

Fallout Equestria: Starlight

Chapter 22: City on Fire

King Sombra is already attacking the Empire. He could reach the Crystal Ponies at any moment... reach Princess Cadance, my brother, my friends... there may not be enough time for me to find a way to escape. You have to be the one to bring the Crystal Heart to the faire.

Loss. What's it like to lose someone? I know from personal experience, that it hurts. It hurts a lot. This hellish place we live in steals away so many lives, uncaring and unfeeling. The story of the Wasteland is not that of the heroes who fight in it, but of the ponies who are lost to it. The loss of our values, our lives, and our very souls. The ponies before the war understood loss very well. They lost their own to battles fought and battles won, and in the end... they lost everything.

I lost friends. Cranky... Diamond... I lost them to the Wasteland. And as much as I wished I could bring them back, it just wasn't possible.

I lost myself... will I ever find myself again? I can only hope.

* * *

I stared down at the note, fuming mad. I was beyond furious, beyond compromise. The Lotus Triad was going to pay for what they had done. I had already lost Cranky and Diamond. I couldn't stand to lose Violet. Not after what we'd been through together. I growled, lashing out at the piece of paper and burning it to ashes with pure magic.

"Star?" Steeljack said quietly.

I glared at him. "What?" I asked.

"What are you... you going to do?" he said, swallowing hard. His eyes spoke volumes of fear. Fear of... me?

"I'm going to find them, and bring them back," I said with a sigh.

A knock on the door interrupted me before I could say anything else. I looked up, seeing Nixis in the doorway. Danish was behind him. The two had shocked expressions on their faces.

"Where were you?" I snarled. "Huh?! Where were you?!"

"Darlin', calm down. What happened?" Danish said calmly.

I pounded a hoof into the ground. "They took them, Danish! Lilith, Violet, Patch. Those fucking Triads took them!" I yelled.

"Where?" Danish asked. "We can rustle up the boys and go get them."

"No, the note was for me. It told me to come alone, and I'm going to do just that," I said, moving to push past the cream-colored unicorn.

Danish put up a hoof, stopping me cold. “Star. Calm down. Think this through, would ya? You're playing right into their hooves. They want you there alone,” he said.

“You think I don't know that?” I snapped. “I'm well aware that it's a trap. I'm going anyways. It's time that the Triad is stopped for good.”

“By getting yourself killed?” Nixis spoke. “I'm sorry my friend, but I cannot let you do that. We are your friends, we want to help you handle this.”

I growled loudly, turning about and packing up my things. The others stood there and just watched me as I placed Stargazer on my bedroll.

“I'm going,” I said after a few moments of silence. “I'm leaving this here, in case something happens.” I pointed to Stargazer.

“Star, listen to Danish. Please,” Steeljack said. “We need to be smart about this. We'll get them back, the right way.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. “But I can't do that. I have to do this. I'm tired of the Triad fucking with us like this.” I moved towards the door, but the gray stallion pushed his way in front of me. “Steeljack.”

“Star. I won't let you do this,” he said.

“You're going to, though. For Patch. Besides, if you don't move in about 5 seconds, I'll move you myself, and you won't like that,” I said forcefully.

Steeljack muttered under his breath something that I couldn't hear and stepped to the side. Danish glared at him.

“You're going to just let her run off and get herself killed?” he said.

Steeljack nodded. “Danish, I can't stop her. She could put me through the wall if she wanted to. Besides, I trust her.”

“Alright, look. If you're gonna do this, at least let me set up some boys to extract you if shit goes southward,” he said.

I looked over at Steeljack. He nodded hesitantly.

“Fine,” I said. “But I want it to be you three. No pony else, got it?” The others nodded. “I'll radio in my PipBuck if things go down. Otherwise, you stay outside. They want me to come to some warehouse right at the perimeter of Chi-Town and Middle Town.”

“I know the place,” Danish said.

“Good, because I'm not waiting for you to leave,” I said, flaring my horn. I glared at the stallions, who shuffled uneasily under my gaze. My teleportation spell went off and I disappeared. I reappeared outside of Theater, in the streets. I spread my wings, taking to the sky. The cold night air blew across my coat, but I paid it no mind. I was angry still, letting it drive me forward towards Chi-Town. The city was alive tonight, ponies looking up at me as I flew overhead.

I slammed to the ground not a dozen ponylengths away from a warehouse, only notable for the good shape it was in. For now. I stalked forward, igniting my horn as I came closer to the main entrance. I was hoping that the Triad knew I was here already. In fact... I was counting on it. I wanted them to see what was going to happen to them. I reached out with magic, ripping the metal doors from their seams violently.

“HEY LOTUS!! I’M HOME!” I shouted.

The soft click of two assault rifles getting ready to fire filled my ears. Two of the Triad’s enforcers shimmered into existence before me. A part of my mind not concerned with ways of destroying these irritants noted that they were pegasi. Interesting, but not important right now.

“Ministry Mare,” one of them said. “You will lower any arms you may be carrying and --

I never gave the mare the chance to continue. My horn fired a vicious blast of energy, blowing the feathers completely off the mare’s wings. She shrieked in shock and pain, catapulting away from me. The other enforcer aimed her battle saddle and fired. I snarled, reaching out and grabbing the bullet with telekinesis. The projectile spun around in mid-air, turning back on its owner and slamming home into the pegasus’ shoulder. The mare yelped in pain as she fell.

“No. I don’t believe I will be doing anything you say,” I said, striding past them. The mare that had been shot grunted. “Where are my friends?”

“F-F-Fuck you,” the pegasus spat. She coughed, blood pouring from her shoulder wound. “I’ll never tell you.”

“Damn. I was sort of hoping that would actually work,” I said, igniting my horn once again.

The mare lifted into the air and slammed against the wall. She groaned and passed out. A blast of gunfire erupted down the hall from me as another pegasus shimmered into existence, firing an automatic rifle at me. The bullet grazed my shoulder and I howled in pain and rage. I reached out with my magic as the mare aimed her gun again and grabbed the offending weapon, snatching it out of her mouth. She yelped, and shot me such a look of consternation I snorted in laughter.

And then I bashed her in the face with her own gun. She crumpled to the floor silently. I resumed my stalk, floating out a magical bandage patch to cover my burning shoulder. At the end of the hall, two unicorn mares in combat armor rushed at me, combat shotguns held loftily in their magic.

“Don’t think so!” I shouted, sending out two telekinetic blasts at each of the unicorns. The blasts struck with intense force, slamming the two mares into the sides of the wall. I reached out, opening the double doors beyond them, revealing a massive warehouse. Metal catwalks spread out above me like a spider web. A conveyor belt system wound its way through the large room, leading out into the shipping area. It was active, moving metal boxes of who knows what. I stepped forward, stopping when a voice echoed over the speaker system.

“Ministry Mare. Continue any further and your friends will be dead before even your unnatural powers could find them,” the snide voice said.

“Try me,” I snarled. “I’m not in a great mood right now, if you haven’t noticed.”

“And you killed my sisters,” the voice said.

“What?” I asked. That was unexpected.

“My name is Lotus Bloom, the sole head of the Triad now. My sisters were Lotus Petal and Lotus Blossom,” the voice said.

I growled under my breath, glancing about. There was no sign of where the voice was coming from. The conveyor belt continued to hum amidst the quiet warehouse.

“I never killed your sisters. They came after me,” I said. “I wasn't the one who dealt any killing blows. Hell, I wasn't even aware they'd perished. The last time I saw Lotus Blossom, she was in the custody of the MMMM.”

“Oh, they're both dead now. The Triad does not tolerate failure. I murdered my own sisters because of their inability to capture you,” the voice said.

“You... what...?” I said, blinking. “You monster... why? Why would you do that?” My rage was boiling over inside. This pony had her own flesh and blood killed because they had failed to kill me. What kind of fucked up punishment was that?!

“It is a matter of no consequence now. I will avenge them, and destroy you. All you have to do is turn yourself in, and your friends will go free,” Lotus said over the speaker.

I lowered my head and shook it. *No*, I thought to myself. *I'm going to free my friends and shut you down for good.* My horn flared, sending out a wave of telekinesis right at one of the metal catwalks, dislodging it from the wall and sending it screeching to the ground.

“No. I will find them, and then I'm going to fucking shut down the Triad forever!” I shouted. “Show yourself! Coward!” I began to canter forward, looking for anywhere the mare could have been hiding. An office of some sort? Where were the administration offices for this place?

“Fine. Have it your way then. Kill the mares, and then give this bitch the end she so rightly deserves,” Lotus said.

I knew I didn't have much time as gunfire erupted in the air above. I dove underneath an overturned metal shelf, the bullets pinging off of it. I glanced up, seeing three pegasi mares diving down, each one wearing a battle saddle mounted assault rifle. I found myself really wishing I'd brought Stargazer after all!. I called up a shield instead, hardening it as best as I could. The first of the pegasi struck and fell to the side. A wicked idea crossed my mind and I reached out, casting a very specific spell on the other two. The magic took hold and suddenly the two mares weren't diving down at my shield, but instead frantically backwinging as they fell upwards. Their eyes widened as they struck a metal catwalk. I let the spell slip and my erstwhile assailants fell off the bottom of the catwalk to land with grim ***thuds***. They didn't get up.

“Is that all you got, Bloom?” I called out. “You won't even touch a hair on my friend's heads, you hear me? You won't because you know if you do, there's nothing stopping me from coming to wherever you are and turning you into paint. Now show yourself, you fucking coward, and let's have this out like civilized mares.”

A bullet came out of nowhere, streaking by my face. I looked back, seeing a bright pink pegasus mare snarling as she barreled towards me. A honest-to-Goddess Anti-Material Rifle hung off her battle saddle,

massive and threatening.

“Stop calling me a coward!” she shouted as she landed in front of me. On her flank was the cutie mark of a flower opening.

“About time,” I said angrily. “Now. Where are my friends?”

“Not telling. They're being disposed of as we speak,” she said, a wicked grin creeping onto her face.

“We've got a real problem, then,” I said calmly. “Because that means I'm going to rip your fucking head off.”

“I'd like to see you try,” she said, flexing her wings. “I'm not like my sisters. They were pansies. I'm the real deal.” She stalked to the side, circling me as I narrowed my eyes at her.

“We'll see,” I said, launching forward and spreading my own wings.

Lotus Bloom's eyes widened in surprise as I struck, knocking her back. Her Anti-Machine Rifle fired, the bullet searing past my shoulder blade. I ignored the pain, but didn't ignore her next shot, which was aimed right at my face. I ducked away from the all encompassing crash of sound her gun made. The shot missed high, putting a head-sized hole in a metal support beam. It was smoking.

I jumped back, growling. I really really wish I had just brought Stargazer with me. Why had I been so stupid? I wasn't even thinking this through, and there was a good chance that my friends wouldn't make it out of this alive. I couldn't handle losing any more, especially Violet. I had already lost enough. I glanced around for anything that I could use to fight with. I leaped behind a row of metal shelving, narrowly missing my body becoming swiss cheese. Lotus Bloom cackled.

“That's it. Run, you pathetic little bitch!” she shouted. “You can't beat me. I'm the best Triad there is!”

I dove across the hall, landing behind a pile of metal crates. The shelving collapsing behind me told me just how close I'd been.

“And you didn't even bring anything to fight me with?! How sad. No matter, when I kill you and your friends, it will still be a victory.”

A gleam of silver caught my eye from inside one of the crates. Inside were packages and packages of what appeared to be dressmaker's needles. A sly grin crept along my face and I reached out with telekinesis, opening as many packages as I could. I stepped out from behind the metal crates, my eyes narrowed at the pegasus.

“Enough of these games, Bloom. Where are my friends?” I said. “This is your last chance.”

The pink pegasus turned her saddle-mounted cannon to me. The hole in the end looked easily big enough to crawl into. “No dice. You die here, and the Triad gets all the glory.”

I hung my head and flared my horn. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of dressmaker's needles soared into the air around me. It was a veritable tornado of whirling metal. Lotus Bloom stepped back, the expression on her face that of mixed surprise.

“What...? What are you...?” she started to say before the first needle struck her on the cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. I roared with unbridled fury as I directed the flying death metal at her. Silver needles hung in the air around her, striking her sides with pinpoint precision. The mare tried to fly away, but couldn't get off the ground as two large crochet needles slammed into the base of her wings. I stalked forward, looking down at the terrified pegasus. “Please... please don't...”

“I will not ask again. Where are they?” I said coldly.

The mare was blubbering underneath me, begging for her life. It would have been so easy to just take it. I wanted to, so badly too. I wanted to make her pay for what she had done, for nearly making me lose my closest friends. I sighed, the needles dropping to the ground. The tinkling sound of the needles raining down surrounded us. Lotus Bloom was seeping blood from a dozen wounds, some needles still sticking out of her flesh. She shoved herself away, trying to curl up in some sort of weird fetal position. I stepped forward again and she screamed.

“No!” she shrieked. “Please...! Please don't kill me!”

“I want to. You have no idea how much I want to, right now,” I said harshly. “But... but I can't. Violet wouldn't want me to do that. As happy as it would make me to just... pin your head to the ground with a dozen needles, I'm not going to. Now... just tell me where they are.”

The mare nodded silently and pointed upwards. I followed her gaze and noticed the offices were suspended above the warehouse. What were pre-war ponies thinking sometimes? I looked back down and nodded in reply.

“You will never come after us again, do you understand me? I never want to see another Triad as long as I live,” I said.

Lotus Bloom blubbered more as she tried to lever her pinned wings away from her body. I turned away and took to the air, flying up towards the office platform. The office windows were dark, their reflective faces giving no clue what lay within. I pushed open the door, revealing a band of cubicles around a large conference table.

“Hello?” I called out, having a very bad feeling about all of this. Why didn't I just end Lotus Bloom like I'd wanted to? Maybe it was because I couldn't stand to cause a loss myself. I had been responsible for enough death already. I moved into the area, hearing muffled cries of help from one of the side offices. I pushed open the door frantically, seeing my prize.

Violet, Lilith, and Patch were all tied down, gagged, and held against the far wall. Their eyes widened as they saw me. I started forward, stopping when I saw my friends shaking their heads as best as they could. I looked down at the office desk. Strapped to it was enough plastic explosives to level a small city block. A burst of static emitted from a speaker attached to the corner of the ceiling.

“Hello again, Ministry Mare,” a voice came from it. “Enjoy my little trap? I know I did.”

“Who.. what?” I said, trying to process what was happening.

“I knew that you'd be pretty pissed at me, so I made sure that the building only had those personnel that were essential to the operation,” it said. “Including that impersonator who played me. Pretty good, eh?”

“What the fuck is going on?” I said.

“I am the real Lotus Bloom,” the voice said. “The pony you fought was an impostor. I'm in a secure location, just waiting to send you and your friends to hell.”

I narrowed my eyes, snarling under my breath. This whole thing had been a trap. And I had thrown myself and my friends right into it. I felt horrible. I wasn't sure I could get them away in time. I wasn't even sure I could get myself away in time. I hung my head. I was so stupid! “You should see the look on your face, Ministry Mare. It's quite priceless. You thought you were so smart. You even bought that sob story about my sister's deaths!”

“So you lied about everything, and now you've got us, is that what you want to hear?” I said quietly. Lotus Bloom chuckled. The explosives in the room began to beep.

“No Ministry Mare... I want you to die!! Before you came to this town, we were fine. But then you got involved. And quite frankly, all you've done since then is piss me off!” the voice said. “Now... *bomb voyage!!!*”

The beeping got faster. I heard the click as the speaker shut off, with a grim finality. Glancing at Violet, I shrugged. I flared my horn, ‘pushing’ at the room with my magic. Nothing answered so I pushed harder, feeling the tickle of pain at the base of my horn. This time, I welcomed it. With an overpowering flash of white, the world dropped away. Moments later, I was standing on the roof of a nearby building. I smirked at the warehouse as the explosion lifted a section of its roof off. From the other side of a teleport, it seemed almost gentle.

Violet and the others were still bound and gagged, and I hastened to remedy that. I couldn't keep a smile off my face as I untied my lovely green unicorn and my friends. Violet stood, removing her gag. Her horn sparked, and I noticed a small metal ring around it.

“Magic inhibitor?” I said. She nodded in reply. My horn glowed softly, pulling the offending device from her head.

Violet grinned as she pumped out waves of her own magic. Lilith and Patch stood shakily, using each other as support.

“Is everypony alright?” I asked.

“As well as one can be,” Patch said. “After getting nearly blown to bits, that is.”

“Well, that went swimmingly,” Lilith said. “Those Triad freaks... they never seem to learn do they?”

“She... she wasn't even in the building,” I said quietly, drawing my friends gazes. “Lotus Bloom. She used an impostor to fight me, and then lured me in. I can't believe... Augh. I put you girls in danger because I let her play me!”

A hoof set itself on my shoulder. Violet smiled brightly.

“It's alright, sweetie. I knew you could get us out of there,” she said, winking.

I sighed, reaching down to nuzzle my love. I needed that encouragement.

“This is awesome and all, but it's a little cold up here,” Patch said. “We should probably get back to Theater.”

“You three go on ahead. I've still got some business to clear up with the Triad. It's time they were shut down for good,” I said forcefully.

“Star. Just leave them be. They're not going to come after you,” Violet said. “They probably think you're dead or something.”

“And when they find out that I'm not?” I said. “I don't want to chance anything bad happening to you, Violet. They started this... now I'm going to end it.”

“What are you going to do?” Violet said angrily. “Waltz right into Triad territory unarmed and unprepared?”

“No. I'm going to do what they did to that building. Rip the damn thing from its foundations. And when I find those bucking Lotus sisters, they're going to pay,” I said, stomping a hoof.

“Star... we're going to be leaving soon. You need to think this through!” Violet said with a loud groan. “Even if the Triad figures out we made it out of that building, do you think we'll even be around for them to come after us?”

I sighed. I knew at the very least that Violet was right. We could theoretically lay low long enough to leave the city undetected, but that wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to stop the Triad for good.

“Violet...” I said softly. “I'm tired of them, I'm tired of them putting good ponies - my friends - in danger, I'm tired of them being... being. If I can shut down their operations for good, then they can't threaten this city anymore. Chicacolt will be a lot better off if I do something.”

Violet hung her head and sighed. “Alright,” she said. I blinked. “Alright. But not 'I'. We. I'm coming with you.”

“Me too,” Lilith interjected.

Patch grinned widely. “Mares fighting mares? Seems like a great idea to me!” she chimed in. “It's sort of like a girls night out!”

“You three do know that we have no equipment, and the Triad has all sorts of tricks?” I said. “At the very least, Violet and I can use magic, but...”

“Please. I can handle myself in a fight,” Lilith said, flexing her bladed wings. “Do we even know where their headquarters is?”

“We know that they control all of Chi-Town. But... you know girls, planning and plotting is the Triad's thing. Let's not do that,” I said.

“Let's just show up and start trashing mooks until their bosses show up?” Lust said with a wolfish grin.

Violet laughed. “And then we trash them, and their bosses.”

“And just work our way up!” Patch concluded.

We shared a hug, laughing uproariously on the rooftop. Violet took a step back, eyeing the burning warehouse.

“Let’s go, then. The night’s young!”

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Two unicorn mares in armored barding rushed towards us, floating along assault rifles in their magic. They took aim, firing a steady stream of bullets. I put up a shield, deflecting them away as Violet shot a blast of magic at one of them, knocking the mare to the ground. It hadn't taken us very long to find our way to the Triad's base. Waltzing right into Chi-Town like we owned the place, the Triad couldn't resist attacking us. The location of the Triad's main base hadn't been a surprise. A sprawling maze that had been a hotel before the War served as their base of operations. I knew Lotus Bloom had to be pissed off that we'd survived, and the swath we were cutting through her faction certainly had her at a boil. I grinned as we galloped down the next hall, running into a group of pegasi enforcers.

“Stop them!” one of them shouted, bringing up her shotgun.

Lilith surged at the mare before she could get a shot off, slicing the weapon in half with her bladed wings. She grinned widely as her opponent dropped the shotgun in shock. Lilith leaned in and planted a kiss on the startled mare. Her wings shooting upright, the pegasus had just enough time to let out a wordless moan before Lilith literally swept her off her hooves. The mare toppled to the ground to be knocked out with a well placed kick.

I laughed maniacally as I double-casted the gravity spell on the two others in the group. The enforcers instantly shot upward, hitting the ceiling with a ***splat***. The second cast brought them plummeting back to the ground double quick, smashing them into insensibility. I wasn't completely sure we were getting closer to our goal, but every enforcer we took out was a small victory.

The next hallway was bare of any enforcers, giving us a bit of relief as we made our way to the stairs heading upward. Did Lotus Bloom know we were here? I couldn't tell. The stairwell was thankfully also clean of opposition. I narrowed my eyes. I had a bad feeling about this, and I'd been through too much to ignore any bad feelings lately.

“Something about this doesn't feel right,” I said quietly. I glanced at my E.F.S. Nothing. Of course.

“If it's a trap, I say we trip it,” Lilith said, grinning.

I looked over at Patch. “Think you can handle it?”

The mare grinned and nodded excitedly. She took off like a rocket, zipping up the stairs. As she got closer to the next landing, a shot rang out nearly striking her in the side. Patch leaped out of the line of fire, landing with all four hooves on the railing and sliding back down to us.

“Definitely a trap. Got some sort of sniper laying down fire up there,” she said. “Any ideas?”

“Just one,” I said, flaring my horn. “We give them what they want, of course.”

I cast my spell, forming a simple shield around the four of us. We started up the stairwell, nearing the point where Patch had been shot at. I glanced upward, seeing a unicorn mare floating a highly impressive looking sniper rifle out over the top of the landing. Her eyes narrowed as she saw us. She took aim and fired, the bullet striking my shield and deflecting off of it. I cast the gravity spell on the rifle, watching with glee as the weapon fell out of the mare's magic and headed straight for the ceiling. Her attempts to recapture it were met by a blast of telekinesis from Violet. The rest of the stairwell was surprisingly bare. Was that really the best the Triad could throw at us? If so... they really needed to hire better help.

The doors at the top of the stairs were massive, stout portals barred and sturdy. I grumbled and reached out with my magic. The doors were strong, but they were fixed a two hundred year old crumbling building. A surge of effort ripped them out of their frame, and I set them aside. locked. Beyond was a cramped hallway that led deeper into the hotel. We moved as quietly as possible, stopping to check each door that we came across. All of them were locked. They seemed to be resident rooms, so we didn't bother with them. At the far end of the hall was a door that led to the hotel's ballroom according to its sign. Finally, a red blip came up on my E.F.S. I nodded at the others. Forcing the door open, we moved inside.

“Welcome... Ministry Mare,” a cruel voice echoed from across the room. I took in the area. A pink pegasus in armored barding stood at the end of what had once been ballroom. The room had been converted to an operations center. Banks of terminals lined the walls, several unicorn mares in Stable jumpsuits tapping away at them. Lotus Bloom grinned wickedly. “Been waitin' for ya, bitch.”

“Lotus Bloom,” I snarled. “It's time that the Lotus Triad was shut down for good.”

Lotus Bloom coughed rough laughter. “Hardly. You see, Ministry Bitch, the Triad's a living thing. We won't ever be shut down as long as one of the leaders survives. And you won't take me as easily as you did Petal and Blossom,” she replied. She flirted her wings, revealing a large missile launcher mounted on her armor. “Now then... let's end this, shall we?”

“Yes... let's,” I said, surging at the mare.

The unicorns running the terminals vacated the room quickly through the rear as Lotus Blossom fired up her weapon. A frag missile shot forth from the pegasus' launcher, tearing through the air at me. I reached out with my magic, taking a hold of it and turning it around. The projectile soared back at Lotus Blossom, who merely grinned and took wing herself, dodging by the missile as it hit the back wall. It exploded violently, putting a massive hole in the already decrepit wall.

“That all you got?” she shouted wildly, strafing to my side and firing off another missile. This time however, Violet stepped in and ignited her horn. The missile fell apart in mid-air before it ever reached me.

“Lotus Bloom, you don't get it, do you? I don't need heavy weaponry to win. I just need my friends,” I said.

I spun about, catching the mare before she could get off another shot. I pulled her close and tossed her towards the ground. Lotus grinned as she flared her wings, pulling out of the fall gracefully and back into the air.

“Oh, I've got much more than that. Who needs friends when you've got family?” she said.

A blast of magic erupted from next to Violet, catching my love off guard and knocking her back. A pink

unicorn mare stepped forward, her horn brightly lit with her magic. Her wicked knife floated in the air next to her.

“Nice to see you again, Ministry Mare,” Lotus Petal said. “Maybe once we're done, I'll have fun with that other ear of yours.” A green blast of telekinesis struck her from behind.

Violet snarled as she charged. “No way, bitch, you're mine!” she shouted.

Lotus Petal sneered and turned towards Violet, meeting her charge as the latter struck her in the midsection. Lotus Bloom soared into the air above me as Lilith shot up to meet her. I glanced over at Patch.

“Patch, see if you can shut down their operations center,” I said frantically.

The dark green earth pony nodded and bounced towards the central terminal. A blue earth mare popped up from behind the desk next to the terminal.

“I don't think so!” Lotus Blossom said, shoving the desk at my friend. Patch dodged and popped into the air, landing on the desk and bounding off right into Lotus Blossom's face. The blue mare growled as she launched herself at Patch with a vicious forehoof strike. Patch blocked it swiftly, spinning about and moving in for her own strike.

“Looks like the gangs all here!” Lotus Bloom crowed as Lilith chased her. The black mare's wings flared out, slashing wildly at the pink pegasus. “Have to do better than that!”

“Oh I'll show you better,” Lilith said, surging forward.

The darker mare was obviously faster than Bloom, shooting past her and slamming into the other mare's barrel. I sat up, watching as the others fought their respective opponents. Grinning, I turned to the terminal in the center of the room. Lotus Blossom and Patch were still wrestling and thrashing with each other, barely paying any attention as I moved over to the terminal. I began tapping at the keyboard, poking through the lines of code and trying to find something that resembled a password. I finally hit upon the word *lotus* and grinned as it was accepted. These Triad mares really were pretty stupid. I began shutting down whatever systems I could find that the terminal had access to, which seemed to be pretty much everything.

“The terminal!” I heard Lotus Bloom shout. I looked up to see the pink pegasus shooting straight at me, only to be cut off by Lilith, who grabbed the mare by her wings. The two went pinwheeling across the ballroom, Lilith's superior agility letting her put the Triad leader face first into the wall. Lotus Bloom tried to wriggle out of her grasp, only to meet the ground face first as Lilith dropped her. The pink mare didn't get back up. I stole a glance to see how Violet was doing. My love was fierce and fast, ducking past Lotus Petal's cruel knife and striking with her cybernetic hoof. Blood splattered across the floor and Petal fell as well.

“Gotcha,” Violet said, grinning. “Patch, what's your twenty?”

“Oh you know, just hanging out,” the green mare said.

I looked up, seeing Lotus Blossom hanging from a rope tied to the chandelier. She was unconscious. Patch sat below her, smiling widely. I grinned, tapping at the keyboard. The terminal and all the ones in the room shut down completely.

“Alright, done!” I called out, standing. I flared my horn, lifting the terminal into the air and slamming it

against the ground, smashing it into tiny pieces. I moved to meet my friends in the center of the room. Lotus Bloom groaned as she tried to push herself up. I put a hoof on the mare's back, stomping her down against the ground. "I wouldn't get up if I were you. Bad things might happen. Now... your little operation? All that fancy tech you love? It's all shut down. Let this be a warning to you. If I ever hear about your little gang ever again... you'll hear from us." The mare tried to speak, but it was muffled by the concrete. I grinned. "Good enough for me. Girls, let's go. We're done here."

"Alright!" Patch exclaimed, smiling widely as she bounced around us. "Let's go!"

* * *

The soft light of Theater came back into view, and we all breathed a sigh of relief. We were in high spirits, tired and beaten to hell, but high spirits nonetheless. The guards smiled and waved at us as we entered the settlement. The hustle and bustle greeted us as normal. A familiar cream-colored unicorn rushed across from the market, followed by Steeljack and Nixis.

"Steely!" Patch called out as she flung herself into her lover's hooves.

I glanced at her, mouthing *Steely?* as I tried to process the nickname. The two grinned at me and I waved them off. They moved into the crowd, disappearing. They deserved a little down time, for sure. I was happy to give it to them.

"We were startin' to get a little worried 'bout you, darlin'," Danish said. "Thought I was gonna have to send out a group. Buzz is, though, that the Triad's practically fallen apart."

"I don't believe you'll have to be worrying about them for quite awhile," I said, winking. "With their center of operations destroyed, the Triad is now effectively gelded. Which... is a little strange considering they're all mares." I pondered that thought for a moment as Danish laughed.

"Well, take a load off, Star. I think we've all earned a little rest," he said. "I've got some business to attend to. Lilith, care to join me?"

The black mare nodded, taking his foreleg and trotting off. Nixis gave a small salute, and loped off into the organized madness of Theater. I glanced down at Violet.

"Well, looks like it's just you and me," I said.

She sauntered ahead of me, wiggling her flank a little and stretching. My face turned beet red as she looked back up at me.

"Like what you see?" she said. I nodded mutely. "Good. Cuz you get this all night long."

I giggled like a schoolfilly as I trotted after her. I'd been missing the playful Violet so much. I was so wrapped up in her that I nearly didn't see the pony I stumbled over until I was on the ground. I looked up, seeing Grey Knight staring down at the ground. I groaned. *Not exactly the pony I wanted to see right now*, I thought.

"Ministry Mare," the stallion said. "Didst thou hear me call your name?"

"Umm... no?" I said, grinning sheepishly.

“Sorry about that,” Violet interjected. “I may have... erm... distracted her a bit. Who are you?”

“Mine name is Grey Knight, Holy Knight of the Celestial Order,” Grey replied as I pushed myself to my haunches.

“I probably forgot to tell you,” I said. “Grey here is going to accompany us to Arlington when we leave. The townspeople there asked him to find me, concerning their issues with the Steel Rangers.”

“Cotton Candy?” Violet asked. I nodded. “Dammit, I knew those Rangers were bad news.”

“Grey, this is Violet Iris, my marefriend,” I said.

Grey bowed before my lover. Violet giggled.

“It's a pleasure, milady,” he said.

“Grey... I'm actually glad I ran into you. Something came up, and I need to stay here for a few more days,” I said, gaining the stallion's attention.

“I thought that thou were planning to leave sooner than that,” Grey said, looking perturbed.

Violet cocked her head in confusion, but said nothing.

“I know, but this is important. I want you to do me a favor if you can,” I said. “I would like for you to start heading towards Arlington. Keep a low profile and gather information on what the Steel Rangers are doing. We'll join you in a few days time.”

“I... I can do this,” Grey said. “The pursuit of justice shall not rest. I will expect to see you soon, faithful squire.” The stallion turned and trotted off. My eye twitched.

“What do you mean, squire?!” I yelled after him. No response. I growled. “What did he mean, ‘Squire’?!?”

Violet chuckled as he disappeared in the crowd.

“Well, he's an interesting one,” she said. “Now then... what's this about staying here a few more days?”

“Let's... let's get to the room first,” I replied. “I would rather talk about this in private.”

Violet nodded and we continued on, making our way up to our quarters. They were empty, thankfully. I would have felt extremely awkward if we'd walked in on Patch and Steeljack again. I plopped down onto the dirty mattress and sighed.

“Alright, spill it. Or no fun time for you,” Violet said, grinning playfully.

“I went and found the bank that Diamond lived at, when she was still Diamond,” I said.

“Oh, Star...” my love said softly. “I'm... I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. I've... I've had a lot of time to think about it. Diamond suffered, and hurt. But she's gone

now, and can't hurt anymore," I said. "But that's not why we're staying. I ran into Envy there."

"Envy? What did she want, to try and capture you again?" Violet said.

"Not particularly. She remembers, Violet. She remembers everything," I said. "She offered to teach me, train me to be a better fighter."

"And you accepted?" my love replied. I nodded. "When?"

"Tomorrow. She wants me to meet her at the bank, alone," I said.

"What if it's a trap, Star?" Violet said with a sigh. "What if she's just trying to get you alone to capture you again?"

"She already had me where she wanted me, Violet. She could have done her worst, but she didn't. I... I trust her," I said. "I want to do this... for Diamond."

"She really meant that much, didn't she?" my marefriend said.

"She... she gave her life to save ours. In the end, she was good. She used her second chance to help us," I said. "I owe it to her."

Violet mulled over this for a few moments and sighed again.

"Alright," she said finally. "If you think it will be fine, then it's okay. Do you think this will help?"

"I'm... I'm not sure. I don't know much about fighting like a zebra," I said. "Now that we've gotten that taken care of... where were we?" I grinned, nuzzling my lover's neck.

Violet nickered, pecking me on the cheek. "Right about... there," she replied, before diving into my embrace.

I smiled as I let myself melt away. Tomorrow, I would have to get back to reality, but for tonight... tonight there was only Violet and I.

* * *

I awoke, feeling quite rested despite the strenuous activities of the night before. Violet lay next to me, nuzzling my neck softly. She was still sleeping. My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room and I noticed that at some point Steeljack and Patch had made it back. They lay across the small room, snuggled close together. I smiled. Despite everything that had been happening to us lately, there was finally time for us to relax and recollect. I sighed in content. A glance at my PipBuck revealed that it was pretty close to noon. I needed to get over to meet Envy. Shuffling out of our makeshift bed, I carefully stood so that I didn't disturb Violet. My love rolled into her pillow, yawning as she fell back asleep.

I closed the door, thinking ahead to my training with Envy. I wondered just what the zebra could show me about her magic. My mind was lost in thought as I moved through the afternoon bustle of Theater. The city air was clean and crisp for a change. I trotted through the city until I came across the ruined bank that had belonged to Diamond. Envy was nowhere to be seen. I glanced down at my PipBuck. It was getting relatively close to when I was supposed to meet her. A glint in the darkness caught my eye as a knife shot out from

nowhere at my face. I growled, pulling back and flaring my horn. Magic caught the silvery knife, but it wasn't stopping it. I strained my telekinesis, finally turning the knife to the side to where it struck the ground next to me.

“Terrible,” a voice said from out of nowhere. “Your form is horrifying. You’re practically a horn on a stick, it’s a wonder that you were ever able to beat me.” The lithe form of Envy appeared beside me. I nearly jumped out of my coat. I hadn’t even heard her move. I glared at her.

“Envy,” I said.

“Ministry Mare. Follow me, I have the perfect place we can begin your training,” the zebra said, motioning for me to follow her.

I trotted after her until we were in the middle of the courtyard of the Ministry of Arcane Science hub.

Envy stopped and turned around, smiling. “Now then. One of most important things that I wish to impart upon you, is that zebra magic is much more instinctual than pony magic. There is less study, and more practical application. To learn zebra magic is to command the primal forces of nature itself.”

“Instinct? So there are no written spells to learn?” I said. Envy nodded. “So... where do we begin?”

“The first thing we must do is teach you how to fight like a zebra. I said before... your form is terrible. You do not move as part of your body,” she said. “When you strike, you hit like a train.”

“Hey, that's not very nice. I'm not fat,” I said.

Envy chuckled, rolling her eyes. “Your weight was not called into question, Ministry Mare. I am speaking of how efficiently you use your form. Your movements are erratic. You react, not pro-actively move to intercept your opponent,” the zebra said. “Your magic, while useful, will not always protect you.”

“To be fair, the blade you threw at me. It resisted my magic,” I said. I was still a little sore about this.

“Such armaments are not common to zebra fighting. The blades are made out of adamantite, a metal that resists magical contact. It is quite rare. One of the few places this metal can be salvaged is north of the city,” Envy replied. “I had them made special for my own use. Now then, enough talk. Once again... to learn to fight like a zebra is to practice. The reason I chose this area for your training is that it was open enough for us to fight unimpeded.”

“Fight? What do you ---” I started to say as Envy reared up, leveling a hoof strike at my face. My eyes widened and I leaped backwards, trying to dodge. Envy grinned, pushing forward.

“Too slow!” she shouted, landing a hoof on my shoulder. I grunted in pain under the force of the blow. “Be light on your hooves, and expect your opponent's attacks!” She dropped on her rear legs, swinging out with a sweeping kick. Clumsily I reared myself, pushing off to leap over the kick.

I failed. Pretty badly actually. The kick struck my leg, knocking me to the ground. Envy stood over me, glowering.

“That sort of thing would have gotten you killed had I been serious,” she said. “Perhaps we must start small with you. Your heart is not in this, I think.”

“No, I'm fine,” I said, pushing myself off the ground. “Just... keep going. I'll never get better unless I practice, right?”

Envy grinned, rearing up again. She rushed forward with an unnatural speed, thrusting her forehoof at me. I braced myself into a standing position like she had done, moving to block the strike. The hoof hit me like a ton of bricks, but at least I didn't fall over. I flared my wings, spinning about to try and use one of them to strike back at the zebra. Envy ducked, using her insane speed to move about me in a circle. She stalked around me, ending up in a blind spot before I could turn to meet her. Her hoof struck the side of my barrel, knocking me back and making me lose my balance. To the ground I went again.

Envy chuckled. “That was... better. You are starting to understand how to maneuver. Pull yourself up, Star, and come sit. Let us speak about the other part of zebra magic,” she said, sitting down on her haunches.

I moved over and sat down in front of her. My entire body was sore from even the limited amount of fighting we had done.

“Now. I said before that zebra magic is instinctual. You just took your first steps towards understanding that. When you can predict your opponent's movements, you are participating in the essence of zebra magic. Conversely, there is another part of that magic that we have yet to touch on.”

“And that is...?” I said, catching my breath.

“Zebra magic is also about reflection. You must be able to reflect on your surroundings. This requires meditation,” Envy said. “Close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes, wondering what Envy meant. What was I supposed to be reflecting on?

“Clear your mind. Let your thoughts go. Feel the world around you. No noise, no sound, no din, no fuss, must interfere with your focus. Unlearn what you have learned, only then can victory be earned.”

I growled under my breath. Every time I tried to clear my thoughts, a certain black maned alicorn kept popping into them. Spark. She invaded my mind even more than when she had been present in it.

“I... I can't do it,” I said, opening my eyes. “It's like... I try... but then she's there, watching me.”

“Ah yes... the other Radiant Star. The one who so thoroughly bested me,” Envy said calmly. I nodded. “I know that she is no longer within you, but yet you are troubled by her. You care greatly for her, despite all that she has done to you.”

“I... I want to save her. She's just confused, doesn't know what she's doing. If I could help her, she could help everypony,” I said. “That's why I can't stop thinking about her.”

“And yet you must. You cannot let this break your focus. You have to keep moving forward, and shed the sins of the past,” Envy said, reaching into her cloak. She pulled out a scroll. “There is a particular magic that I wish for you to learn. It will help you to understand how to be silent and deadly. This will work while you are fighting as well as using your normal magic.” She handed me the scroll. I furled it open, perusing the words it held. Well... at least I thought they were words.

“I can't... exactly read zebra,” I said. Envy grinned.

“Turn it over,” she said.

I flipped the scroll around, the words revealing themselves to be written in perfectly legible Equestrian. I paused for a moment to savor the fierce heat of the blush riding my cheeks. Once I was able to actually read the spell, my eyes widened. It was a spell designed to silence my movements. The only problem was there was no instructions on how to actually cast it.

“Now then... cast it. But do it the zebra way. Feel the natural surroundings around you, and let its energy flow through you,” Envy said softly.

I sighed, glancing down at the scroll. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the energy required, but my mind kept getting in the way. I scrunched my face as I started to feel... something. I thought about Spark, and the feeling went away immediately. Envy was right. I was so hung up on Spark and where she was that I couldn't even do something as simple as clear my mind.

“I... I can't do it,” I said, finally opening my eyes.

“I thought as much,” Envy replied. “Time. Time is what you will need to learn this. I had not expected you to do it on the first try.”

“How am I ever going to get it?” I whined. “I can't even meditate right! I can't let go of her...”

“You will learn, Radiant Star. Trust me,” Envy said, standing. “Keep the scroll. Study it and meditate every night. Eventually, you will understand. Now... come. We have sat still long enough.” I stood, feeling a little more invigorated. Envy grinned as she pulled herself into a rearing position. “Are you ready?”

“Ready,” I said, rearing up myself.

Envy shot forward like a bullet, striking for my exposed midsection. I pushed off to the side, my opponent narrowly missing as I spun away. Regaining my balance, I rushed forward on my hind legs. Envy turned about, standing firm as she awaited my attack. I grinned, flapping my wings for momentum. I lifted into the air, kicking out and clipping the other mare as she struck out herself. Her attack caught me in my barrel, knocking the wind out of me and forcing me to the ground again. I coughed, trying to force some air down my lungs as Envy stood over me.

“Again.”

* * *

“Again!” Envy shouted.

I groaned, standing and rearing again. Two whole days had passed since our first training session and I still felt like I wasn't getting any closer to understanding zebra combat or zebra magic. My meditation sessions were faring worse, if anything. Spark haunted my thoughts during every session. Every time I closed my eyes all I ever saw was her. Envy had been as placid and unmoved as ever, but I could tell that even her patience was beginning to wear a little thin. I growled, surging forward as Envy strafed to my left. I turned to follow, the zebra leaping backwards to put distance between us. I came down to all fours, breaking into a swift canter. Pushing off of my hind legs, I struck out, catching Envy off guard and hitting her in the shoulder. The mare was pushed back, grunting in pain.

“Good!” the zebra exclaimed. She kicked out, coming just within reach of my nose.

I pulled away, slapping the hoof to the side frantically. Envy spun, dropping to a normal standing position, turning my deflection into a buck that landed right on the front of my chest. I dropped, falling onto my back.

Envy chuckled. “That was much better, Star. You are learning.”

“I... I still can't beat you though,” I said, pushing myself off the ground. “And my meditation... still terrible.”

“Yes, but you are beginning to understand how to fight like a zebra,” Envy said. “Come. Let us rest for the moment.”

I sat down next to the mare, looking out across the city. Our latest sparring session had taken us to the roof of the Ministry hub, as Envy had wanted a little more danger added to it. I sighed, hanging my head.

“I'm never gonna get this,” I said.

Envy laid a hoof on my shoulder, smiling. “Star, trust me when I say. Not everypony can quite understand the intricacies of this training. To come as far as you have is quite impressive,” she said.

“I... Thank you. I really do appreciate the help. Violet was a little apprehensive about me coming here,” I said. “After all that's happened though, we needed the down time.” Envy nodded. “Envy... I've been wanting to ask you about something. Can you... can you tell me a little bit more about Diamond? I've been thinking about her a lot lately.”

“Of course. I had expected this to come up at some point,” Envy said, pulling a small pouch out from underneath her cloak. “I prepared this to show you something. It is a memory, of sorts. Of the first time I met Diamond Night.” She took the pouch and dumped it, blowing on the green dust as it flowed from its container. The dust swirled around in the air, surrounding us until all was green.

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I blinked. This was a different way to view a memory. I wasn't in a host, but in a spectral form of my own body. I looked around, noticing the drab grey of the walls around me. It was a drab grey I was quite familiar with. Stable 180. Evora was ahead of me, trotting along the dank hall. She made her way to the entrance of the Stable. The area outside of the entrance didn't look like I'd remembered it. I guess something as large as a Stable had to have multiple entrances, after all. Evora stopped for a moment. She looked back, almost as if she was expecting something. She turned and continued forward into the city. Almost as if I were on autopilot, I trotted after her. The journey through the city was uneventful as Evora neared close to an abandoned office building. The zebra mare entered through a broken doorway and glanced about. Seeing nothing, she continued forward, picking through desks and filing cabinets for anything worth scavenging. Evora sighed, clearly coming up empty. A banging noise caught her attention and mine. The zebra turned, her eyes wide with fear.

“Hello?” she called out to the darkness. No response. Evora stepped back from the desk that she been picking through. The banging noise sounded again, coming from the nearby stairwell. A loud shouting accompanied it. Evora moved towards the door she had entered the building from, scrambling to get away. The door to the stairwell slammed open, revealing two raiders. The lead raider, a dirty white unicorn buck, trotted

into the room, his eyes widening with glee at the sight of the zebra.

“Stripe!” he shouted, floating out a SMG in his magic. Evora dove to the side as he fired, one of the shots catching her flank. The zebra groaned as the raider stalked forward.

“Get her, boys! Show this fucking piece of shit not to tread on our territory!”

Two more raiders entered the room, whooping and hollering. Evora yanked a roll of magical bandages out of her bags, trying to apply them as quickly as she could. One of the raiders, a blood red colored earth pony mare, rushed forward and swung a wicked spiked club that narrowly missed the zebra's head. Evora yelped and rolled away from her hiding place, grunting. She pushed to her hooves, galloping as fast as she could toward the exit. Another storm of gunfire erupted from the leader's SMG, striking the mare in her back legs. Evora hit the ground hard, howling.

“Yeah!” the raider leader crowed. “Pick her up. Bring her here.”

The blood red mare stepped over, grabbing onto Evora's jumpsuit with her teeth and dragging her across the dirty floor.

The lead raider grinned widely as he looked down at the mare. “So... whatcha doing here, bitch? You thought you could just waltz in here and start taking our stuff? This here's our place.” Evora tried to speak, but wasn't able to get any words out. “Looks like we'll have to cut the answer out of her.” The raider floated out a serrated knife and grinned.

“RELEASE HER,” a voice boomed from above. An explosion ripped through the air, knocking the raiders off of their hooves. I looked away from Evora, seeing a pony stepping through the blasted wall. A dark blue alicorn towered over the raiders, who were scrambling to get up. Evora groaned as she tried to pull herself away.

“Fuck! It's one of those alicorns!” one of the raiders shouted, lifting a pistol and firing blindly.

The alicorn's horn glowed brightly, erecting a shield and deflecting the bullets back. Two of the raiders were struck by stray fire, shouting in pain as they went down.

“LEAVE THIS PLACE, FOUL VILLAINS,” the alicorn yelled.

The lead raider growled and floated out his SMG, spraying gunfire about the room and striking the alicorn's shield. The dark mare flared her horn again, pushing the raider to the ground. She stepped over towards the rest of the raiders, righteous fury in her eyes. With another blast of her magic, the raiders were dead. The alicorn turned to the zebra, who was struggling to pull herself off the ground. “Hold thyself for a second. You're badly injured.” The alicorn floated out a healing potion, bringing it to the zebra's lips. Evora sputtered as she tried to swallow the potion, her eyes fluttering open and shut.

“Who... who are you...?” the zebra coughed as the healing potion began to take effect. The alicorn smiled softly.

“I am called Diamond. I was in the area and heard the cries for help. Are you alright?” she said.

Evora nodded. “I... I'm fine.”

“What were you doing in this building? Those ponies could have killed you,” Diamond said.

“Scavenging. It's how we survive out here in the city,” Evora replied, looking up at the alicorn with awe. “You... you're an alicorn.”

“Guilty,” Diamond chuckled. “And you're a zebra. But we won't hold that against you, will we?” Evora grinned as she pulled herself into a sitting position. “Now, where are you from? Your friends and family might be worried.”

“I... I'm from Stable 180. I live there with the others,” Evora said. “Why would you help me? I thought that alicorns were... you know... evil.”

“We... we used to be. But then we were... Freed. Left on our own, to... Rediscover ourselves,” the alicorn mare said. “I helped you because... well, I'm new to this city, and I... I couldn't let you get killed by those monsters.”

Evora stood, shaking herself off. “I do appreciate it. Raiders are pretty vicious around these parts. I really should have been better prepared,” she said. “I honestly don't know how my family at the Stable would take seeing you, though. I should be able to make it back by myself. Thank you... again. Perhaps sometime we could... venture out and scavenge together?”

“I... I would like that,” Diamond said. The world around me began to suddenly fade to a greenish tint before everything disappeared.

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I blinked. I had returned to where I was sitting. Envy glanced over at me, and smiled softly.

“So you see... I owe Diamond my life,” she said. “She saved me, and that was the day I fell in love with her.”

I sighed, hanging my head. “And I left her to die in that damn Stable.”

Envy laid a hoof on my shoulder once more.

“Again... I do not blame you for what happened down in the Stable. Diamond... she knew the dangers of the Wasteland. And despite the mistakes that she made, I never hated her for it,” the zebra said. She stood, stretching her legs and yawning. “So... are you feeling rested enough to try again?”

“I... I suppose so,” I said, standing. “What do you want to work on now?” Envy grinned.

“I have an idea. There are still some wings of the Ministry hub that are unexplored that might have active security. We are going to practice your sneaking skills,” she said, pointing to a nearby door. “Come on. Let's go.” She loped forward, trotting lightly. I followed behind the zebra as quietly as I could. Envy opened the door and grinned. “After you.”

I stepped inside the small stairwell, feeling quite cramped as I started down. The amount of light coming from the hallway below us was dropping as we walked. When we reached the bottom, the hall was dark and dank. I looked up and down the hall.

“Which way?” I said.

Envy motioned down the hall to the left. I trotted forward, keeping an eye on my E.F.S. for any hostile activity. Nothing. The last time I had been here, I hadn't run into anything that attacked me. Now... I wasn't so certain. Granted, I also didn't remember that room that Diamond had found the chest in. I rounded the next corner, not expecting a laser blast to suddenly hit the ground before me. I yelped and leaped into the air, looking up at the ceiling mounted turret that had suddenly come to life. The turret tracked my movements, firing another stream of deadly fire my way.

I snarled, throwing up my shield and deflecting it. “Shit!!”

“Star! Remember your training,” Envy said sternly. “Watch and learn.”

The zebra leaped into action, silently and quickly bounding through the hall. Every time the turret tracked her, she was already gone, moving onto the next piece of cover. She drew one of her wicked blades, tossing it with deadly accuracy at the turret. The blade embedded itself in the metal and the turret began to spark. Envy turned back to me with a stern expression. I lowered my shield and sighed.

“Sorry. I just kind of... panicked I guess,” I said.

“Just... try to feel your surroundings. Listen and look, and not just at your E.F.S. Learn to fight without it,” the zebra said. “Now then, let's continue. There is one other reason I brought you here, and that's to see Twilight's office. I thought you might be able to glean some information from it about Spark.”

“What? Really?” I said, grinning. “Alright then, what are we waiting for!” I started to canter forward and then immediately fell flat to my face as Envy yanked on my tail with her teeth. I glared up at her.

“We are going to do this the right way,” she said. “Undoubtedly we will run into further defenses. We need to be careful.”

I sighed, and finally nodded. Pushing myself to my hooves, I followed Envy as she started down the hallway. The zebra stalked like a hunter following prey. I tried to move as quietly as I could, attempting to feel the surroundings around me and not blindly glance at my E.F.S. I sighed. It wasn't happening. The hallway ended in a set of stairs, and there were no more turrets on this particular level. We set down the stairs, eventually coming to the door that led to the ground floor of the Ministry hub. I pushed open the door cautiously and stepped into the hallway. Envy nudged me with her muzzle, motioning down the hall. I stalked down the hall, trying to keep myself loose and quiet, but while I couldn't even hear Envy behind me, I could clearly hear my own hooves striking the ground. I was never going to get this silent thing down, it seemed.

The hallway was bereft of any hostile activity. I briefly wondered if the Twilight Society had cleared out everything, but the turret in the upper levels gave me pause. There was still some danger to this building, despite how easy this seemed. As we rounded the next corner, I found myself wishing that it was still easy. The large open hall before us appeared to be a lobby of some sorts. Roaming to and fro were several Ponitron security robots. Red blips fluttered into my E.F.S. Thankfully, they hadn't noticed us yet. Envy looked over at me and nodded. Sighing softly, I stepped forward and tried my best to sneak up on the first robot. The pony-shaped metal thing was whirring quietly as it scanned a nearby hall that branched off from the lobby. I got to within two feet of it before it turned, blaring a loud alarm that alerted practically every other robot in the room.

“Aww, come on!” I yelled, angry at myself for my inability to be silent.

The Ponitron's red eyes flared and a laser blast shot forth from them. My eyes widened as I instinctively cast my alicorn shield, deflecting the blast right back into the robot's face. It exploded violently, rocking me back across the hall to the hard ground. I grunted in pain, sliding to the wall with a violent ***thud***. Envy leaped into action, slicing into the nearest Ponitron with her wicked blades. I pushed myself off the wall, narrowly missing an electrical blast that would have flash-fried my head. With a flare of my horn, I grabbed the robot, crushing two others with its flailing form.

“Do you always make a habit of getting yourself beaten up and shot?” Envy called out, sneering as she ripped another robot to pieces with her knives.

“It's not something that I actively plan for, no!” I shouted back as I rammed into the last robot, sending it flying into the wall to explode in a shower of sparks. I huffed as I tried to catch my breath. Envy chuckled.

“Still, it seems as if you aren't even trying, Star,” Envy replied.

“I am trying!” I exclaimed. “This is a lot harder than it looks, you know.”

“I... I'm sorry. I forgot that you are just starting to learn. You have come far, but you need to continue your meditations. Now, let us cease this speaking, our destination is quite close to here,” Envy said.

I nodded, following the zebra down the hall amidst the broken and smoking Ponitrons. We turned down the next hallway, and there... there it was. Two massive doors lay broken next to the entrance to the office. Inside lay the most plush carpet I'd ever stepped on in my entire life. I was giddy as I glanced about the wonderful room. Books upon books upon books lined the walls, and while the crystal globe in the back of the office had lost its shine, it was still something to behold.

“Wow... this is... just... wow,” I said, finding myself at a lack of words. I trotted up to the desk, glancing down at the open drawers and terminal sitting on top of it.

“We found it quite by accident. In fact, I almost think that you couldn't find it unless you were meant to,” Envy said. “Something here... it wanted Diamond to find it.”

“That something was... not a very pretty thing,” I said. “It was... a nightmare. A nightmare that took your friend from you.” A glimmer in the darkness caught my eye. *What was that?* I thought as I let my gaze drift upon the crystal globe. At the base of it was the stylized etching of Twilight's cutie mark. “Umm... Envy? Can you see this?” I trotted up to the globe and pointed at where the mark was.

“See what, Radiant Star? I see nothing other than metal and crystal,” the zebra replied.

“I thought so. All over this city, I've been finding these... messages. Left by the original Ministry Mares. They're always addressed to Twilight. The last one I saw was in Stable 180, belonging to Pinkie Pie. It was associated with a symbol of her cutie mark,” I said. “There's one right there. But I don't think anypony else can see them. I think they're messages for me. Hold on, I'm going to try something...”

I flared my horn, my magic taking a hold on the etching of the cutie mark. It lit up brilliantly, spilling light into the air that coalesced into the form of a familiar purple mare. Twilight smiled softly, a golden crown with a pink star gem inset sitting upon her brow.

“If this message has found you, then I have failed to do my duty as a Ministry Mare, and... as a Princess of Equestria, and we have all lost.”

I blinked. *What...? Princess? What is she talking about?* I said. It was then that I noticed that Twilight's stature was a bit... taller than I'd remembered. I glanced at her, cocking my head and realizing that it was due in part to the wings that were tucked neatly against her sides. Twilight was an alicorn? But... how did I not notice this before now? The image continued to speak.

"When this war started, I thought I could help Celestia and Luna solve it peacefully. But I was wrong. Littlehorn happened. Celestia gave up the throne... and Luna... created the Ministries. I did what was necessary to help her. I gave up my role as a Princess. I became the Ministry Mare. Always hiding myself, my true self from everypony.

No more. I am going to use this power I've been given to complete my mission. To ensure nopony else will ever die, I will use my own wings and horn to finish this for good.

If I've failed... I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry. The Zebras played their part, but We did it. We destroyed everything, and life will never be the same. I'm so sorry..."

The hologram faded to nothingness, and I sighed deeply. How had Twilight managed to hide the fact that she was not only an alicorn herself, but once a Princess? None of it made any sense. Every memory I'd seen of the mare or been in her body, she was a unicorn. I couldn't figure it out. I looked over at Envy. The zebra had a concerned look on her face.

"Sorry about that. Like I said... these things tend to only show themselves to me," I said. She nodded. "I don't know if there's anything here that can help me with Spark. I'm not even sure I completely understand what I just saw, anyways."

"Where will you go then, to seek the answers?" Envy asked.

"Manehatten. There's a group of ponies there called the Twilight Society. They might know of some way to locate Spark," I said.

"Then go, we should. We have been away too long. Your friends will worry and you have a journey to prepare for," the zebra replied.

I nodded, turning to follow her as she headed towards the door. I glanced back once more at the stylized cutie mark on the metal. Unlike any similar message marks, this one was still glowing brightly. Pulsing, even. My eyes widened as a blast of magic emanated from the mark, striking me directly on my horn. I fell to the ground, groaning. Envy whirled around and began to call out for me as whiteness overtook everything.

"Star!!!"

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"Well, that's just lovely," I said, gritting my teeth as I glanced up and down the long hallway. The doors that lined it looked the same as they always had. "Hurry up and open up, Twilight. I haven't got all day to wait for you." I snarled. As if on command one of the nearby doors opened immediately. I stepped through, finding myself in a dark wooded area. In the center was a large treehouse I knew had once been home to Twilight. I trotted up to the door, and pushed it open.

"Hello?" I called out. "Is anypony there?" I wondered briefly what emotion or memory or thing that

Twilight would have ready for me. I gasped softly in surprise when I saw her.

The mare sitting in the center of the library was a broken shell of what she once was. Her wings lay limply at her sides, and she appeared as if she had been crying for hours on end. She looked up at me and forced out a soft smile through her cracked face.

“So, you finally know the truth of the matter, do you?” she said.

“Twilight?” I said, blinking. The mare nodded. I trotted over and sat down on my haunches in front of the mare. “You... you weren't just a unicorn were you? You were... like me.”

“Yes. I was an alicorn much like you are. I was also at one time, a Princess. The Princess of Friendship, they called me,” the mare replied.

“But... what happened?” I asked.

“Littlehorn. The zebras killed so many fillies and colts that day. Celestia was stricken with grief over it. She decided that she wasn't fit to rule. I tried to console her, but she wouldn't listen to me. She tried to offer the throne to me... but I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I couldn't just take my mentor's place like that. Not after seeing how heartbroken it made her,” Twilight said. “Luna came. She offered to take the throne. Said she had some ideas on how to win the war. That was when she proposed the idea for the Ministries.”

“But then... your hologram said you had to give up being a Princess,” I said.

Twilight nodded. “Luna said it was for safety reasons. She said that if the worst ever came to pass, that I could take her up place as ruler. I was the backup plan, so to speak. I was forced to abdicate my Princess status, and take a new role, as the Ministry Mare,” she said. “At first... I agreed with her. But after awhile, I wanted to use my power to try and stop the war as best as I could. That included many many unfinished projects, but some of them you know quite well.”

“I.M.P.,” I said. “But... how is it then that all this time I've only ever seen you as a unicorn, even in memory orbs?”

“That was... Rarity's idea. She thought that if we made my identity as an alicorn obscure, that the zebras wouldn't try to attack me. She came up with a spell to overwrite certain parts of memories, and every propaganda poster that was shown I was without my wings,” Twilight said. “She wasn't the Ministry Mare of Image for nothing, after all. I still wonder how she learned all of that in such short time. Perhaps Luna? I don't know.” Twilight paused to draw a deep sigh of breath, fluttering her wings listlessly. “I was the only new alicorn in the historical record. I had thought that the mechanism behind that transformation could be duplicated...”

“I.M.P. again,” I interjected.

Twilight nodded, staring at her hooves. “If we could have created more alicorns, it would have meant so much... Aside from the obvious military applications, it would have meant government stability if Luna or Celestia fell. But... you know how that turned out.”

“So what now? What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Out of all the alicorns that... resulted... from I.M.P., Star, I only have a connection with you, and it's

decaying. It's not going to go away quickly, but I'm worried it won't be quick enough." Twilight said, a flicker of animation crossing her tired features. "It all comes back to Spark, and to third-manifold cross-temporal thaumatographical connectivity. Spark is leveraging her primary link to me as a cotemporal Element Bearer to reach through spacetime itself --"

"Twilight; Equestrian, please!" I interjected, my eyes wide and staring.

Twilight grinned sheepishly, settling back to the floor.

"Sorry, I just -- Sorry." she smiled sadly. "In plain Equestrian, Spark is using her bond to me as a bearer of the Element of Magic *then* to bring her power through you, *now*. When my link to you fails, she'll be able to take it over. That will let her force her magic into the web of life in this world. She'll kill everything on the planet to remake it in her perfect vision. She must be stopped."

"Why? Why does she want to do that?" I said. I couldn't begin to fathom the amount of magic required to perform such a feat.

"I... I failed. The spell, the life spell that should have brought Shining Armor back to me. In casting it, I spent the last of my energy. I reverted to a normal unicorn, my wings... given to the spell. I didn't have enough power to give Spark her own body," Twilight said. "Spark resented it. She claimed she wanted freedom, to live her own life. But I saw past her deception and saw her true goals. She wanted the world, Star. She wanted to see everything in the fires of Tartarus with her as the ruler. I personally believe the grandiose nature of Nightmare impressed that upon her."

"I... I can believe that last part," I said, thinking about what had happened with Diamond. "But Spark... there's still a piece of goodness in her. I know it. I can feel it, in my heart. If I can just get through to it, I might be able to save her, Twilight. I don't have to kill her."

"Maybe, but I'm not taking any chances," Twilight snarled. "That self-serving bitch never really helped me. She never wanted to be my friend. She wanted power, plain and simple. All I ever wanted was to have Shining back."

"Your brother," I said. "What was his angle in all of this? I know that he wanted to die. He wanted to help you complete your work, to complete the spell."

"Shining... was corrupted by *her*. Spark's goal was to push me into a corner, force me to cast such a complex spell to give her a life of her own. She failed, because I intentionally put all of my energy into trying to bring back Shining Armor. I still don't know if the spell actually did anything. But that didn't matter," Twilight said. "It gave me a way to beat her. And then of course, the megaspells dropped and now here we are."

I looked down at my hooves, taking it all in. I remembered Twilight's memory. She had told Spark she would stop her.

"Twilight," I said finally after a few moments of awkward silence. "I can't make any promises about her. I made my choice. She has one of my friends inside of her now. And I made a promise to her. I intend to keep that promise."

"Just... don't trust her. Don't let her get to you with her words, her charm. She'll as soon as destroy you as look at you," Twilight said. "Please... be careful. You are important."

I glared at the purple mare. I was important? I wished that were actually true.

“When this is all said and done, you and I will have to talk about that,” I said forcefully. “And from now on, if I want to talk to you... you'll be available. None of this proxy shit from Unity.”

“Fine,” Twilight replied. “The emotions will no longer trouble you. Now... you should go. Your friends... they will be missing you.”

I stood, looking down at her. I realized how broken she looked. I felt sorry for her. All this time, she'd been alone, hurt... and angry. So very, very angry. Was this how I was for a time? I couldn't remember. In fact... I'd been having trouble remembering a lot lately of my own life. It was like Twilight's memories kept popping up into place. The only constant it seemed... was Violet. I could clearly remember everything about her. I turned around and trotted to the door of the library. Before everything went dark, I looked back at Twilight and sighed. I knew what needed to happen next. It was time to leave Chicacolt, time to find Spark and end this.

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“Star!” Envy shouted from above me. Her hoof laid on my shoulder, shaking me fiercely. “Star!!!”

I groaned, rolling over on my side. My eyes fluttered open. The zebra's expression was one of fear and concern.

“You're... you're awake. I feared you were hurt or dead, or worse.”

“Just... another one of those freaky mind things I get sometimes,” I croaked, pushing myself off the ground and back onto all fours. “How long was I out?”

“Several hours, at best,” Envy said.

“And you stayed with me?” I said, raising an eyebrow. The zebra nodded. “I... thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“It would not befit my duty as a teacher to leave a student alone, especially in a place such as this,” Envy replied. “But I feel we should return to Theater. Your friends are sure to have begun to wonder where you have gone off to.”

I nodded, pondering that thought. Violet would have come and found me, she had my PipBuck tag. Where was she? We trotted out into the hallway, glancing about for any more hostiles. Thankfully, there was nothing. Within several minutes we had made our way to the main entrance of the Ministry hub and out into the city. It was dark out already, but there was an odd hint of light in the distance.

Then I heard it. An explosion, muffled, but still clear enough to know what it was. It was coming from the direction we were headed. From Theater. The large blast was followed by several smaller muffled sounds. I moved into a gallop, Envy keeping pace with me. What was happening? Were my friends alright? The closer we got, the more the muffled sounds began to clear up. Gunfire. Grenades. This wasn't just some Wasteland beast who got too close to the settlement. This was a firefight. From what I could tell by the flaring glows dancing off the streets, there were also flamethrowers being used.

I turned the next corner, not paying nearly enough attention to my E.F.S. as I ran right into an earth pony

who was carrying a semi-automatic submachine gun in his teeth. He snarled around the grip, spraying a fire that went wide thanks to my inadvertent collision with him. I reached out with my hoof, striking the weapon and knocking it from his mouth, taking a few of his teeth with it. The other hoof shot out automatically, catching the stallion in the face and knocking him out cold. I shook that hoof, pain lancing up into my leg. That buck had a really hard head!

“One of the assailants, it seems,” Envy said softly. “Probably meant to hold a perimeter. We should move quickly and assist the townspies of Theater.”

I nodded, looking down at the unconscious stallion. His style of dress stuck me as odd. He was wearing a nice (as nice as one can get in the Wasteland) tailored suit. My eyes widened as I recognized the outfit. *The Cowpones? After what happened with them the last time?* I thought. Something just didn't add up here. Why would the Cowpones be attacking Theater?

Because you weren't there, I suddenly thought. I hung my head. Somehow, they had known I would be gone and planned this excursion. Possibly they thought I'd already left the city, thanks to the Minotaur's last broadcast. It would have been the perfect time to strike at the MMMM, and at one of their larger settlements, too. Envy poked me in the side, breaking me free of my thoughts.

“Come on, Star. There are yet more battles to be fought,” she said. I noticed she had her blades dangling around her legs, ready to be used at a moment's notice. She turned and began cantering silently towards Theater.

I followed, trying to use my wings to keep me off the ground and keep myself silent as well. It wasn't working too well, but silence didn't seem to matter too much when we turned onto the stretch of concrete that lay outside Theater's entrance.

It was a war zone. The ponies of Theater had attempted to put up a crude barricade and were firing from behind their cover at the brahmin and earth ponies that were besieging the town. All over, I smelled the stench of burning flesh and flamer fuel. A large earth pony at the head of the siege was the responsible party, the massive flamethrower strapped onto his battle saddle alight with death and fury. A flash of black above me caught my eye. Lilith was soaring over the battle, a whining noise tracing after her as the Bitch let loose its payload of pain. A missile shot forth from the launcher, slamming home into the ground in the middle of the Cowpones' army, exploding violently and spraying shrapnel everywhere. Elsewhere, ponies I recognized as foot soldiers of the MMMM were engaged in smaller skirmishes away from the main fight. The defenders appeared to be vastly outnumbered, however, and I noticed a few bodies that definitely belonged to them as well as the Cowpones attacking. I nearly died inside when I saw Thin Mint laying among them, her pale green coat seeming even more pale in the stillness of death. While I hadn't known the mare all that well, she had been a genuinely caring pony for myself and my friends.

A blast of silver fire from behind the barricade both warmed and froze my heart at the same time. Violet would be there too of course. There was no way she wouldn't be helping. It was in her nature. Still, I worried she would be okay. Unfortunately, there wasn't much time for me to process everything else going on before I was spotted. A blast of gunfire struck the concrete just in front of my feet, causing me to leap back. I flared my horn, taking a cue from the fight with the Triad, and cast my gravity spell at the less than fortunate assailant. Screaming, he went flying into the air as he disappeared from sight.

“That... was actually kind of frightening. You know that, right?” Envy said as she leaped past me. I grinned.

“Certainly effective, though,” I said. “Let's get to the others, and quick.”

The zebra nodded, leaping into the fray with intense and controlled fury. It was amazing to watch her fight for real. She moved from target to target with fluid grace, easily dispatching three opponents in mere moments. I galloped forward myself, raising my alicorn shield to deflect any incoming fire. The majority of the ponies and brahmin firing at me seemed to just stare when I did this. I wondered briefly if they hadn't expected me to actually be here. It was no matter. I just needed to get to Violet. A blast of silver fire torched two earth ponies who had come close to the barricade. My marefriend grinned as she saw me.

“Star!” she called out. Envy leaped after me as we made our way onto the other side of the holding point. I smiled softly at my love.

“What happened? What's going on?” I said.

“The Cowpones,” Violet said, stomping her metal hoof on the ground in anger. “Those bastards snuck right up on us, started attacking Theater. We're lucky it's inside the building, but still a good portion of the entrance has been destroyed. This is all we have to defend at the moment. Danish went to go get Gluttony, try and get us some reinforcements.” The flamethrower pony roared in the battle behind us, his weapon searing the outside of the barricade with intense heat.

“Well, we're here to help,” I said. “Sorry for not getting back sooner. Had a bit of an out of body experience with Twilight. I'll tell you later about it, after we get out of this frying pan.”

“That flamethrower wielding fuck is getting damn annoying!” a tiny voice shouted. Patch glanced back up at me, grinning wildly as she balanced Para Bellum on her shoulders. “Star! Hey, Steely, Star's back!”

I groaned. I was *not* going to get used to that nickname. Steeljack waved, his concentration on the attacking forces. He let loose from behind his cover with a ***crack*** of his rifle, taking down two brahmin with a single shot.

“Where the hell is Nixis?” I said, wondering aloud.

“Nixis is ensuring the safety of the ponies inside the settlement. He's digging a way for them to get out just in case the Cowpones breach our defenses,” Violet said with a grin.

I nodded. It made perfect sense, really. With his eloquence and peaceful manner, I sometimes forgot that my friend was a hellhound, his claws capable of digging even through metal.

“Well, then. Envy, what are you ---?” I started to say before I realized the zebra was missing from my side. She had moved quietly out into the roaring sounds of battle, using her stealth and speed to strike swiftly against all who would have opposed her. “Nevermind, then. I guess I've got the flamer pony then.”

“I'll give you cover. He seems to be the leader here, if you can get him down the rest of them might fall apart,” Violet said.

I nodded and threw up my shield spell again. Leaping out from behind the barricade, I charged straight forward into the fray. Two brahmin wielding spiked clubs rushed right at me, and I went to retrieve Star-- uh oh. I forgot I didn't have my weapon! The two brahmin ran right into my shield and began beating on it with their stout clubs.

“Violet!!” I shouted, backpedaling to where she could see me.

My love rolled her eyes. “I sort of figured you'd forget to pick it up!” she called out, floating out my beautiful minigun away from the barricade and right into my magical grasp.

I grinned widely as I took control of Stargazer once more. I spun about, the ripping slash of Stargazer's fire music to my ears. First up was the two brahmin that were assaulting my shield. In a flash the two went down, their bloody and broken bodies striking the hard concrete. I was in no mood to pull any punches here. If I didn't, the Cowpones might break through our defenses and breach the settlement. I couldn't let that happen. I rushed forward, nearly running into a blast of fire from the flamer pony. He howled loudly and let out another burst of flame, stopping me dead in my tracks. I grinned, slipping into E.S.A.T.S., hoping that I could see – Yes! I could target the honking huge tank on flamer pony's back. Queuing up every shot I had and hoping for the best, I released the spell. Stargazer released its payload, the bullets slamming into the fuel tank. The tank exploded violently, setting it's wielder on fire. The stallion dropped to the ground, trying to roll around and put out the flames, but to no avail. He stopped moving after a scant few seconds, the residual fires spreading to the surrounding area.

A shot slammed into my rump from behind me, pain shooting through my flank. I growled as I spun about, facing down my next assailant. Several earth ponies with shotguns mounted on battle saddles charged in at me. I sighed, an idea forming in my mind. I latched Stargazer onto its harness and rose on my hind legs, pulling myself into a rearing position. It wasn't perfect, and I knew my form was still off, but I had to keep trying. I pushed off, using my hind legs to lift myself into the air in the center of the three ponies. Landing, I struck out clumsily with my forehoof, catching the one to my right and knocking him out cold.

“Sloppy form, Star!” Envy shouted as she leaped in next to me, catching the stallion behind me in the leg with a slash of her blades before he could get a shot off. “Tighten it up!”

“I'm sorry!” I called back, twirling about on one back hoof. I accidentally caught the other stallion in the side, knocking him over. Envy dropped down to all fours, slashing out and ending the stallion's life quickly and quietly. “I'm trying!! I really am!”

“Not hard enough,” the zebra chided.

I sighed. I was still learning, it seemed. The chaos of the battle exploded around as more of the Cowpones poured into the streets. I growled as we were surrounded on all sides. Gunfire rang through the air. I could see the barricade being attacked again from where we were. Silver fire filled the air, and cracks and retorts from various weapons struck the veritable army that had descended upon it. This wasn't just a siege. It was turning into a slaughter. How many did they have? Where in the hell was Gluttony? I glanced over at Envy.

“What now?” I asked.

The zebra shrugged, slipping out her knives. “Fight. If we die, we die. But we cannot let these bastards kill the good ponies of Theater. They deserve much better than that,” she said. I grinned. “It's been quite an honor to fight beside you, Ministry Mare.”

“Likewise, Evora,” I said, using the mare's original name. She smiled softly.

I slipped Stargazer out of its harness and tossed up a shield, hoping to discourage any would be attackers as we tried to make our way back to the barricade. We were getting closer when something really really *big* dropped right in front of us, slamming right into my shield and tossing Envy to the ground a few feet away.

“What the...?” I looked up, and my eyes went wide.

The creature in front of us was the ugliest thing I had possibly ever seen in my life. Two grotesque cow-like heads jutted out from its massive upright body, and two sets of overly muscled and scarred arms were situated on its sides. Its legs were small, but stout. Its height more than made up for it. It towered over even me. A torn suit jacket with holes cut out for the beast's four arms adorned the creature. The thing's eyes gleamed. It was as if somepony had taken a minotaur and a brahmin and stuffed it together in some unholy matrimony of evil... like a brahmintaur? Everypony and brahmin in the immediate vicinity gave it and us a wide berth.

“So,” the left head said, its voice guttural and throaty. “You're that Ministry bitch I keep hearing about on the radio.”

“Yeah, the Ministry bitch,” the other head said. It sounded... excited and higher pitched. “Can we kill her? Please tell me we can kill her?!”

“Shut the fuck up, wouldja?” the left head replied.

“What... what the fuck are you?” I said.

Both heads chuckled loudly. It was fucking creepy.

“I'm the one who's finally gonna take you down,” the left head said. “I'm Cow. This is Face.” One of the thing's arms pointed at the right head.

“You're Cow-Face? The new leader of the Cowpones?” I said, narrowing my gaze. The left head nodded. “What do you want here? These ponies never did anything to you.”

“Ohhh boss boss boss!” Face said. “She's pretty, I like her! I wanna fuck her! We can still kill her first, but I'm gonna fuck her, boss!”

“I said shut the fuck up!” Cow shouted. “Sorry, forgive him. Suffice to say, he's not my better half. You wanna know why I'm here? I'm here cuz I'm sick of the MMMM running the show around here. I'm here to shake shit up a bit! You? You're just a bonus.”

“I'll stop you. I won't let you hurt anypony,” I said angrily.

Cow-Face chortled in unison. Still creepy.

“You ain't gonna hurt anyone, today,” Cow snarled. “I didn't think you'd even be here, to be honest. Last I heard on the radio was that you was leaving town.”

“Didn't take. Now then, call off your crew and maybe I'll let you off easily,” I said, lifting Stargazer.

The... thing... if that's what you could call it moved faster than I could even blink, its four massive arms slamming out at me and striking me directly in the chest. I hurtled backward in the air, striking the ground with intense force. I groaned, trying to push myself up as I felt the beast upon me before I could even get up. The bottom set of arms grabbed me by my throat, lifting me into the air. The other two arms joined them, wrapping around and squeezing hard. I couldn't see any of the others beyond the massive beast.

“Yeah!! Kill her kill her kill her!” Face crowed. I struggled, trying to breath and stay conscious. “Strangle the life outta her!!”

“You know... for once... I have to agree with him. Goodbye, Ministry bitch,” Cow said, grinning. Face kept going on in the background.

“And when you're done with her, fuck her liver! Better yet, let me fuck her liver! Come on, Cow, you gotta let me fuck that shit when she's dead, it'll be fucking awesome!” the right head of the creature shouted. Cow's expression turned to that of disgust.

“Really? You're fucked in the head, you know that Face?” the left head replied.

Face chuckled loudly, his eyes crazed and wild. I could feel my eyes starting to go black. I didn't have much time. I tried to flare my horn, but nothing happened. Was this how I would die? I couldn't... I couldn't go yet. I had to stop Spark still! I kept flopping from side to side, trying to break free, but his grip was just too strong.

Then I suddenly had breath and I was on the ground. Cow-Face had leaped back as an even larger creature slammed down in front of me. I coughed violently. I looked up to see who had saved me. A massive earth pony stood over me. His dark eyes glanced down and a smile came from his face.

“You alright?” Gluttony said.

I nodded, pushing myself up shakily. The soft amber glow of magic assisted me and I glanced over, seeing Danish next to me. I smiled in gratitude.

The MMMM's leader turned back to the leader of the Cowpones. “So... you're that new asshole running the Cowpones. Cow-Face, right? What makes you think you have the right to come into Theater and shit in my playground, huh?!”

“Oooh, he's huge! Let's rip him open, Cow, I bet he's got huge guts!” Face erupted. The left head nodded and grinned.

“And you're the big bad of the MMMM. Word is on the streets, you've gone soft,” he replied. “I think we'll tear you open to see just how soft that is.” The four-armed monstrosity rushed forward, striking at Gluttony before he could move.

The earth pony growled loudly as he fell backwards, nearly toppling over me. Cow-Face wasted no time, hammering at the side of the MMMM leader with vicious strikes. Gluttony rolled over, turning his size into an advantage to toss the brahmintaur away from him. Cow-Face landed easily, using his bottom arms to cushion his blow. Danish grabbed onto me.

“We'd better make tracks, sweetheart. This could get real dangerous for us,” he said.

“No, you go. I need to help Gluttony,” I said, shaking my head.

“Don't be stupid, Star. This is a battle between them,” the cream-colored unicorn replied.

I looked over at the two combatants. They were busy trading blows with one another. Despite

Gluttony's size, strength, and speed, he wasn't doing so well. It was easy to see how the brahmintaur had caught me off guard. Cow-Face was elemental, Face's screams seeming to goad the composite creature to new heights of rage and fury.

"No. I need to stay," I said finally. "If I don't... I'm afraid of what might happen. Get to Evora. See if she's okay. We might need her help."

"Fine, fine. But don't come hauntin' me when you're dead," Danish said with a sigh. "Just... be careful wouldja?"

"You know it, Danish. Thanks," I said, pulling myself off the ground.

Danish disappeared into the chaos of the battle, headed in the direction Envy had been thrown to. I spun about, gazing upon the titanic conflict in front of me. I lifted Stargazer up without thinking and leaped into action, spraying a line of bullets at the four-armed creature. Cow-Face snarled as he jumped back to avoid the fire, giving Gluttony time to refocus himself.

"Two against one? Hardly seems fair," Cow snorted. Face's... err... face lit up and he began to cackle madly.

"Yeah, fair! For you! Hardly seems fair for you! You stupid fucks! We're gonna come over there and rip your skin from your bone and wear that shit as a fancy hat! That's right! And then I'm gonna pose your skeletons and make you bone each other! Geddit! Bone, skeleton! Oh fuck you, that was funny!" the right head spouted. I could see why Cow kept telling him to shut up. I honestly couldn't imagine what it must be like to live with that sort of psycho.

"Gluttony! Are you alright?" I called to the massive earth pony.

"I've been better. I do appreciate the assistance," he replied. "You try to disable him. I'll put both his heads six feet under, starting with that annoying right head."

"You got it," I shouted, pulling up Stargazer again. I slipped into E.S.A.T.S., queuing up several shots that were intended to strike at non-fatal parts of his body. I wanted to disable him, not make ground brahmintaur. I released the spell and fired. The minigun spun into action, several of the shots missing but the few that counted hitting the brahmintaur in his arms and legs. Howling in pain, Cow-Face charged forward, aiming right at me. He was deadly close when Gluttony interposed himself between us.

"You're fighting me, remember?" Gluttony said, striking out at the brahmintaur.

Cow-Face parried the blow, bringing his lower set of arms in for a brutal thrust that struck the earth pony in his chest. Gluttony roared in pain, trying to scramble backwards to put some distance between him and the Cowpones leader. Cow-Face pushed off from the ground, launching himself at Gluttony, grabbing onto his neck with all four of his powerfully built arms and squeezing.

"Fuck yeah!! Squeeze the shit out of that fat fucker!" Face crowed. "Squeeze him until his shit comes squirting out!"

"Kind of gross, Face," Cow said, grinning. "But I will most certainly comply. It's time for your reign to be over, MMMM fucker." The brahmintaur squeezed harder, but Gluttony merely grinned as his hooves came up, knocking loose Cow-Face's grip. Gluttony pushed out with his forehooves, tossing the four-armed beast to

the ground. Gluttony stomped forward, the earth shaking underneath his hooves as Cow-Face pulled himself up.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily, freak!” Gluttony shouted, putting his oversized shoulder right into the brahmintaur’s twin faces.

Cow-Face grunted, taking the brunt of the blow before pushing back with his powerfully built arms. The brahmintaur battered at the leader of the MMMM, each strike knocking the earth pony back until the two were at a distance from each other.

“You’re strong, I’ll give you that,” Cow said, trying to catch his breath. Gluttony began to snarl a response, only to be interrupted by Face’s triumphant cry. “No fucker’s stronger than Cow-Face!”

“I’ll show you strength, you freaky deaky son of a bitch,” Gluttony said, stomping his forehoof and causing a shockwave that sent the brahmintaur soaring through the air. The beast struck an overturned trash bin, smashing it to pieces as he continued through it and to the hard concrete. Cow-Face stood, setting himself for a charge.

“Oh no you don’t,” the massive earth pony said, slamming forward with a hoof strike that knocked the brahmintaur back to the ground. “Now you’re mine!”

Gluttony reared up, intending on bringing down his giant forehooves on the creature below him. They came down, stopped only by Cow-Face’s four rippling arms. The brahmintaur thing sneered with both faces.

“Nice try, but no,” Cow said, lifting the earth pony’s hooves off of him. The thing straightened its arms out, holding Gluttony at full extension. His faces alight with rage over clenched teeth, the massive bipedal monster shouted in effort and flung Gluttony off of him. Gluttony cartwheeled across the concrete, smashing back first into a nearby building. The ground shuddered below our feet as he struck. Cow-Face stood, the left head grinning widely at me. “Now then, where were we?”

“We were just about to cut her open and fuck her liver, boss man,” Face said, chortling. “Cut her up! Fuck her up! Cut her fuck! F ---” Cow headbutted himself, silencing Face instantly.

“For the last time, would you shut the fuck up, you moron? Sheesh! Is that all you ever think about?!” he shouted.

I charged forward, trying to use this opportunity to strike while I had the chance. Whipping Stargazer about, I slammed the butt of the gun into the brahmintaur’s gut, knocking him back. Catching his breath, both heads snarled as the brahmintaur’s powerful arms reached out and grabbed onto Stargazer. I struggled to keep hold of the weapon with my magic, but his grasp was strong and I could feel my control slipping. How strong was this thing? He looked like he’d barely taken a beating from Gluttony and still had plenty of juice to drop him into a building. Danish was right. This was way out of my league. But I didn’t have a choice now. I had to stop this thing before it and its cronies could breach Theater. I had to save ponies, not let them die. I had to be better. I just had to.

“LET GO OF MY GUN!!” I shouted, filtering my magic into my voice to act as a shockwave, hoping that a kiss of the Royal Canterlot Voice would get him to loosen his grip.

For a split second Cow-Face startled, all four of his ears pinning back. I took the opening and acted, ripping the minigun away with a blast of telekinesis. Cow-Face dropped back and I did as well, hoping to put some distance between us.

“Feisty. I like it,” Cow said. “But take a look, Ministry bitch. You've spent so much time fighting me, you forgot that your friends are going to die by my gang.”

I shot a glance back at the barricade. The ponies there were still fighting but it was becoming harder and harder to see them amidst the chaos and carnage of the battle. I turned back around, looking past the brahmintaur, chuckling softly.

“No. They won't. My friends are a lot stronger than you think they are, Cow-Face. If there's anything I've learned...” I said, lifting Stargazer into the air as I spoke. “It's that you can never, *EVER*, underestimate the power of good friends!”

A roar from behind the four-armed beast grabbed his attention. Gluttony charged at the brahmintaur with a ferocity I was quite sure that I was happy to not be on the receiving end of. He struck Cow-Face like a freight train, using all of his momentum to push the beast into the air. The massive earth pony lashed out, bringing his hoof across the brahmintaur's midsection and slamming him back into the concrete. One of the heads coughed, blood spewing forth from its mouth.

“I told you, stupid fuck. This is my playground. And I'm the king of the sand castle!” Gluttony erupted as he stood over the brahmintaur. “And now I'm going to end you!” The gigantic pony brought his forehooves down in a spectacular hoof slam, striking the four-armed creature with a force and intensity the likes no pony had ever seen before. I heard a **snap** as bones broke and muscles ripped apart. Gluttony's massive weight and power had punched his forehooves completely through Cow-Face, crushing his lower shoulders like melons. Gluttony gave no quarter to this monster, and he deserved it. As he pounded Cow-Face into jelly, Gluttony roared loudly in triumph, stopping the siege instantly. Brahmin and ponies alike halted in their fights, looking up at the massive earth pony with fear and awe in their eyes. Gluttony stared back, puffing out his chest as he shouted. “Alright, listen up you stupid Cowpone sons of bitches! You want a piece of the MMMM, you gotta go through me first. Now who wants a piece of my fucking cake?!” He stomped a hoof, the impact of which caused a small earth tremor.

Panic ensued. The army of the Cowpones fell apart before the power and ferocity of leader of the MMMM. They fled from the settlement as fast as their terrified legs would carry them. Gluttony stood triumphant in the center of the square, letting them go. With the head cut off, he didn't need to do anything further. The fleeing Cowpones kept shooting looks at the destroyed corpse of their boss. I glanced down at the body of the brahmintaur, myself. He was still twitching, his body broken and bloody. I stepped up, noting that the head that belonged to Face lay limply off to the side, blood streaming from its dead eyes. Cow's head shook as he looked up at me.

“Fuck... you...” he said, before his eyes went dark and his head dropped as well.

I sighed. Some things in the Wasteland just lived for death, I supposed. I lifted my eyes to Gluttony.

“Thank you for the help,” I said. “I think I owe you one.”

The earth pony grinned. “Nah. I owe you a lot more, Radiant Star. More than you'll ever know. You're a friend. And as of today, you and yours are officially honorary members of the MMMM. As you can see - as you *do*, we protect our own,” he said.

I smiled as I joined him in the walk back towards Theater. The outer walls of the settlement had taken a massive beating, but in time, the ponies living there would recover much better than if they had been overrun by

Cowpones. A flash of green ran towards me as Violet hopped into my embrace.

“You're alright!” she said, tears welling up into her eyes.

I nuzzled her close and grinned.

“Was there ever any doubt?” I said. “Okay, that sounded bad. Sorry, won't ever do that again.” Violet snickered. “Say... did anypony see what happened to Evora?”

“I'm right here,” a voice in my ear said. I flipped out of my skin and jumped five feet into the air away from the zebra mare, who had somehow managed to sneak up on me once again. “You're still not perfect at it, but I believe you are ready to continue your studies without me, Star.”

“I... I'll try, Evora. I don't know if I will ever get good enough at all of this, but I will try as hard as I can,” I said. “When this is all over, we'll have to spar again sometime.”

“I'd like that,” Evora said. She looked up at Gluttony. “It is good to see you again, Grenadine. I would stay, but there are things I must attend to.”

The earth pony nodded. “And you, Evora. Before you go, though,” Gluttony said, plopping to his haunches, taking one of the forehooves in both of his own. “With Pride -- I mean Diamond -- out of the picture, us Sins have to stick together. Don't be a stranger, if you need help, or just need a friend - come see me.”

The zebra smiled, leaning forward to put a peck of a kiss on Gluttony's forehead before bounding off into the night. There was a smile on her face as she disappeared into the depths of Chicacolt. I looked down at Violet and back up at Theater.

“It seems like trouble always seems to follow us, doesn't it?” I said as we trudged back toward the settlement. Gluttony walked beside us to where Danish and the others waited. Danish had a grim look on his face.

“Darlin', we've got a big problem,” he said. I put a hoof up, stopping him.

“Please, I think I know. You can't send anypony with us to Arlington, right?” I said. Danish nodded. I sighed. “I understand. It's alright. I sort of figured that with everything going on, you'd need every available pony you could get.”

“I'm sorry, darlin',” he said. “I wish we could help you. Between this attack, and what happened with the Lotus Triad, it's gonna take some time for the MMMM to rebuild.”

“It's going to be all hooves on deck here for quite a while, Radiant Star. There's just no way we can spare the ponies to back your play in Arlington,” Gluttony added, scowling at Danish. The cream unicorn stood fast under his boss' disapproval, and I nudged Gluttony as I stepped up to Danish.

“No worries, my friends. I know that this must be hard on you,” I said, smiling at the cream-colored unicorn. “On that note, it's late, and I'm quite tired. We should make preparations to leave first thing in the morning.”

The others nodded and we trotted inside the settlement. The ponies of Theater were filtering back into their homes and shops. I waved at Nixis, who was busy helping the MMMM ponies with the refugees. Making

our way to our room, I flopped down on the mattress and closed my eyes. Every part of my body ached and I groaned as Violet lay down next to me.

“Star? You alright?” she said softly.

I rolled over and looked at her, smiling. “Yeah... just thinking,” I said. “This night really got a little crazy on us. I was... I was scared you all were going to be fine, even though I knew in my heart that you would be.”

“Oh, Star,” Violet replied, stroking my mane with her hoof. “Just rest, okay? One more night, and we'll be on our way to Arlington, and everything will be alright.”

“I sure hope so, Violet. I sure hope so.”

* * *

My eyes fluttered open and I yawned. Soft light filtered into our room as I snuggled in closer to Violet, who had taken to curling herself up next to me. She awoke shortly after, and I smiled as we rose to meet the new day together. I began packing my things, knowing that this would be the last time I would see this place for a long time. The others were awake now too, and had begun packing up their saddlebags. When everypony was finally ready, we made our way down to the main part of Theater.

The destruction of the night before had certainly taken its toll on the ponies living there. Many of the shops near the front of the settlement had been completely decimated in the first wave of the attack, and the wall and doors were scorched black from the fires. Still, life went on. The ponies of the settlement had hunkered down and were starting to rebuild. I smiled at the progress of it all. Danish awaited us at the entrance, Lilith standing next to him. The two were talking softly amongst themselves. They glanced up at us and nodded as we trotted up.

“Star,” Danish said. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“For now, my friend. For now,” I said, hanging my head. “I promise you, Danish. Someday, I will return.” I glanced over at Lilith. “And what about you, Lilith? Are you staying here?”

The black mare smiled brightly. “We... we discussed it, and I want to go with you, if you'll have me,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I want to help you find Spark. I want to make sure that Diamond, Cutter, and Cranky... that their deaths weren't for nothing,” she said with a nod.

“Well... alright,” I said. “We could use the help from another flier, and you've already proven yourself on more than one occasion.”

Lilith nodded and picked up her saddlebags.

“Shall we?” she said, trotting past Danish, who nipped at her flank as she passed. Lilith shot him a look that made him blush to the tips of his ears.

Shaking his head, Danish focused a more sober look on me.

“Be careful out there,” he said. “I'd hate to hafta come and save your ass again.”

“Don't worry,” I said, waving a hoof. “Grey Knight will have the situation scoped out, we'll be fine.”

“Besides, I get to save her ass first,” Violet interjected, prompting a laugh from Danish.

We bid him and the rest of Theater goodbye and stepped out into the morning air. The scorched and blasted ruin of the street greeted us, the stench of death heavy. Still, despite all that had happened here, I knew things could get better. Maybe, just maybe... these ponies of the MMMM were what this city needed. They could make the world, or at the very least Chicacolt, a better place, one pony at a time.

We trotted along the streets, heading south towards the border of the city. Time seemed to drift away as we traveled. Steeljack and Patch walked closely together and I couldn't help but think that their experiences in this city had brought them closer than ever. Nixis loped alongside myself and Violet while Lilith lazily flapped her wings in the air above us. Grinning, I put on the radio, curious what the Minotaur had to say about the battle last night, if anything. We were greeted by the smooth rock beats of the station's music instead. After the song finished, however, the brash and loud voice of the DJ hit the airwaves.

“MOOOOOOOO YEAH!!! That's right, kids. It is time again for the 'Morning Moo Madhouse' with your host with the mostest, the ONE, the ONLY, the MINOTAUR!!!

That's right kids, it's time again for some news!

It seems that the Cowpones thought that the time was right to make a big strike against the MMMM settlement of Theater, but the baking ponies said NUH UH, GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! Not only that, the infamous leader of the brahmin gang, known only as 'Cow-Face', made his first and last appearance, thanks to the combined efforts of the MMMM and none other than the Ministry Mare who was staying at the settlement. Fuck yeah, Ministry Mare! Way to support the good ponies and fight the good fight!

Now... it's time for your old pal the Minotaur to get a little serious.

My eye in the sky tells me that our city's new protector is on her way out. You see, kids... There's a big bad juju going on out there, and our friend the Ministry Mare has to go and take care of it. But life in our little hole of the Wasteland goes on! Out there every day are ponies who fight the good fight, who bring light to others. Treat each other well Wastelanders, and always make sure your guns are loaded and your friends nearby.

You never know when you might need both.”

I smiled, and clicked the radio off. I knew deep down that somehow, I'd done some good here in this crazy little place called Chicacolt. But the Minotaur was right about one thing. Spark was out there, and I needed to find and save her. I thought about Diamond, Cranky, Lucky, and all the others whose lives I had come into contact with in my time here. I would do this for them, and do exactly what the Minotaur said. I was going to fight the good fight. To bring a little light to those around me, or die trying.

A flash on my E.F.S. caught my attention as Violet nudged me on the shoulder and pointed off in the distance. I glanced over in the direction of it, and my eyes widened. In the dim light that was overshadowed by the massive buildings around us, I could have sworn I saw two pairs of smoldering red eyes. I blinked, and they

were gone, along with the flashes on my E.F.S. I looked down at Violet.

“Do you think...?” I said softly.

“I don't... I don't know...” she replied. I sighed. For a moment, I thought had seen Cranky... maybe we were just seeing things. Or maybe he and Matilda had survived, I didn't really know for sure. If he did, why didn't he approach us? Or maybe that was his way of saying good bye, and thank you.

We kept walking, the city's border and noon arriving at the same time. I looked back at the broken city and smiled. We were leaving, yes. But not for forever. I promised silently to myself, and to everypony there who needed it, that I'd be back someday, to help, to live, and to forgive. I glanced back at my friends, who were waiting expectantly for me. Into the Wasteland we trudged as the skies began to darken and clouds rumbled in. Rain fell as we walked, pattering lightly against our coats. I checked my PipBuck, it looked like we would reach Arlington in the late evening. I hoped that Grey Knight had been able to keep an eye on things before we could get there. The stallion was strange, but I knew in my heart that his head was in the right place. He wanted to fight the good fight too. And I knew for sure that I certainly needed more ponies like that in my life.

Hours passed and we finally came over the ridge that led down into the valley that oversaw the tribal village of Arlington. A flash of red and silver caught my eye. Grey Knight was standing at the top of the ridge, looking down into the valley. I trotted up behind him, and he looked back down at me. There were tears in his eyes.

“Too late,” he said softly, turning his head back down to the valley below.

I stepped up next to him and my eyes widened as a soft gasp let loose from my throat.

Arlington was burning.

Author's Notes:

Finally!! This chapter is done, and we're moving forward! This chapter was a ton of fun to write, and I sure hope that you guys enjoy it.

This chapter finally wraps up the Chicacolt arc of the storyline, and moves us out of the city and onward into Arc 3 to find Spark.

And yes... I did incorporate a bit of the Season 3 finale stuff into this story. I spent a lot of time coming up with ways to work in Twilight's alicorniness, and I believe that it fit rather well into this.

Also as tradition dictates... the title of Chapter 23 is.... “For Honor and Glory”

Onto the plugs, as always you can keep asking Star questions at <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com>!

My story plug of this week belongs to a guy by the name of Pallydan (or Aria has he is known in #FalloutEquestria). His story is called “[Fallout Equestria: A Guardian's Tale](#)” and is pretty damn good so far. I don't always do this, but those of you who are familiar with Aria's fic may recognize the type of creature that the Cowpone leader 'Cow-Face' was. I spoke with Aria at great length about this idea, and he agreed to let me use his concept of brahmintaur in my story to create this villain, and I was very pleased with how he came out. So,

check out his story!

Also, since this is a bit of a special two-plug chapter, I have to also re-plug "[Fallout Equestria: Guise of Chaos](#)" for Fallingsnow, for one very special reason. He's finished his story, and it went out with a bang. So stop over and say hi to Snow and give him some love for Two-Kick and Ripple!

April 2nd, 2013 is officially Starlight's 1 year birthday!!! I just wanted to thank you all so much for supporting this. I promise we'll keep moving forward and finish this thing this year. 14 chapters and an Epilogue to go!

As always, thanks to McMesser and Wirepony, my pre-reader and brushie man respectively. You guys are great, and always keep encouraging me to keep going.

If you like this story, please feel free to toss out an upvote, a comment, a favorite, tell your friends/neighbors/loved ones. Every little bit helps!

And of course, thanks much to Kkat, for creating this crazy little world. It's been a wild ride so far, and I can't wait to finish it.