more, tears starting to drizzle down my own cheeks. I wasn't sure what would happen next, but I knew in my heart that I would never leave a friend hurting like this ever again.

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

And there we have it. The second part of Chapter 24/25: Return to Dust. This chapter ended up fairly shorter than normal, because it was split from Chapter 24 and turned into a two-part deal.

This chapter had a lot happening, and progresses us further to the end goal. Between dealing with the Magisterium and Truth Seeker (which was an incredibly fun villain to write), to the return of Professor Osmosis and the Smooze's exodus, the first part of this chapter was a lot of fun.

The resurrection spell, I had been intending to show for some time now, and I am quite pleased with how it came together.

And finally, Patch's revelation. Many of you picked up already on what was going on with her, but even knowing what had happened to her with the radiation still did not prepare me for the writing of this scene. Patch is one of those characters that I know people like, and I certainly hope that I did justice to the pain she is going through. I love her dearly myself, and like I said, it was the hardest scene to write in the whole chapter. So, give Patch some love, and a little hope. After all, we all could use some of that, sometimes.

I will also admit, that the scene gave me the opportunity to use “Into Each Life” from Fallout 3, which is one of my most favorite songs from Fallout 3 (besides “Civilization” that is).

As tradition dictates, the title for Chapter 26 is “Revelation and Rewards”

That being said, let's move on to the plugs.

As always, you can continue to ask Star questions over at <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com>!

In case you've been living under a rock lately, RinaSunshine over at DeviantArt has been doing some awesome stuff for me, and his art is completely fantastic. He recently did a scene from Chapter 10, when the group first meets a certain ghoulish donkey. Check out Sloth in all his glory over [here](#)!

My story plug for this chapter is going out to ThatDarnPony (forever known as TDP), and his story “[Fallout Equestria: The Tartarus Contingency](#)”. I'm well aware that this same fic was lambasted so badly the first posting that TDP ended up pulling it and rewriting large portions of it. Having not read the original, I can't quite comment on it, but the rewrite is shaping up quite well so far, and it's worth getting into to read. It takes a strong man to tackle the story of the Crystal Empire in a fic, and TDP is doing it fantastically. So go check it out!

Many thanks to my editor Wirepony, and my pre-reader McMesser. You guys, so cool, I don't even think I need

to say it.

Also, keep your eyes on the horizon for something new coming soon from me, FoE-wise. My side project is under way, titled “Fallout Equestria: Tales of Chicacolt”. The concept is episodic in nature, weaving together stories from various characters around the city of Chicacolt. The first chapter is titled “The Moose... is Loose” and it will prove to be quite a fun time.

Major thanks to Kkat, for creating this crazy little world, without whom I wouldn't be here right now.