

Fallout Equestria: Starlight

Chapter 14: Breaking Point, Part 2

I did everything I could think of to change the future. But it didn't work. So maybe it's not what I do... maybe it's what I don't do! If I stand right here and don't move a muscle until next Tuesday, I can't possibly do whatever it is that future Twilight wanted to warn me not to do!

Failure. It's inevitable in this shithole known as the Wasteland. No matter what happens, failure is inescapable. I'd like to think that I've done some good in this hellish world, but the truth of the matter is... I've failed. I failed Lucky, I failed Violet and Patch, I even failed myself. Failure is the great truth of the Wasteland. If you try to do something good in life, you will fail.

I wonder what it felt like at the end. When the ponies of Equestria realized that their world was ending all around them, did it feel like they failed? Did they feel the failure they caused to occur by pursuing the end of a hopeless and violent war? I wonder what Twilight herself felt, as she realized she failed to create the alicorns as she desired and was instead subjugated by Trixie. Did she feel like she failed?

Failure... Maybe we're all just destined... to fail.

* * *

Shit! Bad day bad day bad day! I thought as I dodged another strike from the unicorn mare in front of me. Behind me, gunfire had erupted as several unicorns with shotguns fired my way only to meet my shield spell in return. I lifted Stargazer, blocking another hoof strike and using its weight to force the mare off guard. I turned and bucked, sending the unicorn flying through air into the nearby wall. She struck the surface with a sickening ***crunch*** and slid to the ground. She didn't get up, but telltale signs of breathing showed she was still alive. To my right, Dusk Blue was charging up his horn for another blast of spellfire. The deep blue unicorn cast his spell, discharging the pent up magic into a group of unicorns in front of him. I had to admit, the buck really knew his stuff when it came to magic. To my left, Sunshine Sky worked her own peculiar brand of spellcraft. Her spells were random, and often had strange effects. She had just finished wrapping up one of the Triad's enforcers with a vine of all things

before looking to me for guidance.

Negotiations had gone wrong, of course. The Lotus Triad was angry with me over my supposed betrayal of the technology they could have gotten from the M.W.T. Hub. Even more so, the presence of Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky made the Triad even more wary of trusting me. The gang had apparently dealt with the Twilight Society before, and the results of those dealings were quite sour. We had made our way back to the old warehouse on North Hoofamak, as that was the only place I could remember the Triad hung out at. I supposed that Lotus Petal had seen us coming, because she was waiting for us. The inside of the warehouse was still bare, but in the center ceiling portion hung Violet and Patch from a metal catwalk. They looked a little worse for wear and they appeared to be unconscious, but otherwise they were safe for the time being.

Once negotiations had failed, Lotus Petal had ordered us to be captured. So we found ourselves surrounded by the Triad's enforcers, unicorn mares brandishing combat shotguns. Lotus Petal herself had retreated to an upper catwalk in the main room. The catwalks were arranged so that they ran parallel and perpendicular across the top story of the warehouse. Metal stairs connected each level. We hoofed it across one of the metal bridges as I barreled into another one of the Triad's enforcers, knocking her off the rickety surface and sending her to the floor below us. Dusk Blue leaped ahead of me, sending another blast of spellfire down the lane right into another enforcer. The unicorn mare went tumbling off the catwalk, slamming onto another enforcer on the catwalk below us. The clatter of metal behind us followed by a gunshot indicated more enforcers were on our tail. Sunshine Sky huddled behind me, the pink mare cautiously using her magic to try and deflect the shots. I turned and dropped into E.S.A.T.S., lifting Stargazer high. Shot after shot queued up and time fell free, releasing the spell as my gun spat hot lead. Each shot struck true, disabling the enforcers behind us. I was not aiming to kill any of these ponies, but if my hoof was forced I would.

"Oh come on... You're no fun," a smooth voice echoed in my mind.

I growled quietly. Spark had been moaning incessantly on the way to the warehouse, poking and prodding at me with every move. Thankfully Lucky had been around to try and calm me down about it. It hadn't helped much, but it made her feel better.

Shut up, I said back to the voice. *Right now is not the time and place for you.*

The voice went quiet once more as I turned back, taking a hoof strike to the face from a unicorn that had leapt from one of the upper catwalks. The strike pushed me back some, but I gritted through the pain and reached out with my magic and grabbed the mare's leg with the firm grip of my magic.

"My turn," I said as her eyes widened. I pulled hard and threw the screaming mare back up towards the ceiling. Gunfire ceased for a moment as horns glowed, halting the mare's ascent and setting her back onto the catwalk. I grinned, motioning at Dusk and Sunshine to move. Using the opportunity presented we charged forward, pressing our way up onto the next catwalk. Another unicorn appeared out of nowhere and raised her rifle in our direction. Not only were these enforcers rather skilled, but they were also using PipBucks with StealthBuck attachments. Behind me Lucky trailed along, bouncing from square to square of the catwalk. I sighed and for a brief moment I was sort of glad she couldn't be seen or shot at. The enforcer had frozen for a moment, most likely using S.A.T.S. to line up her shot. My horn began to glow as her rifle fired, the shot going wide and pinging off of the metal railing. I discharged the magic and teleported behind her, taking her down with a swing of my hoof. I looked up for a moment, seeing Lotus Petal grinning down at me. The pink mare had cleverly positioned herself just above where my friends were hanging down in such a manner that any shot up her way might accidentally hit them first. I glared at her as I was joined by Dusk and Sunshine.

"Well, this didn't exactly turn out great," Dusk said, following my gaze upward.

"I guess they're still a little sore over me betraying them at the M.W.T. Hub," I replied. Another enforcer leaped at us. Sunshine stepped forward and discharged her magic, sending a jet of fire slamming into the other unicorn..

"You two sure know some crazy spells," I said.

"Life Bloom taught the majority of the Twilight Society many spells, both offensive and defensive," Dusk replied. An explosion ahead of us interrupted our brief conversation as a grenade landed at the end of the catwalk. It shifted as the metal bridge wrenched from its supports. They broke free, sending the entire thing down towards the darkness below.

"Shit!" I shouted as I watched Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky falling, hanging on for dear life onto the metal railing. I beat my wings hard, rushing downwards after them. I charged my horn, putting all I could into a teleport spell. The magic discharged as the two unicorns disappeared and reappeared on the

nearest catwalk as I pulled up out of my dive. The other bridge slammed hard into the ground below, squealing with the sound of metal grinding against metal. I flapped my wings and lowered myself next to the two.

“Are you two alright?” I asked.

“A little beat up, but thank you for the save,” Dusk replied, panting hard. Gunfire erupted above us, reminding of where we were.

This is insane, I thought. What was I thinking trying to negotiate with these freaks? There was never going to be a deal in the first place.

“Of course there wasn’t. Everypony is the same, they just want to hurt you,” Spark cooed softly.

Stop it, I responded to the spirit. Her intrusions were beginning to get more frequent.

“Suit yourself, but you need me Star. Don’t forget that,” she replied. I could just see her shit-eating grin now. More gunfire brought me out of my stupor as Sunshine stepped forward and deflected several of the bullets with a flick of her horn.

“What about you Goddess? Are you alright? You seem out of it,” Dusk said anxiously as we began moving forward again.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lucky had joined us again. I shot a smile at the spectral mare, who returned it with a nervous grin. I knew that she was still scared of Spark, and I didn’t blame her. The spirit was beginning to scare me too. When had she turned so hostile? Had she always been that way? I couldn’t begin to fathom why she was suddenly acting in this manner. I nodded at Dusk and sighed.

“I’m fine,” I said.

Another group of enforcers appeared through the steam put off by the pipes. I snarled fiercely and used Stargazer like a bludgeon, slamming into the lead enforcer with furious rage. Despite what the gun looked like, it was rather well constructed and made for an excellent impromptu melee weapon at times. The other mare groaned with pain as she hit the ground hard, knocked out cold by the blow. Sunshine grinned and lit her horn up, causing several small vines to appear that wrapped themselves around floating shotguns and yanked them out of the air. Dusk followed up behind her with a blast of spellfire, disabling the other two enforcers. I turned to the two unicorns.

“Look, we need to end this, and end this soon. Will you two be okay on your own?” I said calmly.

“I’ve got more than a few tricks up my sleeves,” Dusk said, grinning.

Sunshine smiled widely as well. “Take the fight to them Goddess!” she crowed.

“Would you stop calling me that?” I asked, groaning.

Sunshine meeped and put a hoof up to her mouth.

“Sorry,” she managed to squeak out.

I stretched my wings out and prepared myself. Kicking off, I activated my shield and flapped hard, pushing myself into the air and towards the highest catwalk. Bullets pinged off of my shield as I flew, dodging the pipework and metal catwalks that barred my path. Landing on the platform in front of Lotus, I heard her distinct laughter.

“Getting bored of playing with us, Ministry Mare?” she chided. “Come any closer and your friends will get it.” She pointed down where my friends were hanging, suspended by a rope in the center.

A knife floated next to the rope enveloped in her magic shroud. It was ready to cut the rope at the slightest.

“Why are you doing this?!” I shouted at the mare, who merely grinned.

“Please, everypony in the city knows who you are now. The Minotaur has been talking about you nonstop now, alongside his normal drivel. And to think, we’ve had your friends here all along,” Lotus said. “If you want them to live, put down your weapon. Once you are in custody, we’ll let them go. You have the Lotus Triad’s honest word.”

“She’s lying,” Spark said in the back of my mind. *“She has no intention of releasing your friends.”*

“What do you want from me?” I asked, ignoring Spark for the moment.

“You have the knowledge of where the megaspell you took out of our possession is,” Lotus replied angrily. “Tell me where it is... and I might consider letting you live.”

“Who said anything about letting me live? It’s just you and me up here sister,” I snarled.

Lotus giggled for a moment and made a motion with her hoof. Two unicorn mares, her elite enforcers, appeared out of nowhere on each side of me. Each one brandished a rifle that was aimed directly for my head. No matter how fast I could move, they could shoot before I even had the chance to do anything.

“Oh.” I said flatly. *How stupid am I?* I thought. *Of course it was a trap.*

“Your fault,” Spark replied, chuckling. I snarled internally at the spirit.

“Girls: if you’d be so kind as to relieve Miss Star of her weaponry and saddlebags,” Lotus said. The unicorns nodded and I felt my bags and Stargazer lifting away from me. The knife floated away from the rope and up to my throat, pressing hard against me as the enforcers began binding me to the railing. I could see that Violet and Patch had still yet to awaken even amidst the commotion. I briefly wondered for a moment if they were already dead, until I saw the telltale signs of breathing.

“I’m not going to ask again. Tell me where you sent the bomb,” Lotus asked, glaring at me with death in her eyes.

“Go fuck yourself,” I choked out.

“Wrong answer,” she replied. The pressure lifted from my throat as the blade silently rose up above my left ear. “You know what we do to those that resist us?”

She grinned evilly as the knife pressed up against the back of my ear and began to cut. I felt blood spurt from my ear as pain overwhelmed my entire head. I howled in agony as I felt the knife scissor back and forth in a rhythmic pattern. The slicing motion subsided quickly as a large purple chunk hit the ground next to me with a sickening ***splat***. Blood flowed freely down the left side of my neck as I struggled to keep with it. I looked down, seeing that they had only severed the tip of the ear.

Oh holy fucking Luna’s panties, I thought as I gazed upon the chunk of purple flesh.

“Now. Tell me where you put it. Or do I need to make my point further?” Lotus said.

I panted hard from the blood loss as I glared at the mare. “F-f-fuck you. I sent it to the Minotaur,” I stammered. “You’re never going to get it.”

The pink unicorn’s eyes widened. She was clearly not expecting me to answer, let alone to answer with such an outrageous claim.

“Really now? The Minotaur has the megaspell? That is most unfortunate,” she mused. “Why should I believe you? Nopony has set foot in Filly’s Tower for years and yet you expect me to believe that you went there?”

“Y-y-yeah,” I choked out. My vision was getting hazy. Lotus snorted.

“Well then, we don’t really need you anymore now do we?” Lotus said, snorting. She lifted the knife once more.

I tried to cry out. *Fuck... I’m sorry Patch... Violet... I love you... I fucked up. Should have been more careful...* I thought as the knife descended and I closed my eyes.

The pain never came. I heard a cry ring out in front of me. I opened my eyes to see the knife had been tossed to the side and was embedded in the wall. Dusk Blue was standing there, his horn glowing.

“Unhand the Goddess!” he shouted angrily.

I smiled weakly. I had never been happier to hear that name. The blue unicorn’s presence had given me the distraction I needed. I forced the pain down and struck out, slamming the mare on my right with a fierce applebuck. Before the other mare could react, a blast of spellfire slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. I stared for a moment, blinking at the show of power that Dusk had just put forth. A growl pulled me back to reality as I saw Lotus rushing forward at me. I snarled back and lifted Stargazer quickly, slamming the barrel of the gun into the mare’s face. The unicorn went flying back, hitting the ground hard. I leaped forward, planting myself right over the top of the pink mare. Stargazer came up and floated above the unicorn’s head. I paused for a moment, hesitating as I stared down at Lotus. Could I really take this mare’s life so carelessly? Sure, she had done some bad things, but so had I. I was directly responsible for Lucky’s death; I decided I wouldn’t be responsible for another. A cackle from my side drew my attention to the dark maned unicorn next to me.

“Do it. Kill her. She kidnapped your friends and even cut part of your ear off,” Spark mused. “She deserves it.”

“I... I can’t... She deserves a chance to do better...” I said quietly.

Lotus stared up at me with fearful eyes. Tears had begun to form in them as she began to plead softly for her life.

“Please. Look at her. She’s pathetic. She’s even begging. Do it. Take her life,” Spark replied. The purple mare twirled around me, giggling. “Come on, you know you want to. It’ll make you feel better.”

“I... No... I can’t...” I said. “I can’t do that... not again.”

“Who cares?!” Spark exclaimed, cackling madly. “She’s a bad pony. She deserves to die. Do it! Kill her!”

“No...”

“Do it!”

“No!”

“Do it now!”

“**NO!!!**” I shouted as I dropped Stargazer to the side of the mare, the gun nearly landing on her head.

Lotus scrambled away as I wheeled about to face Spark. Everpony else dropped into the background as I focused exclusively on the psychopathic delusion.

“Leave me alone! Why are you doing this? Why me?” I shouted at her.

The purple unicorn grinned with glee. “Because you’re so much fun to fuck with, sweetheart,” she replied. “Come on, you totally were going to do it.”

“No! I won’t. I won’t be responsible for another death that I could have prevented!” I shouted at the spectral mare.

A laugh behind me thrust me back to reality and I felt a sharp pain in my side. Not only was my ear spurting blood but now I had been shot! I turned around and saw Lotus Petal standing there, a pistol held in the air with her magic. Her eyes wide and terrified, the unicorn was shaking as bad as the pistol held in her magic. I couldn’t blame her, my argument with Spark wasn’t exactly normal or comforting to witness. I tried to lift Stargazer to fire back, but couldn’t. I tried to lift Stargazer to fire back, but it came up oh so slowly. The thousands of injuries and magical output from getting to this point had worn me out. Pain ripped up from my chest as Lotus shot me again, and Spark’s mad cackle blended with the clatter of Stargazer hitting the deck as I fell to my side.

“What... what’s wrong with you?” Lotus shrieked, her voice filled with fear.

I coughed and tried to push myself up. *Where was Dusk? Sunshine? What happened to them?* I thought, trying to find the two unicorns through the haze clouding my vision. Then I saw them, further down the catwalk. They were entangled with another group of Triad enforcers. I tried to shout at them to help me.

“Please...” I said quietly. “Please...”

Spark sauntered over next to the pink mare. She batted her eyelashes at me and grinned.

“Honestly,” she said. “This is what you get for not taking the initiative earlier and just killing

her.”

“You stay out of this!” I shouted from my spot on the ground.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?” Lotus Petal said, her eyes quaking with fear.

I groaned as my head began to dip and I hit the ground. *No... I need to get up. Need to save Violet... and Patch... Dusk and Sunshine... Need to save them...* I thought as I struggled to push myself up again.

“Give... me... my... **FRIENDS... BACK!!!**” I shouted, getting louder and louder with each word. I gritted through the pain, lifting myself up and causing Lotus Petal to step backwards.

“Good. Let me in, I’ll get them back for you,” Spark said, grinning evilly.

I shook my head, trying to clear her away. It was getting harder to do. Spark was too strong, even for me.

“Star!!”

A voice cut through the pain. I looked up, seeing Lucky staring down at me. Lucky flew down and landed in front of Spark.

“Leave her alone!” she shouted at the other spectral mare.

“Fuck off greenie. She’s mine,” Spark replied.

Lucky shrank back for a moment before stomping her hoof and standing her ground. “No. You’ve been pushing her around too much. Go away!” she cried out.

Spark’s eyes widened at the mare’s defiance. I smiled through the pain briefly. *Thank you...* Lucky, I thought as I truly hoped that the green mare just wasn’t a part of my crazy and was actually real. I realized I would do anything to help her get back to what she was. Spark growled for a moment and waved a hoof, disappearing in a blink of an eye. Lucky turned to me, her eyes wide with concern.

“Star? Stay with us, come on. You gotta stay with us,” she said frantically. She tried to reach out to me but couldn’t because her hoof went right through my shoulders. “Please... I need you to stay with me... please...”

I could see through the haze that something had happened to Lotus Petal during Lucky’s intrusion. In my confusion and pain I noticed that she was now on the ground. Dusk Blue was standing over her, his horn ablaze as he lifted my friends out of their bonds. I could see that they were now awake and staring right at me. I tried to call out to them, but couldn’t speak. As I fell, I saw Violet rushing at me, her mouth moving but no words escaping her lips. Then, there was only blackness.

* * *

I blinked and looked around me. The circular room with the different cutie marks greeted my eyes. *Fuck*, I thought as I tried to process the events prior to my blackout. I knew that when I woke up I was going to hurt a fucking lot. I only hoped that my ear wasn’t seriously damaged. I sighed and turned towards the doors, wondering which one would open next. The torch in the center went out and sent its fiery package right at the door with the three apples on it. The door opened and I stepped towards it cautiously.

The door opened up into a beautifully warm sunny day on a dirt road. The road ended immediately into an apple orchard. The sign above the gate read ***Sweet Apple Acres*** as I passed below it. A large farm house loomed off to the left as I followed the path down into the orchard proper. Rows upon rows of apple trees met my gaze as I let out a soft gasp at just how many there were. Glistening red apples graced each tree, and the ones in the center of the orchard beheld an incredible rainbow colored apple that I had never seen before. As I neared the center of the orchard I could hear grunting noises. A burnt orange earth pony mare with blonde hair and a Stetson hat appeared before me as she put all of her

strength into a spectacular applebuck, knocking down more of the rainbow-dyed fruit. She stopped for a moment as she regarded me.

“Yep,” she finally said. “Was wonderin’ when you might get here. Pick a tree sugarcube, and help me out would ya?”

“Huh?” I said, not realizing what she meant.

“Pick a tree, work with me a bit and then we’ll take a break so we can talk. Ah think ah made that pretty clear mahself,” she said, grinning as she pushed into another buck, knocking every apple from the tree. She pointed at the tree next to her.

I nodded and moved over to it. Turning around, I put all my effort and force into an applebuck... and landed flat on my face instead. The orange mare laughed out loud as I pushed myself up and snarled. I planted my front hooves and kicked out, slamming into the tree with magnificent strength. Apples rained down from above, landing perfectly in the buckets set aside to catch them.

“Nicely done sugarcube,” the orange earth pony said with a grin on her face.

I smiled back and began to work beside her, bucking apples. What felt like hours must have passed and the Sun was beating down on the both of us hard. After an eternity, the mare put up her hoof and motioned for me to stop. She trotted over to a cooler and opened it up, pulling out two bottles of apple juice. I grinned, using my magic to pick the bottles away from her and twisted off the tops. I took a swig of the cool liquid, feeling it refresh and rejuvenate my throat as it trickled down. I set the bottle down on the ground next to me and slumped down into a sit. The orange mare sat next to me.

“Ain’t nothin’ like an honest day’s work, am ah right?” she said cheerily.

“I’m gonna go on a limb here and guess that you’re not really Applejack,” I said blankly.

“That’s right. Name’s Honesty, pleasure to be makin’ your acquaintance there Star,” the orange earth pony replied.

“Let me guess... one of the Virtues?” I asked cautiously..

“Got that right too. Hoo doggy, you’re two for two so far,” Honesty said, chuckling.

“So why am I here this time?” I said, looking over at the orange mare. “Another history lesson?”

“Was there ever any doubt?” the mare said curiously. “If you’ll be pardonin’ my fancy, but time... it’s never been something that’s linear. It’s an ocean, a storm if ya willin’ to think so. History is just another part of that storm.”

“Interesting, but what does this have to do with me?” I said.

“Let’s jus’ say that sure as sugar you need to learn how to be honest,” Honesty replied, chuckling.

“What am I supposed to learn from being honest? I’m pretty sure I *honestly* fucked up pretty badly back there,” I said.

“Ah know you saved your friends. Regardless of what happened with Magic,” Honesty said. “Plus you worked with me. Like ah said before, ain’t nothin’ like an honest day’s work.”

I nodded, thinking on the mare’s words. I looked back up at Honesty.

“So be honest with me for a second. Why did Twilight do it? Was it her that gave the instructions to the Twilight Society?” I asked.

“Twilight... Twilight was obsessed if’n you get mah meanin’. She took her obsession a little too far with Shining Armor. You know one time... she said she met herself from the future?” Honesty replied.

“Really? How did that pan out?” I asked, curiously. I seemed to recall a friendship report from Twilight’s diary that dealt with this. A flare in the back of my mind brought up the memory as well.

“Well, as ah’m sure you’re already rememberin’, Twilight was so obsessed with worryin’ over what would happen that she took it a little too far,” the mare continued on. “In the end, tweren’t nothin’ to worry about at all.”

“But Shining Armor was different. Why?” I said.

“Twilight’s brother was a great stallion and an even greater general. That mare loved her brother with the fire of a thousand suns, and woulda done anythin’ for him,” Honesty said. “What you’ve failed to remember yet, and ah’m not sure why Magic is blockin’ you from it, is why Shining Armor died in the first place.”

“It was pretty clear to me in Rainbow Dash’s memories,” I said, the contents of the cyan mare’s memory orb floating up into my mind. “It seemed like he didn’t have enough time to save himself and the others.”

“Shining Armor was a general in the army of Equestria. He once saved the entire city of Canterlot with his shield spell from a swarm of changelings, including their queen,” the orange mare stated.

I thought about this for a moment and considered the ramifications of it.

“If he was that powerful then, why didn’t he save himself?” I asked.

“You have two memory orbs in your possession. One of them belonged to Applejack, the other Shining Armor himself. Watch them. They will tell you all that you need to know,” the mare said, turning deathly serious for the moment, her accent all but disappearing.

I nodded, pondering the orbs she was talking about. Shining’s orb must have been part of one of the four I found in the library at Fort Knowledge. I took a mental note to watch them as soon as possible.

“Honesty?” I asked quietly after a few moments of silence.

“Yeah sugarcube?” the mare replied, her accent returning.

“What’s happening to me?” I asked, fear creeping into my voice. “I can’t get it out of my head. I keep seeing Lucky, and the ponies from 33, and I’m even seeing the ponies of Arlington... all dead... always dead.”

“Death is a funny thing. It takes an honest pony to stare down Death in tha eyes and live to tell about it. But ah think what you’re experiencin’ is guilt,” Honesty said.

“It’s more than that,” I said. “I feel like every emotion, mine and Twilight’s is just running rampant now. It’s starting to wear me down.”

Honesty nodded. “Sometimes sugarcube, we let our emotions control us.”

I sighed and prodded in the back of my mind for anything else that I was missing.

“Honesty... you mentioned Magic earlier... are you talking about Spark?” I ventured.

Honesty turned away for a moment and paused at my question. She hesitated and then finally looked back with a solemn gaze.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Spark represents the Virtue of Magic that was once connected to Twilight Sparkle. Specifically, she was originally the Element of Magic.”

“Element?” I asked. “You mean like the Elements of Harmony?”

“The very same. Spark was the one that set us all into motion. *When the other five elements are gathered, a spark will ignite and the sixth element will reveal itself,*” the orange mare quoted. “Spark liked to think of herself as the uniter of the virtues. That’s why she took that name instead of Magic.”

“Was she always so... I don’t know... mean?” I asked, thinking about the recent events that had been driven into motion by the spirit.

“She... she never used to be. Ah can’t rightly say when she changed,” Honesty said. Tears had begun to form in her soft eyes.

“I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have brought her up... I can see that it’s a touchy subject,” I apologized.

Honesty smiled and brought a hoof up, wiping away the tears.

“It’s alright sugarcube. You just had me thinkin’ of better days is all,” the mare replied. “I think however our time is up for now. I can only stay so long. You already forced Generosity away prematurely.”

I started to speak, my voice getting caught in my throat. *Did I really just push her away?* I thought. *I didn’t mean to... I was thinking about the bomb and getting it safely away at the time.*

“Don’t you worry about fussy britches sugarcube. She’s a strong one, and you’ll be getting your proper time with her sooner or later,” Honesty said, almost as if she had read my mind. “Now then... time to wake up.”

* * *

I awoke instantly, my eyes snapping open and blinking. As my vision focused it resolved into the two most beautiful green eyes I’d ever seen in my entire life. Thankfully, along with those eyes came soft green hair and a beautiful smile. Violet was sitting over me, staring at me intently. She must have been there for some time, as I noticed that she looked a little worse for wear. She was also crying. I grunted, trying to force my body to sit up a bit.

“V-V-Violet?” I stammered out. *Where am I?* I thought as I tried to focus past Violet on the rest of the room. Then the pain hit me. The side of my head felt like it would split open any second.

Violet’s eyes turned serious and she turned and shouted. “She’s up, but I need some Med-X over here!” she yelled.

Muffled voices responded in the background, but I could only hear Violet’s voice amidst the commotion. My love turned back to me.

“You’re going to be alright. We’re here,” she said. “Just stay with us.”

A sharp sting was felt on my side and the pain began to subside. I groaned in agony as the pain left my senses, a numbing sensation replacing it. The haze in my eyes began to clear as I stared once again at Violet.

“What happened to me?” I managed to choke out quietly.

“Well for starters, you were shot and one of the bullets punctured your lungs. You’re lucky

enough to be breathing. Thankfully, the bullet punched through cleanly and went out the other side,” Violet replied. “However, you also lost a lot of blood.”

A greenish glow surrounded a small piece of glass that lifted up so I could see myself in it. A good portion of the tip of my left ear was completely gone. I gasped softly as I could see the end of it was cauterized, making the end of the ear look like a burnt piece of purple flesh.

“Dusk had to perform emergency cauterization on it to stem your blood loss. The healing potion seems to have no effect on it though,” my marefriend continued. “That’s not the most pressing issue though. You were having some sort of seizure when we got to you.”

“S-seizure?” I asked. *What happened to me?* I thought. I clearly remembered Spark, egging me on and on to kill Lotus Petal. “What happened to the Triad? Lotus Petal?”

“We barely escaped with our lives. Suffice to say, we’d probably better steer clear of Chi-Town for like... ever,” Violet said. “Lotus Petal got away too.”

“I almost did it...” I said quietly. “I almost killed her...”

“Why didn’t you?” Violet replied.

I stared up at her with fear in my eyes. Tears began to form in them.

“I... I couldn’t cause another death,” I said, burying my head in her side and sobbing.

Violet’s harsh eyes softened. She reached over and pulled me into her embrace, smiling softly.

“What happened?”

I held back the tears for a moment, motioning for her to help me to sit up. Quietly, she pushed on me with her magic in order to prop me up in the bed so I could see things better. The room we were in was some form of dilapidated one room apartment. It had been cleared out of any remains, but still felt dusty and old. In the corner sat Dusk and Sunshine Sky, talking amongst themselves and stealing a glance at me every few seconds. I wondered what was going on in the minds of the two Twilight Society members. At the other corner, cleaning out her sniper rifle was Patch. She looked at me grimly and cracked a weak smile. I knew she had to have been going through hell once she realized that I returned without Steeljack. I looked back at Violet and began to speak. Patch stopped cleaning and sat down next to the bed. She was soon joined by Dusk and Sunshine.

I told them about Steeljack and I being caught by the MMMM and meeting Lucky. I spoke of what we found in the M.W.T. Hub, evoking several low gasps at the mention of Pink Cloud. Numerous topics filled the air: Lucky's death (I failed to mention Lucky's rebirth. A quick scan of the room indicated the mare was nowhere around), The Bullfather and the Cowpones, the meeting with the Minotaur, and meeting the Twilight Society. When I got to the subject of the Twilight Society's involvement in my transformation, I noticed that Violet had shot Dusk a glare of death ray eyes. I left out Spark and Lucky. I wasn't ready to admit that to my friends just yet, and I was honestly concerned about what Dusk and Sunshine might do if they found out that the thing inside me was not definitively Twilight. I thought about what Honesty had said. If Spark was Magic, what happened to her? What changed her? I thought about trying to contact the spectral mare once more, but fear stopped me. I realized I was afraid of her, of what she was trying to do. A hoof entered my vision, waving back and forth as I realized that I was lost once again in my thoughts.

"Star? You alright in there?" Violet said.

I nodded lightly, not wanting to admit the opposite. Instead of alright, I felt like hell. My mind wanted me to do nothing more than to crawl up in a corner somewhere and bawl my eyes out. Yet for some reason, I couldn't do it.

"Well Goddess. It seems like our next course of action is to retrieve your other friend from the Cowpones," Dusk Blue stated.

"Why are you calling her that?" Patch piped up for the first time the entire conversation. She looked deadly serious about her question.

“Well... she is... she’s the living embodiment of the Goddess of Twilight,” Dusk replied.

“If she were a ‘Goddess’ like you claim, none of this would be happening would it? She’d be able to stop it all right? She’d have been able to save Steeljack all by herself,” Patch said viciously at the blue unicorn, whose eyes widened. An angry look crossed Patch’s face. *Wow... I guess she’s mad at me*, I thought, trying to process what she had just said.

“Patch, enough,” Violet replied before Dusk could say anything.

The other green mare grumbled for a moment and went back to her corner. Moments later she was back to cleaning her gear. I noticed for a moment that the two’s bags were slightly different, although I was able to pick out Thunder Flash among the items.

“What happened to your bags?” I asked quietly.

Violet sighed, and motioned me closer. She spoke quietly. “Most of our stuff was taken when we were kidnapped. We were lucky enough that Thunder Flash wasn’t taken away somewhere, but Patch’s old rifle was busted up by one of those enforcers,” she said. “She picked one up off of one of the Triad and has been trying to figure it out since we’ve been gone from that area.”

“Wait... how long have I been out?” I asked, already dreading the answer.

Violet sighed once more, letting me know that I indeed would not like to know just how long I was unconscious.

“Star, you’ve been out of it for at least a week,” she said.

Oh... oh. Fuck me with Luna’s horn three ways from Tuesday, I thought. *No wonder she looks*

like hell. My stomach growled intensely with a furious rage as I grinned sheepishly at my love.

“I figured you would be hungry when you woke up,” she said, pulling out of her bag some old prewar snack cakes and a box of Sugar Apple Bombs.

I dug in, relishing the taste of each morsel as I scarfed down the preserved food. It was pure heaven, almost like I had never eaten before in my life.

“Wait... so what about Steeljack? Is he alright?” I said as I ate ravenously. I prayed that the buck wasn’t dead, that Steeljack was still alive somehow.

“Steeljack is alive. The Cowpones apparently run a bit of a slaver ring in this town, and so they’ve got him in an old rock quarry or farm if you want to call it that,” the green mare said, her eyes drifting over to Patch. “It’s been hard on her. I don’t know what to do.”

“We’ll get him out of there. I’ll make sure of it,” I said.

Violet sighed and rested her head on my shoulder. “You should get some rest. If we’re going to be on the move, we’ll all need to be on the top of our game.”

I nodded and slumped back into the bed, the green mare sidling up next to me in a careful embrace. I giggled a bit as she clumsily nuzzled my neck.

“I missed you...” I breathed. “You have no idea how much I missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’m just glad you’re alright,” Violet said, sighing softly.

I smiled and closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of her body as I drifted off to sleep.

What felt like moments later, I woke up. Darkness cloaked the room as I peered around, finding everypony else. Patch lay in her corner, snuggled up to her new sniper rifle. Dusk Blue and Sunshine lay next to each other in the other far corner. I had to admit, they were kind of cute together. Violet still lay next to me, but she no longer was all over me. Instead she was lying on her back, her legs in the air in a cute fashion. I nearly giggled, but thought better of it. A soft chuckle echoed in the room beyond me as I turned towards the source of the noise. A faint glowing green light was coming from beyond the closed door. I pulled myself away from the bed quietly and stepped towards the light. Opening the door, I found myself face to face with Lucky once more. I sighed and stepped into the hallway with the spectral mare, pulling the door closed behind me. The hall was littered with debris and rubble, giving no clear indication as to where we were other than that it was some sort of abandoned apartment. I really wasn't even sure where we were in the first place. Being out of commission for seven days kind of does that to you.

"Hey Lucky," I said, smiling at the green mare.

"Star. I'm glad to see you up and about finally. I've been hanging around off and on, waiting for you to wake up," she said meekly. "I thought you were a goner."

"Takes more than that to keep me down," I said, not feeling very confident about my reply. "I was hoping you might show up. I wanted to talk to you."

"Me? What did I do?" Lucky replied, looking very nervous.

"You stood up to Spark when it mattered," I said. "I... I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't intervened. She would have taken over."

"I... I just wanted you to be okay," Lucky said quietly. "You've been so nice to me, and I've been nothing but a bother."

"No no, you've been fine... really," I said. "I... I've just been really out of it."

“Just... promise me you won't listen to her. She's not nice. She's really scary,” Lucky responded.

“I... I can't make that promise. I need to find out more about her. Why she's inside my head, why... why she is the way she is,” I replied. “It's the only chance I've got at getting her out.”

“Star...?”

I turned around, seeing Patch standing there. *How long has she been there?* I thought as I looked back to regard Lucky. The purple haired unicorn/pegasus simply shrugged and began walking down the hall. I turned back to Patch.

“Ummm... hi. I didn't wake you up did I?” I asked.

“Just a little. Who were you talking to?” Patch said, staring at me.

“Oh... umm... no one, that's right. Just talking to myself,” I said. *Great, I thought. Now she's really going to think I'm crazy.*

“Are you okay? You look like hell,” the dark green earth pony said.

I sighed and slumped to my haunches in the middle of the floor. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Patch nodded slowly.

I grimaced. “I haven't wanted to tell Violet yet. I'm afraid she might worry too much about me.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“This... thing inside my head. It talks to me. Her name is Spark. I don't know what she is, but I do know she's connected to the Element of Magic,” I said. “Lately though, she's been getting vicious... sometimes downright... evil I guess you would say. Saying hurtful things. Trying to force me to do things.”

“I see,” Patch said.

Please don't think I'm crazy, I thought, closing my eyes for a second. I felt hooves wrap around me and I reopened them. Patch had shifted over and had placed me into a warm hug.

“Patch...?” I said quietly, confused by the mare's response.

“Shh,” the green mare replied. “It's alright.”

“But... I thought... aren't you mad at me?” I asked, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I was. But even I can see you didn't mean to leave him behind,” Patch said, releasing me from the embrace.

“I'm sorry, I should have been there to help him,” I said. “By the time I got back to the Ministry of Technology... it was just Lucky and me.”

“Lucky?” Patch said, a confused expression crossing her face.

My eyes widened. *Oh, shit*, I thought. *I just said Lucky didn't I?* I groaned and lowered my head.

“Yeah... you see the thing of it is... I'm kind of seeing her around too,” I said quietly. *Not crazy!* I thought as I met the gaze of the green earth pony.

“But you told us she died,” Patch said..

“She did. I'm... I'm not sure what she is but apparently, only I can see her,” I replied. “It's like... she's a ghost or something.”

Patch's eyes widened. “But you said there weren't such things as ghosts.”

“I know... but I know what I'm seeing and she's definitely not there,” I said adamantly. “She even passes through things.”

“Strange,” Patch said, looking at me curiously.

“Look... I know you must think I'm crazy or something but please don't tell Violet. I don't want her to worry about me,” I said. “It's bad enough that you two had to deal with being captured by the Lotus Triad.”

“Heh... yeah... that was a bit strange. Never been kidnapped before and forced into pleasure massages,” Patch said rubbing her neck with her right forehoof.

“Ah... right. So... anyways, Violet told me you lost your sniper rifle and had to pick up another one?” I asked, quickly changing the subject.

Patch groaned. “Yeah. I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to use it though, it looks like it was made for a friggin' unicorn,” she replied.

Quietly she disappeared as she tiptoed back into the room and returned cradling the gun in her

forehooves. Walking upright like a zebra, she set down the gun in the hallway before me. Looking over the gun, I could see she was right. The gun was clearly not designed with an earth pony in mind. No mouth grips and definitely didn't look capable of being mounted on a battle saddle. No, this had to be set up and used by a unicorn.

“I can see what you mean,” I said, staring at the jet black rifle..

“I've been messing with it, trying to adjust the stock so that I could saddle mount it, but I have no fucking clue how to actually hit things that way,” the green mare said.

“What if you adjusted the firing mechanism? We could rebuild it and make it hoof capable,” I offered. I didn't know a whole lot about what I was talking about to be honest. I was really only trying to make Patch feel better about losing her other rifle.

The other mare grinned widely.

“That's it!” she exclaimed. “It just needs to be resewn together, and I'm just the mare for the job!”

“Speaking of sewing... how did you get that needle anyways?” I asked as the mare set to work disassembling the gun.

Patch paused for a moment and then continued to work as she spoke.

“Well. Growing up in a Stable, you are usually locked into one job based on your cutie mark. My mom was a Security officer. She was pretty disappointed when my cutie mark appeared. I had somehow gotten into one of her old sewing cabinets and managed to make a cute little sweater. Got this baby right afterwards,” she said, pulling a few tools out to help her work.

“So why did you become a Security officer then? You sound like you could have been a talented

seamstress,” I said.

“Mom. She hated the fact that I got a cutie mark that wasn't slated for some military career,” Patch replied, snorting. “Pretty much forced me into the position. We soon figured out I also had a knack for taking apart and putting together weapons. Gave my cutie mark a whole new meaning really.”

“Interesting. So what are you doing here?” I asked as I nodded at the disassembled gun.

The other mare grinned. “Just what you suggested. We're going to custom build this baby! The firing mechanism won't work the way it is currently, it's built for a unicorn after all. I need to modify it so that I can fire with a bit instead,” she said, pointing above the stock. “The electronics for the scope are totally intact, I figure I can turn them into some sort of eyepiece I can wear that will engage the scope.”

I blinked as I looked at her.

“What?” I said flatly.

Patch grinned even wider. “You'll see,” she said.

I sat there quietly as she worked, not feeling very tired at all. The hallway began to lighten as the sun came up and Patch was still hard at work. I waited patiently until the mare's eyes widened with glee and she whinnied a victory cry.

The rifle itself was marvelous looking. The entire thing was shortened down to fit Patch's small stature. The scope and the barrel were intact and so was the loading mechanism. A bit firing mechanism was attached to the rifle, and as Patch lifted the gun up in her hooves I could see that she could easily engage the bit. A device almost like a monocle was strapped over her good eye.

“I rigged the whole thing up so that I can carry it standing upright. If I'm lucky, I should be able

to even use her in close quarters too,” she said, grinning.

By this time I could hear voices in the room. Violet pushed open the door and looked out at us.

“What are you two doing up?” she asked, yawning.

I nodded at Patch. “We’ve been... well Patch has been working on her new gun,” I said.

Patch grinned, standing upright once more and showing off the rifle.

“This baby is going to be awesome!” she said, clearly excited about this. “She packs a punch too. I modified it so that it would accept 7.92mm machine gun rounds!”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

Patch grinned and took aim with the rifle down the hallway and put her teeth down onto the bit, biting into it. The bullet erupted from the gun and sped through the wall, ripping a clean edged hole in it and continuing out into the world beyond. I noticed Patch grimacing, rubbing her shoulder. A shriek from the other room indicated that Dusk and Sunshine were now awake.

“Recoil is a bit of a bitch though, gonna have to get used to that,” she said.

“So... does this new baby of yours have a name?” I asked as the green mare put down the rifle.

She paused for a moment of thought and grinned.

“There’s an old saying my mom used to tell me. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*,” she said. “I don’t

know what language she was saying, but it means 'If you wish for peace, prepare for war.' Which is exactly what those Cowpones are going to get.” She grinned even wider at this.

“Yes... her name is Para Bellum.”

* * *

The next several days flew by faster than I had ever thought possible. Despite the healing that I had already received from Dusk Blue and the healing potions, the injuries I had sustained at the hooves of the Lotus Triad were simply too severe for me to be out and getting into trouble again. My ear especially had to be bandaged and re-bandaged as we hoped that something would help heal the scarred flesh. Even with the magic working on it, my ear hurt like hell. Gradually I began to get used to the numb painkilling feeling that was brought on by the Med-X. Still, every time I looked in the makeshift mirror I could see the burnt tissue still there, almost as if it was mocking me.

Patch had taken to her new weapon like a fish to water. She spent most of the few days we spent in the building, which had turned out to be an old abandoned apartment building known as Hay Lake Tower, practicing with Para Bellum, using everything from windows to radroaches as targets. Violet had spent a vast majority of her time taking care of me, and helping Dusk Blue with his healing magic. He had even managed to teach her how to cast the healing spell herself, so that she could continue while he and Sunshine Sky went out into the city to perform some reconnaissance. They had managed to determine that Steeljack was still alive and was being held along with Danish. I was surprised to hear the cream colored unicorn had continued to survive, but was thankful. He had been ready to give up everything to help me keep the Pink Cloud bomb from getting into the wrong hooves. I owed it to him.

Several mornings later, after figuring out breakfast and our planned route through the city, we set off towards the west side of the city to find this rock quarry that our friend was being held at. As we walked I felt very tired and my headache returned. My ear still wasn't healed. It wouldn't respond to either potions of Dusk Blue's healing magic. Dusk suspected that Lotus' knife may have been enchanted to cause such a strange wound. Despite that, I seemed to have no issues hearing out of it. I kept a close eye out for Lucky, catching glimpses of the green mare trailing behind us. I wondered why she was keeping her distance from me as we arrived on the edge of the city. The western edge of the city was pretty bare, other than the large amount of debris and trash everywhere. I kept a close eye on my E.F.S. as we moved forward, looking for any sort of hostile targets. Thankfully, E.F.S. remained clear, there was nothing around us.

The rock quarry was situated in a low valley just outside of the city proper. The top of a hill nearby served as a decent vantage point with which to see the entirety of the camp. Enslaved ponies moved to and fro, lifting rocks and moving them out of the quarry to a rock crusher on the top of the far side of the crater. I could see several large chunks of rock being crushed down, revealing gemstones inside. *No wonder they're here*, I thought as I watched. A large wooden house and several large caravan tents looked to serve as the camp for the workers to sleep in and the Cowpones to manage their operation. Brahmin and earth ponies in suits guarded the slaves. I guess I had to be thankful that this didn't seem like the type of operation that would draw the Bullfather's attention too much. A quick scan of the area however, didn't reveal our grey friend or the cream colored unicorn Danish.

"I thought you said he was here," I asked Violet quietly.

"There's some sort of mine below the quarry as well," she replied. "They may be down there."

"Well, how are we going to get down there?" Sunshine chimed in. "We can't exactly waltz on in, we'd be sitting ducks."

"I agree. We need to be stealthy about this," I said. I looked over at Patch nervously, who shook her head.

"No. Not doing it. If he's down there, I'm going to find him," she said adamantly.

"I know," I replied, nodding. "And I'm not going to make you stay here either. You need to do this, I can tell. We just need to figure out the right way to do it." I looked over at Dusk Blue. "We need a distraction to lure the guards away while we sneak into the mine. Can you two work something up?"

"We might be able to come up with something," he said, looking over at Sunshine who just grinned.

"Good," I said, pulling out the StealthBuck attachment and handing it over to Violet. "In case we

need this. I'm going to try and cast an invisibility spell over us so we can sneak in."

"You sure that's a safe idea?" Violet asked, cocking her head with a nervous expression. "You haven't cast your invisibility spell in quite some time now."

"I'll be fine. I'm sure I can remember it," I said, smiling. *Nothing will go wrong*, I thought, staring past Violet a moment at Lucky. The spectral green mare smiled at me and nodded. I closed my eyes and let the magic begin to build up into my horn. *Come on... invisibility spell!* I thought as I discharged the magic, letting it wash over myself, Patch, and Violet. A funny tingling feeling wrapped itself around my body. I opened my eyes. *Did I do it?* I thought.

"Wow..." I heard Sunshine say. "I think you did it. We can't see you guys now."

I grinned, looking over at Violet. Apparently because we were all under the spell we could still see each other.

"Dusk," I said. "We'll start making our way towards the mine now."

The blue unicorn nodded and motioned towards Sunshine. The pink unicorn grinned and began charging up her horn. I began making my way behind Patch and Violet, skirting our way around the camp and down into the quarry. It was quiet, and most of the workers were too engrossed in their work to even hear our hooves touch rock as we passed by. The brahmin guards surrounding the workers were also too interested in keeping their slaves actually working as well. Granted, I doubt that these brahmin were intelligent enough to hear us in the first place. As we crept along, I kept looking around the mine entrance. Violet motioned at me and pointed at the dead center of the quarry. Situated there was a mine shaft going downward attached to a metal elevator. *Great*, I thought. *Unless Dusk's distraction is good enough, they're definitely going to notice an elevator going down all by itself!*

A loud banging noise caught my attention. I looked back towards the source of the noise and my jaw dropped. A fireworks display, grander than any other I had ever seen lit up the sky. At the center of the display was Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky, combining their magic as more fire and explosions burst forth into the air. I grinned as the guards and workers began making their way over towards the two unicorns. The two looked at each other and discharged their horns at the same time, launching another

large aerial bomb off into the air before running the opposite direction. I motioned to Violet and Patch to keep going as we reached the now unguarded elevator. The bombs in the air were still going off. I said a silent prayer to Luna, hoping Dusk and Sunshine would escape as we stepped into the metal cage and hit the button. The elevator began to lower into the deep ground, descending down the stuffy mine shaft at a relatively quick pace. *There must be more gems down under the quarry*, I thought as the elevator stopped abruptly, depositing us in a large open tunnel. The glint of gems lit up the cavern around us. More workers lined the halls of the large tunnel, digging at the walls and pulling gemstones out of the rock. I looked around as we quietly made our way forward, hoping to not draw attention to ourselves. The guards had looked at the elevator when it had touched down, but hadn't yet gone to investigate why it was empty.

The tunnel narrowed to a smaller tunnel, filled with workers and guards. I shifted uncomfortably as we walked. There was no way we could get through it without bumping into someone. I moved to turn around, slamming into a large earth pony guard who had come into the room. *Shit!* I thought as I cried out in surprise. The magic fueling my invisibility spell completely discharged, revealing my friends and I in the center of the tunnel.

“What the fuck?!” the guard shouted as he moved to aim his rifle. “Intruders!” He shouted as more guards piled into the tunnel. He began moving in at us, drawing the bit for his gun into his mouth.

He never even got the chance. A loud ***blam*** echoed through my ears as Patch took up Para Bellum and fired, the bullet slamming home in the other earth pony's shoulder. The impact of the shot put the guard to the ground almost immediately. The slaves around us, those that were still strong enough to take notice, began cheering as the guard hit the ground. Another group of guards strode into the tunnel, the head earth pony aiming a massive shotgun off of his battle saddle.

“Hold it!” he shouted. “Well, if it isn't the alicorn bitch. Put in a call to the Bullfather. He's gonna want to hear about this.”

The guards began to fan out, surrounding us on all sides. I looked at Patch and nodded. Our stealth mission had effectively been blown. I hoped and prayed that we were right and that Steeljack was down here somewhere. I also knew though, that there would be no stopping my green earth pony friend if he was. Violet grimaced at me.

“Ideas?” she said quietly.

I shook my head. “Surrender for the moment?” I replied nervously. It was a terrible idea, but I wasn't sure we would make it out of here alive.

Before anypony could formulate a response to my question, a cry of victory erupted behind the guards. Several of the slaves turned and began attacking their masters with crude weapons fashioned from spare metal. Metal spears and bludgeons struck home, throwing the slavers off guard for a moment. I grinned and took the opportunity to queue up a shot in E.S.A.T.S. at the head guard, hitting him square in the head and taking him out of the game. Within moments, the battle was over and the slaves were pulling their chains off using keys lifted from their masters. One of the slaves bounced his way up to me, a small pale blue earth pony stallion.

“So glad you could save us my dear,” he said, bowing low to me. “I'm Filthy.”

“Yes, yes you are,” I said flatly. I mean come on, he was working in a mine. Of course he was filthy.

“No no, that's my name. Filthy Rich the Forty Third,” he replied. “I'm a local resident of the town of Filiet.”

“Filiet?” I asked, confused.

“Yes indeed. Filiet is one of the largest settlements on the west side of the city. Beautiful settlement too,” Filthy replied.

“If you're from there, why are you here?” I asked.

“Well, the Cowpones sometimes work their way up near us and they kidnapped me while I was

out of town working for the Tin Rangers,” Filthy said nervously.

“The what?” I asked blankly. “Don't you mean the Steel Rangers?”

“No, the Tin Rangers. Finest force this side of the landfill if I do say so myself,” he replied. Around us slaves began to mill about, going from slave to slave and freeing them from their chains. It was a miracle we hadn't had any guard intrusion in this part of the tunnel yet. Somehow I knew it wasn't going to last too long.

“That's... interesting, but I need to know something. I'm looking for friends of mine. A grey earth pony named Steeljack, and a cream unicorn named Apple Danish. Know where we might find them?” I asked as Violet and Patch joined me. Their faces indicated that they hadn't found either of the two. I kept a close eye on my E.F.S., noting that we had more red blips incoming. I had to make this fast before the battle resumed again.

“Can't rightly say. I haven't personally seen em,” Filthy replied. “I'm sure if they're important, they'd be in the tents up top instead of way down here.”

“You mean we didn't have to come down here?” I said flatly. The red blips got closer and closer, and chaos erupted in the room as brahmin and earth ponies flooded the tunnel, wielding their instruments of death. Behind the crowd of slave masters, the one and only intelligent brahmin entered himself. However, instead of enforcers flanking the sides of the Bullfather, Steeljack and Danish were set on each side. Each of the stallions was wrapped in chains and was also gagged and blindfolded.

“Well, I sort of figured you would come here for your friends, provided that you lived,” the left head of the Bullfather shouted. “Quite a ruckus you made with the Lotus bitches. Thanks a bunch, that made it a lot easier to moooove in on some of their territory.”

“You're quite welcome, but you have my friends. Let them go,” I said angrily, growling loudly.

The Bullfather's heads chuckled. It was still creepy.

“Or what? You'll let the slaves do all the work for you? Please. You're surrounded. Surrender now, and then we can discuss where you sent my bomb,” the right head replied.

A harsh giggle erupted from my right. I looked over and saw her again. *Fuck*, I thought. Spark stood there, giggling profusely at whatever she found to be funny in this situation.

“Yeah, surrender. It's not like you're gonna save them anyways,” she said, grinning widely as her giggling subsided.

I tried to ignore her, as saying anything would make me look severely crazy in front of... well everypony and brahmin. Fortunately, I didn't have much time to reply before Patch did.

“Fuck off,” she said, glaring at the Bullfather. She lifted Para Bellum, standing upright like a zebra. “You're going to release my Steeljack. If you don't - aww, buck, who am I kidding, you're not going to let him go. I'm gonna shoot you now. Kay?”

“Who the fuck are ---” the right head started to say before Patch unleashed hell. Several loud eruptions filled the air as she fired, the bullets traveling through the air and hitting the right head of the Bullfather dead center. Blood and bone exploded from the right head, and chaos erupted once more. The Bullfather's left head cried out in pain as he struggled to move out of the way. I jumped forward, growling as I dropped into E.S.A.T.S. and queued up several shots, targeted all at the guards near Steeljack and Danish. Time fell free and Stargazer fired, the bullets flying through the air and slamming home into their targets with extreme prejudice.

“Patch!” I shouted, giving the green mare the opening she needed.

Patch ran forward, hopping onto my back and pushing off. She landed in the middle of several brahmin that were wielding those nasty spiked clubs they favored. Grinning, she spun around, bringing Para Bellum to bear and firing. Her bullets struck true and I smiled. *She really did make it well*, I thought. Another giggle at my side made me groan as I turned to face the spirit of Magic. Off in the distance I could see Violet, holding her own with Thunder Flash as silver fire filled the air. I quickly

scanned the chaotic scene of slave against master, looking for Lucky. She was nowhere to be found.

“I thought I told you to leave me alone!” I shouted amidst the chaos at Spark.

“Not until you give me control sweetie,” she replied, grinning.

“Not going to happen! What'd you do with Lucky?” I yelled, hoping that I wouldn't draw any attention from Violet or Patch.

“What, little miss goodie two shoes?” Spark said. “She took a walk. You know, it's funny. I don't seem to be able to affect you as much while she's around you.”

I snarled as pain shot through my body. A brahmin with a spiked club had used the opportunity presented by my talking with Spark to hit me in the ass with it. I turned and lifted Stargazer, obliterating its head in mere seconds. Beyond the haze of pain and gore, I could see Patch. The green mare was busy untying her love's bonds. Steeljack's eyes opened in a flash, seeing his mare as he smiled. She appeared to chatter animatedly as the two set about freeing Danish as well. The cream colored unicorn scanned the room and saw me. He nodded his head and smiled. Another set of sharp giggles returned me to my crazy talk.

“Looks like your friends are okay. Too bad really. I was hoping they would have died,” she said, scowling. “Oh well, not like you did too much to help them.”

“Shut up,” I said, trying to ignore the spirit as I focused on the fight at hand which had begun to spill over into the other tunnels. The Bullfather was nowhere to be seen, most likely extricated by his cronies. Patch and Steeljack were working together in tandem, wreaking havoc on the slavers. Violet came up beside me with Filthy and grinned.

“The Cowpone slavers seem to be getting pushed back,” she said. “We're still stuck down here with only that single elevator to go up and down, and it's certainly not large enough to take all the slaves out of here.”

“Don't you worry about my folk ma'am,” Filthy replied. “We can handle things from here. You take your friends and get the buck out of here, if you'll be excusin' my fancy. Fillet's just north of here. You can hole out there.”

I sighed and looked at Violet, who merely nodded.

“You sure you'll be alright?” I asked the earth pony.

“Sure as sugar,” he replied. “We'll be fine.”

“Good. Violet, let's grab Patch and the others and blow this pop stand,” I said.

My marefriend grinned as we galloped forward into the surging chaos of the fight ahead. Patch and Steeljack were just ahead, standing next to Danish, who smiled broadly as we met up with them.

“Sweetheart!” he shouted. “Glad to see you finally decided to come save us. I was startin' to get a little itchy here, you know what I mean?”

“Hello to you too Danish,” I said flatly.

The cream colored unicorn chuckled loudly.

“You guys seriously brought this guy along?” Violet asked..

“Don't ask,” I said, motioning towards the end of the tunnel.

A break had appeared as the slaves pushed back on their masters, providing us a clear path to the elevator. We surged forward, pushing towards our destination. The elevator came into sight moments later as we rounded the next corner. The device was beginning to be raised. I focused my magic and held the platform in place with my telekinesis. Quickly I set up another spell, teleporting the group of us onto the small platform. I looked over at Steeljack, realizing he was without his power armor.

“What happened to your armor?” I asked as I pumped more magic out of my horn, speeding the elevator up towards the surface.

“They keep any armor and weapons taken from the slaves up top, in a large armory tent,” Steeljack said.

“That'll be our first stop then,” I said as the elevator picked up speed. I grinned as I pushed on the platform harder. The Cowpones waiting for us up top were in for a very nasty surprise.

“Get ready!” I shouted as I focused my magic once more, creating the Shining Armor shield at least for a good moment before the platform struck the top of the shaft.

Then... we were airborne. The platform hit the top of its ascent, lurching to a stop and launching us into the air. A cold breeze whipped along my face as I relished the experience, using my telekinesis to push us to the ground across the quarry, much to the surprised faces of the slaver guards. It took me a moment to realize that the chaos below had extended its way above as well. Slaves attacked brahmin with crudely made weapons, taking down the beasts in short order. At the head of the assault was a massive earth pony wearing what appeared to be power armor... made of trash cans. Standing next to the buck were none other than Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky, who cheered heartily at the sight of me and my friends.

We touched down in front of the tents, landing next to a group of Cowpone slavers. The two earth ponies in the group wheeled about and aimed their long rifles at us. Patch leaped to the side and brought up Para Bellum, firing four shots that took out the offending ponies. All around us, fighting ensued as we made our way towards the armory tent. Despite its name, it wasn't very well guarded or very well built. Sitting just inside of the leathery tent was Steeljack's armor and rifle. He cried out victoriously as he ran to them and began to pull on his power armor.

“Ready to go,” the grey stallion said as he fitted his rifle onto his saddle, grinning. We started to make our way out of the tent, stopped only by the sight of a very familiar brahmin. The Bullfather stood at the far end of the clearing, brandishing a massive cannon-like gun on his battle saddle. Gone was his suit and fedora hats. What was amazing was that he was even able to still stand. The brahmin's right head sagged downwards, clearly immobilized if not completely dead. The left head growled with fury as it saw us.

“You fucks! I'm gonna kill all of you! Say hello to my little friend!” the head shouted as he bit down on the firing bit. A loud ***boom*** echoed from the giant gun on his back, firing a massive ball of iron right at us. A giggle to my right made me remember that Spark was still hanging about.

“Haha! Boomcow. Get it?” she said, laughing.

I snorted and returned my attention to the problem at hand. The giant ball of iron sped down at us at extremely high speeds. I focused my magic... and nothing happened. Spark giggled next to me.

“Ah ah ah,” she said. “No magic.”

What?! I thought. She can do that?! I growled in the few seconds that I had time to.

“Listen here –“ I barely had enough time to say before the ball of iron struck the ground before us, exploding on impact and knocking me to the ground. I groaned in agony with the pain. I struggled and pushed myself up, noting that the explosion had knocked back my friends as well. Thankfully no pony else seemed to be in horrible condition. I stood up and assessed the situation. Violet, Steeljack, and Patch were pushing themselves up as well. Danish had been knocked back into the armory tent. I turned and glared at Spark, who giggled profusely at our situation.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?!” I yelled at the spirit of Magic, who continued to giggle. Across the clearing, I could see the Bullfather getting ready to fire another shot. He paused as I screamed at my crazy. Violet and the others paused too, watching me as I let loose. I was past caring now. The bitch had prevented me from using my magic and had also almost caused my friends physical harm, and

that was the last straw. Something in the back of my mind snapped as I growled at Spark.

“You know what?! I don't care anymore! Get out of my head, you psycho bitch!” I shouted.

Spark glowered at me as I charged my horn up for a blast of energy. Spark giggled more.

“What's so fucking funny?!” I yelled.

“You. You're so hellbent on getting me out that you haven't realized yet that I almost control you entirely. Don't worry though, I'll still treat your little Violet with the utmost care and respect,” she said, grinning.

“You stay away from her!” I shouted. I could barely hear anything else that was going on. In the background, Violet and my other friends were yelling out my name, but I didn't care. Everything else faded away as it was just Spark and me standing there. I glared at her and let loose my spell, sending a blast of fire right at her. She grinned and disappeared right before it would have hit her.

Reality snapped back and I heard a shout of pain. The spell had hit something alright, but it hadn't been the Element of Magic. The spell had slammed into the Bullfather, sending the brahmin to the ground in a bout of pain. He cried out as the magic wracked his body. I paused for a moment and blinked. *Did I...? Did I really do that?* I thought as the magic expelled from the brahmin's body, leaving him a lifeless husk. I felt a little invigorated by the spell, as if somehow... the Bullfather's remaining life energy had been transferred to me. A voice from behind me broke my concentration.

“Star...” Violet said, fear bubbling up into her speech. I could start to see the fear in her eyes now as well. “What... what happened...?”

I turned back, not able to face my marefriend. Surely by now, they all thought I was crazy. But that's because I was... right? I was bona fide psycho. And I'd just crossed the line. What was happening to me?

“No... Violet stay back!” I shouted. “Please... don't come near me. It's too dangerous!”

Violet took a step forward. “Star... it's okay, we just want to help you. Please... let me help.”

I could see it. The fear there, hidden behind her concerned face. She was afraid of me. It had finally happened. And it was all Spark's fault. I cursed the spirit of Magic as I struggled to move back away from Violet. I could hear her giggling as I tripped over the body of the Bullfather, falling over and hitting the ground hard. *Where is Lucky?* I thought as I tried to get back up. *She was supposed... supposed to be here...*

“Star... please stop. We're your friends,” I heard Patch say.

I could tell it in her voice too. She hated me for not saving her coltfriend when I could have, and she knew just how crazy I was. She was afraid too. They all were. The truth of the matter was, I had no friends. They all hated me. *Why do they hate me?!* I thought as I tried to fly away from them. My wings wouldn't cooperate however, nothing would. I tried magic, and failed once more. Was Spark killing it again like she had before? I couldn't really tell.

It was then that I saw her. Lucky. She was flying above me, circling inwards as she landed next to me. *Why now?* I thought as I regarded the ghostly mare. *Why is she here now? She's too late. It's over for me. Spark has won.*

“Star. Please, for your friend's sake and your own. Stop now. You're scared, I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner, but you have to trust me,” she said calmly. When did this irritably cute mare get so wise? I tried to step away from her.

“L-L-Lucky?” I stammered. “Stay away. Spark is still here. I can feel her. She's taking over. She's...” Lucky sighed and put her hoof on my shoulder. I realized immediately that I could feel it.

“It's going to be alright. Just close your eyes and everything will be just fine. You'll see,” Lucky

said, smiling.

“But...” I started to say before I was shushed by the green unicorn/pegasus.

“Just sleep,” she said.

My eyes felt heavy and they began to close on me. I didn't want to go. I struggled to stay awake, but my body was winning that fight. Blackness overtook me and I saw nothing more.

* * *

My nose woke up before the rest of me did, to a most unfortunate stench. The smell of garbage filled my nostrils as my eyes fluttered open. The room I was in was dark and dirty and looked like a metal storage container. I groaned. *Where am I?* I thought. *Not again...* My eyes widened, remembering what had happened. I felt around in the back of my mind for a moment. Spark was either not listening to me, or didn't seem to care enough to stop in yet. I groaned, wondering how long had I been out of commission this time. The sense of lost time was beginning to feel as familiar to me as going to sleep. Had I been out a week? A month? Three years? My mind raced with the possibilities as I struggled to remember anything between what happened with Spark and now. A creak of a door alerted me to a presence entering the storage container. Violet stood inside the container's door, smiling weakly at me.

“Hey,” she said quietly as she trotted up to the side of the dirty mattress I was lying on.

I curled myself up and looked away from my marefriend. I was afraid.. afraid of what she was going to say. I felt her hoof brush over my coat and over the base of my wings. It was soft and caring. I shuddered.

“Shh... it's okay. How are you feeling?” Violet said.

I looked up at her, seeing the love held there within her eyes. She didn't hate me? After what I

did? I couldn't believe it.

"Scared... I'm... Violet please go away. It's not safe around me," I choked out.

"No. It's okay, you're safe now," my love said. A soft smile crept onto her lips. "We're away from the slave camp now."

"It doesn't matter. *She's* still here," I replied, shaking with fear.

"She?" Violet said. "Who is she?"

"Magic. She's Magic," I stammered. "She's stuck in my head Violet... and it's getting worse. She's getting worse. I don't know what to do..."

"I know. Patch told me about it. She said you've been seeing her... and Lucky," Violet said. "It sounds like her death hit you a lot harder than even you thought."

Memories replayed in my head. Gushes of blood and gore from Lucky's neck showered my thoughts.

"I... I'm scared of her," I said finally. "She stopped me from using my magic. She almost got us killed. I think she's responsible for what I did to the Bullfather."

Violet nodded and went silent for a moment, appearing to be lost in thought.

"Please don't hate me... I'm not crazy, please..."

My green love smiled again, weakly but I could see it in her eyes. She *didn't* hate me. There was only concern and love there deep within those dark green orbs.

"It's alright. We'll figure this out. This Spark better watch out. We're gonna get her out of your head," she said confidently.

"But... what if we can't? What if she takes over completely?" I said, fear filling my voice.

"Then she's gonna have to go through me before I let her at you," Violet replied firmly.

I sighed and let her come closer as she nuzzled my neck.

"I really missed you," I breathed. "I... I just feel like I don't even know what's real anymore Violet. It's like my mind is just cracking."

"It's alright. We'll get through this," she said softly. "I missed you too sweetheart."

"How long?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"A day at most. You hit your head pretty hard in addition to your other injuries. It's going to take a few days but you'll be okay," Violet said, nuzzling me.

A knock on the metallic door interrupted our private time. I looked up, seeing a large white earth pony stallion wearing trash can armor stepping into the makeshift doorway. Patch and Steeljack trailed in behind him. They smiled at me. I realized for the first moment that everypony else but the native looked a little pale. I sniffed the air again and finally understood why. The air smelled like pure, unadulterated, rank garbage. Rotting food and the smell of what could have been feces filled my nostrils. I must have been subconsciously blocking it before. I nearly gagged.

“What is that?” I coughed as I looked up the big earth pony in front of me.

“That's the scent of Fillet my dear,” The buck replied. “I'm glad you're up and about, let me welcome you to our fair town. Name's Trash Can.”

I looked the buck up and down at his trash can apparel. Even his cutie mark which was barely visible through his armor was a trash can. At least it fit.

“Really. I couldn't tell,” I said flatly.

The buck laughed heartily. “Well, I'm glad you're alright. You are one crazy filly you know that? Taking on the Cowpones in one of their larger slave operations,” he replied.

I shuddered at the word 'crazy.' It must have been pretty visible since Violet held onto me and ran her hoof through my hair after he said it.

“How did you know to come help us?” I asked weakly.

Trash smiled and whistled at the door. A familiar pair of unicorns entered. Dusk Blue and Sunshine Sky smiled at me and bowed.

“Your two friends here came running into town and warned us about what was happening. We did what we could to send out a contingent of the Tin Rangers out to assist,” the white stallion replied.

“Thank you. I... What happened with the slaves?” I said.

“They're all safe. Filthy told me how you came down there and took on the Bullfather himself,” Trash Can said nonchalantly.

The Bullfather. Did he survive what I had done to him? I pondered what the spell was that I had cast on the brahmin, trying to remember the specifics about it.

“Did... did anypony see what happened to the Bullfather?” I quickly asked.

Trash Can shook his head. “Nope. Never did find the bastard. However, suffice to say they won't be kidnappin' our citizens no more,” he said.

“Well... still. Thank you for helping us. We are truly in your debt,” I said as calmly as I could.

Trash Can laughed some more. “Shucks. It wasn't no big deal little filly. That's what the Tin Rangers are for. We patrol these parts around our town,” the white stallion said. “In fact, I'm their acting leader.”

“Acting leader? And if you patrol the areas why hadn't you dealt with the slavers already?” I asked. My mind was still swimming with the memories of what had happened.

Trash chuckled again, albeit a bit more nervously. “Well, we umm... alright look. We all take turns being the leader of the group, and we just make do with what we have out here. We don't have fancy armor, or even fancy training... and buck we sure as sugar don't speak fancy, so we try our best. Those Cowpones unfortunately were much better organized than we are. Luckily you put them into such a tizzy we was able to make a difference,” he said.

I blinked. *You mean we were saved by a bunch of... incompetent untrained ponies?* I thought. My mind nearly exploded at the thought. I groaned for a moment and motioned to Violet.

“I... I need to stand. Need some fresh air,” I said, pushing off the bed and heading towards the door, barely listening to Violet's protests. I pushed open the metal container door and stepped out into... a large pile of trash.

“Oh. That's what it is,” I said aloud, mostly to myself than to anypony else. I blinked for a moment as I took in what I was looking at. It was a town, if one could call it that. Giant metal storage containers made up the majority of the buildings, but you could also see large skywagons and carts strewn about the area as well. This was par for the course for most Wasteland settlements. What was surprising was the ground consistency and general aroma of the place. It was all garbage. I realized then that Filthy Rich had made some comment about a landfill, but I didn't figure he meant that the town of Filiet was actually situated on top of one. Suddenly the Minotaur's jokes about the place made a little sense and I began to chuckle a bit at the irony of it.

“Heh. Trash Mountain. I get it now,” I said aloud once more. Crunching noises behind me revealed that Violet had stepped out of the musty container.

“I was going to warn you. It's a tribal town apparently. We're still lucky we found some place friendly,” she said, stepping up besides me. “Seems like everywhere we've been in this shithole of a city has tried to kill us, so far.”

“I know where to go next,” I said calmly. “There's a Ministry of Image hub downtown. I don't know exactly where, but I have it on good authority that it may hold some answers for me. Possibly for both me and Lucky.”

“What about Pride?” she asked. “Any sign of her? She's fucked with your dreams before. Are we certain this doesn't have anything to do with her?”

I shook my head. I was nearly a hundred percent sure Pride wasn't responsible for this current bout of crazy.

“No... this is different. This is already there. I can feel Spark inside me Violet. She's growing stronger by the day, and I don't know what I'm going to do if she gets loose,” I said. “I'm scared of her.”

Violet smiled and leaned up against me. Oh Goddesses how I missed that.

“What we're going to do, is go to this Ministry hub and find your answers,” she said. A creak behind us indicated that the door was opened and the others had filed out to join us.

“Goddess,” Dusk Blue said as he strode past me and turned. He bowed before me.

“You really should stop calling me that,” I said. “What is your goal now? Staying with me still?”

The unicorn shook his head. “These... past days being by your side have been eye opening for myself and my young comrade,” he said, indicating Sunshine Sky as she stepped up to join him. “I am truly sorry for the pain we have inflicted upon you, oh Goddess of Twilight. Your actions have shown us though that we can be better. We can do better than what we have before. I think you were right in telling the Elders to return to Tenpony. We can do so much more for the Wasteland. We can carry your story and show the world that there still is good out there.”

I sighed as I took all of this in. I was no hero. I wasn't even good. I caused pain and heartache and suffering. It was all a bit much to be regaled in such a way. For once, I was speechless and found myself unable to really formulate a response. I simply nodded. Dusk smiled.

“So. That's what we aim to do. Sunshine and I shall return to the Twilight Society and convince the Elders that our work here is done. I can see for myself there is no need to continue our interference in your affairs,” he said, turning to move away.

“Wait,” I said, halting the unicorn in his tracks.

“I meant what I said before. I don't hate you. I... I just wish I understood all of this better,” I said hesitantly. “I'm not your Goddess. But... if there was anypony who was a Goddess... I know she'd want ponies like you backing her up.”

The blue stallion smiled, turned and bowed once more. Sunshine Sky bowed as well.

“It was an honor Radiant Star,” she said as she turned to join her friend. The two began the precarious trek down the side of the trash pile, heading towards what I guessed was the landfill gate. I couldn't really tell because of the large amount of trash overflowing onto it. I waved after the two as they became smaller and smaller. I sighed and turned to Violet.

“Speaking of friends, whatever happened to Danish?” I asked, remembering the cream colored unicorn.

“That goofy little unicorn ran back to his bakery buddies as soon as he could,” Trash Can interjected.

I grinned. *Of course he would. Ever the selfish thinker that one,* I thought.

“Looks like it's just us again then,” I said, smiling at my three friends.

Steeljack took a moment and stepped forward. “I... wanted to thank you for coming after me Star. Patch and I... we both thank you,” he said.

I smiled and extended a forehoof over the grey buck. It felt too good to be true.

“Well that's because it is,” a very familiar voice echoed in the back of my mind, causing a sharp pain. I stumbled back from Steeljack a bit.

“Star? What's wrong?” Violet asked.

“I'm fine. Headache. Just a little worn out and overexerted is all,” I said, waving her away. *You stay out of this,* I said to the spirit of Magic.

“Suit yourself sweetheart. But be forewarned, I am coming for you,” she said before going silent once more. The pain subsided and I sighed.

“I... I just think I need to lay down and rest for now. Get back on my feet,” I said, moving back into the storage container room.

My friends had nodded and advised that they would give me however much time I needed. I plopped down onto the dirty mattress and brought my saddlebags over to me. I began to poke through them, pulling out what pieces I could of the puzzle. I regarded the diary once more, and sighed. While it was nice to know that Twilight was once happy and hunky dory, it didn't really answer anything for me. I pulled out the tiara next. The old broken thing confused me greatly. Why was it in that library if it was so important? I poked at it with a hoof, even with telekinesis, just to get it to do something. It mostly just sat there, an enigma taunting me. It was then that I remembered my conversation with Honesty. *Where did I put that memory orb?* I thought as I dumped the contents of my bags out. There, in the center of everything else was the orb I sought. It's swirling orange contents called out to me. I sighed. *I guess there's no rest for the wicked huh,* I thought as I reached out and grabbed the orb with my magic. The world fell away into nothingness as I fell into the past once more.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

The lean powerful body of the Ministry Mare of Technology greeted my senses as I fell into the mind of Applejack. A cold breeze whipped across my host's face as she walked down the street. On each side of the mare, two Steel Rangers marched in perfect time in their famous power armor. In the distance loomed the familiar building of the Ministry of Wartime Technology Chicacolt Hub. It was getting dark out, and the building was still a hive of activity. The war never stopped, it seemed. My host stepped into the lobby of the building, flanked by her armored escort. Ponies milled about the lobby to and fro, but each of them took notice of the Ministry Mare and her armored escort. My host stepped forward and marched down the massive hallway towards the elevators at the end.

“Y'all just stay here now,” my host said to the two Rangers.

They looked at the mare like she had just told them to go jump off a cliff.

“Are you sure Madam Applejack?” the one on the right said. His voice sounded old and grated behind his armor..

“Ah'll be just fine. Just stay here,” the orange mare replied.

The two Rangers nodded and took up point next to the elevator door. The door slid open and my host stepped inside. After a few button presses, the elevator began to move. A soft ***pop*** next to my host indicated another presence had joined me in the elevator.

“Evenin' Twi,” my host spoke aloud to the pony behind her.

“Good evening Applejack,” Twilight's voice said from behind my host. The purple unicorn stepped up beside my host. Her face was ragged and she looked like she hadn't slept in days. Her mane and tail were tangled all in knots and her eyes were bloodshot.

“Twi, you alright? You look like hell sugarcube,” my host said with concern in her voice.

“I'm fine. Just... lot going on with my projects is all. The Princess is always keeping tabs on my Ministry,” Twilight replied. “The I.M.P. Project has hit another complete dead end. I may have to bring on additional help at some point.”

“Well, just take care of yourself sugar, ah don't want to see you run yourself ragged,” my host said as the elevator continued its descent.

“I'll be fine once I get this taken care of,” the lavender unicorn said.

“What's in tarnation this about anyways? You called me while ah was in the middle of a business meettin',” my host asked. “Not that ah minded, mind you, them businessponies are as venomous as

snakes in the ground.”

“My Ministry managed to get their hooves on something big. You're going to want to see it. I've had it transferred here for careful study,” Twilight said.

The elevator finally shifted to a stop. The two Ministry Mares stepped out into the corridor, the same one we had found the vault in. My host followed the purple mare down the corridor, not really paying much attention to anything but her friend walking in front of her. I considered what must have been running through Applejack's head at that moment in time. Was Twilight truly okay? Why was all of this happening? Why now? I couldn't even begin to answer the questions. The walk was short lived as the two mares approached the vault. My host eyed the purple unicorn as she stepped up next to the terminal.

“When did this get here?” my host asked. “Ah don't remember buildin' anything like this.”

“My Ministry built it for the sole purpose of containing the device which you are about to see,” Twilight responded.

“In mah Ministry building? Don't you think that's oversteppin' the bounds just a little,” my host replied.

“It's fine. Look, do you want to see this or not. Your Ministry is going to be responsible for studying it after all, with M.A.S. help of course,” the lavender unicorn said, putting her eye up to the terminal.

The box flashed **ACCESS GRANTED** and the door opened. My host followed the other mare into the vault and gasped at the sight I knew they were going to be seeing. The steel acorn of the Pink Cloud megaspell sat in the center of the vault.

“Twi... please tell me that's... that's not what ah think it is... is it?” my host said, fear creeping into her voice.

“The Littlehorn Agent,” Twilight said. “Undoubtedly in megaspell form. Ministry of Arcane Science agents found it during a joint operation with the Shadowbolts. It took a million bits of royal money to get it here safely without detonating.”

“Twi, that thing is dangerous. Why did you bring it here? If it goes off this entire city, hell possibly our entire country is done for!” my host shouted at the lavender mare, who only sighed in response.

“Applejack, please... this is important. If we can figure out how the zebras did this, we can change the whole course of the war. Plus there are other applications too,” Twilight said confidently.

“That's not the only reason you did this is it sugarcube?” my host said, glaring at the other mare. “You wouldn't spend millions of bits just for this. What is it? Better yet, who is it?”

Twilight sighed once more. “I knew you wouldn't understand it,” she said after a moment's pause. “Applejack, I had to try something. Rarity wouldn't let me have it, so I had to go to the source.”

“Have what? What's Rarity got to do with this?” my host said. “This has got to do with your brother again don't it?! Dangit Twi, I thought you were past this! You're taking this too far!”

“I can't take it Applejack! We were so close to figuring it out! Then he just... he just died!” Twilight shouted back, tears streaming from her eyes. She put her forehoof to her mouth as she realized she had just said something that she hadn't meant to.

“Figuring what out Twi?” my host asked, glowering at the lavender mare.

Twilight meeped in response, sounding nearly like Fluttershy for a moment.

“Figuring what out?” my host repeated angrily.

“It's... It's a secret,” Twilight said quietly. I almost couldn't hear her.

“Well you'd better start explainin' quick sugarcube. What was so dang important that you had to spend so much money on getting this thing here?” my host exclaimed.

Twilight took a deep breath and finally spoke after a moment's pause.

“He... he was sick Applejack. Cursed even,” she said calmly. “While on assignment, by brother's squad was attacked by a contingent of zebras testing a new form of the biological agent known as the Littlehorn Agent. There was nothing he could do to stop it. It debilitated him.”

“Ah... Ah didn't know,” my host said, her anger toning down as her voice switched to a softer and more caring one.

Twilight continued to speak. “It happened a few months before he... before he... I thought I had it all figured out. We were working on a cure,” she said. “It was supposed to work. But then that day happened. I don't know why he did it. I keep running through it all in my head and every time I can only come to one conclusion... and it hurts like hell to think about it. My brother wanted to die.”

“Why? Why would he do that to you?” my host asked.

“He was always in so much pain. The concentration of the biological weapon wasn't enough to kill him, but it dampened his magic significantly. The doctors didn't know what was wrong, and they couldn't figure out either why he was still alive,” the lavender mare said. “I told him I would help him no matter what. That I would fix it. And I'm still going to. I'm going to do it Applejack. I'm going to bring him back.”

“Is that why you went to see Rarity?” my host said.

Twilight nodded. “Rarity has a book on zebra necromancy. But she won’t admit that she actually has it. I tried to get her to give it to me, even tried to capitalize on her little crush on me, but she won’t budge,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter now. I have this. It’s everything I will ever need. If I can decipher the necromantic spells woven into the Littlehorn Agent, I believe I can do it. I can bring Shining Armor back to life.”

My host’s eyes widened. “Twi, please tell me you’re joking,” the orange mare said.

The lavender unicorn shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Are you crazy? You can’t just go on bringin’ ponies back from the dead!” my host continued.

“Who are you to tell me what I can’t do? Huh?” Twilight angrily replied. “You spend all your time with your business meetings and what are you really accomplishing?! Nothing! I’m working on something that will change the course of the war! No pony will ever have to die again. We’ll be able to bring them all back while we send the damned zebras to Tartarus!”

“Twi, there’s a better way to do this. Please, just listen to me,” my host said.

Twilight snorted and pushed past the orange mare. “I thought you of all my friends would understand Applejack. I guess not,” the purple mare said as she stomped out of the vault.

My host looked on as the unicorn left and sighed.

“Ah do sugarcube, ah do,” she said as the memory faded to blackness.

ooooOOOOooooOOOOoooo

I awoke, groggily at first as I recognized the familiar smell of Filiet once more. The rotting stench of garbage assaulted my senses as I let my eyes focus on the storage container room. I groaned and pushed myself off the dirty mattress and strode to the metal door, pushing it open. It was dark out, and I could see fires lit around the town. In a sense, this made the refuse smell even worse. Nothing totally worse than rotting trash. I started down the hill of garbage, pulling up my PipBuck and locating Violet's tag. They were over in a large skywagon on the next trash pile over apparently. I poked my head in, seeing my friends speaking with Trash Can. Violet turned and smiled when she saw me. She trotted up to me as I stepped into the old skywagon cabin.

"Hey... feeling any better?" she asked.

I nodded. At the very least, my headache had gone away. I still couldn't shake the feeling that Spark was still there, watching every movement and waiting to put me in another situation like she did against the Bullfather.

"I'm... I'm alright. What's going on?" I said, trying to process the memory orb that I had awoken from. Twilight had been working on some sort of cure for Shining Armor? None of it made any sense. What happened to Shining Armor then? Did he really step in front of that rocket intending to die? I needed to know as soon as I could look at the memory orb that belonged to him. Still, the Ministry of Image loomed ahead in my future. What was there that was so important? If the Pink Cloud bomb was what Twilight was studying... where did she keep that research?

"Trash was giving us a better map of the inner city areas. Apparently the old train system still kind of works. There's a station nearby that will take us right downtown," Violet said.

"Well what are we waiting for then? Let's get going!" I said excitedly.

"Are you sure? Your injuries were quite serious," my marefriend said with a concerned look on her face.

I grinned. *No. Not better... driven. I'm going to figure this out and beat Spark. I have to, I thought.*

"I'll be fine. Nothing I can't handle," I said as I turned to the white stallion in the room.

"Thank you again for your hospitality, but we really must be going now," I said, bowing low to the earth pony.

"Thank ya kindly as well ma'am, for saving our townsfolk," Trash Can responded. My friends and I exited the skywagon and began the precarious trek down the side of the landfill off into the direction of the train station. As we walked, I clicked on the radio, hoping to catch any more news about goings on in the city. The familiar gruff voice of the Minotaur greeted us as we trotted along.

"YEEEEEEEEEEHAAAAWWWW!!!! That's right kiddies! It's that time once again for the 'Morning Moo Madhouse'! I am your hostest with the mostest. The ONE. The ONLY. THE MINOTAUR!

Yes that's right kids, it is I the Minotaur, and I'm here to give you the down low on all the happenings in the Chicacolt area. Have I got some news for you! The Cowpones are on the run my friends, after a visit from the Ministry Mare at one of their west city slave camps! Word is, the Ministry Mare might have even taken out the Bullfather himself folks. Eyewitness reports also place the Tin Rangers at the scene. Hope you had fun up in Filiet with all that trash Ministry Mare!

In other related news, the Lotus Triad has placed a bounty on the Ministry Mare's head and are willing to pay 500,000 caps for her head.

That's all the news I have for the day for you kiddies out there. No other segments for tonight other than the sweet sweet music of Radiopone. Enjoy!"

A soft humming beat replaced the DJ's voice as a crooning lead vocals entered the mix. We trotted along, listening to the music and not really saying much else. There really wasn't much to say really. Violet spent some time casting the healing spell again on my ear, but results were nonexistent. The thing still hurt, regardless of any magic applied to it. *Just what was on Lotus Petal's knife that did*

this? I thought as I walked. The knife she had wielded hadn't looked like anything special, and yet even now I felt the slicing motion gnawing its way through the soft flesh. I gritted my teeth through the pain for a moment as Violet reapplied the bandage with her magic.

Hours later, the train station loomed in the distance. We had finally managed to somewhat rid ourselves of the scent of Filiet (although I was pretty sure I'd never be able to smell burning garbage the same way ever again). The Minotaur's broadcast had made me a little frightened. A catastrophically massive bounty of gargantuan proportions? On me? It seemed that the Lotus Triad wasn't one to forget those that transgressed against them.

The train station was ravaged by the ages of time, and skeletons lay strewn about everywhere around the lobby. The train platform however was relatively clean. I supposed that if the trains were still running, the ponies from Filiet would have kept things in order. I looked about, trying to locate the train, as it appeared to be completely missing from the platform.

"Anypony see the train?" I asked.

Violet shrugged. A loud horn blew in the distance as the chugging noise of a subway car echoed down the track. Within moments the train began to speed past the platform. I realized that it wasn't going to stop.

"Shit. We're gonna have to hitch a ride. Everypony hold on!" I shouted, charging up my horn and pouring my magic into a teleportation spell. Hitting a moving target was going to be difficult, since the change in vectors increased the amount of energy I would have to put out. The magic let loose and I felt myself tumbling onto the top of the train car, my friends right behind me. I groaned and pulled myself to my feet, shaking from minor magic exhaustion as I spotted the porthole that led down into the car. I looked back at my friends as the car sped along. Patch groaned as Steeljack helped her up, the buck using his weight to help her and Violet along to the porthole. I used telekinesis to open it and we slid down into the car proper.

The car was dirty and smelled of vomit and booze. Skeletons of dead ponies sat in the chairs lining the sides of the car. The cityscape ran by us outside the tinted windows. I blinked. It was a miracle that this thing even survived the megaspells, let alone had power. Somepony must have fixed it up. We moved some of the remains and used the chairs to sit, watching the city fly by. I sighed and

nuzzled up next to Violet, who kissed my forehead in return. Within a few hours we'd be downtown and on our way to the Ministry of Image. There I could hopefully find some answers and hope to get rid of Spark for good.

I briefly wondered where Lucky had gone. I hadn't seen the mare since the encounter with the Bullfather. I hoped she was okay. I promised her that I would find a way to fix it... and I realized that my promise was no different than what Twilight had promised to Shining Armor. She had only ever wanted her brother back, and I only really wanted to save her because I felt responsible for getting her killed. Was it too much to ask?

A loud ***thunk*** brought me back to my senses and reality. The noise continued above us, and I realized quickly that it was hoofsteps. The noises had gotten loud enough that the others were alerted to them as well.

"Somepony is up on the train," I said quietly, pointing upward.

Suddenly, without warning the train's brakes began to squeal and cylinders hissed as the train slowed down until it bumped to a complete stop. The squealing intensified to earsplitting levels as the ancient brakes tried to keep the train from moving forward. A voice came over an aging loudspeaker warning us about clearance on the tracks and that we had temporarily stopped until the obstruction was removed. I stood, lifting Stargazer as I headed to the porthole. Violet trotted along after me as she brought up Thunder Flash. I poked my head outside of the train, noting that we were now surrounded by large buildings in the center of an elevated track high above the city. I pushed myself out of the porthole and onto the top of the train. Where did the mysterious hoofsteps come from? No pony was in sight as I trotted up the length of the train car, trying to see what lay ahead of the train that was preventing it from moving. Violet stood by the porthole, levitating the beam rifle above her as she acted as its guard.

I knew the moment I reached the front of the train car something was wrong. A giant piece of concrete block sat in the center of the elevated track, breaking the connection in the track. A shout behind me alerted me to the real danger. I spun around, seeing a dark form on standing on the train car upright. A green cloak surrounded the form, preventing me from seeing who it was. Violet had lifted Thunder Flash and fired as the form leaped over the silver fire expelled from the beam rifle. As it flew through the air, I could see a lithe figure beneath the green cloak. Black and white stripes floated along the figure's coat, revealing its true nature. *A zebra?* I thought. The figure landed again on the train car and turned, pulling back the hood. A beautiful zebra mare with fiery green eyes stared at me. Her wild spiked hair made her look devilishly evil in the night sky. Her mouth moved and she began to speak in a language I

couldn't understand. Another blast of fire came her way from Violet who shouted at me. The zebra mare twirled about, dodging the blast with relative ease. I stared, mesmerized by the exotic beauty of the zebra.

“She attacked me Star!” my marefriend shouted, bringing me back to my senses.

I lifted Stargazer and pointed it at the zebra. “Who are you!” I shouted.

The mare turned back and grinned widely.

“Surrender now, and lay down arms, or your friends will suffer great harm,” she said as she pulled out her hooves from her cloak. “I am Envy, as you see, and your bounty belongs to me!”

Envy?! I thought. What?!

The mare pulled out several small devices and spoke quietly in a chanting voice. The devices glowed with unholy light as she tossed one at me and the other at Violet. Stargazer came up and fired, hitting the device in the air and causing it to blow up in a flash of blue light. A scream from behind the mare caught me off-guard. The other device had made it past Violet's blazing fire and struck her on the shoulder. I watched in horror as the device exploded in a flash of blue light, knocking my love off the train car and hurtling through the air towards the mean streets below.

“Violet!!!!”

Author's Notes

Wow. So... this is why I split this chapter from 13 into 13 and 14. With everything I needed to cover in this second half, it was absolutely necessary to save you, my readers the headache of reading a 30k + chapter. Anyways, I am deathly appreciative of you all for sticking with me on this, with more sure to come.

This chapter marks a very important milestone for me as it officially crosses “Starlight” over 200,000 words. I never thought I would ever get this far, but I am happy I have. Thank you so so much for helping me get here.

On a much sadder note, the FoE community lost one of their own this week of 7/9/2012. Emily R. Smith, otherwise known as SugarCookie in the FoE Resource Chat and around Canternet died on 7/9/2012 following a car accident. While I didn't know her too well and only spoke a few times, I know that she was kind and welcoming, and always very friendly. My thoughts and prayers go out to her family and friends. Know that there's a whole community of us right there with you as you go through this difficult time. In the mean time, have a picture of the fabled Cookie herself. <http://i.imgur.com/JhYDR.jpg>
Cookie: wherever you are, we'll miss you.

Onto the plugs. Star's tumblr is located here: <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com>

My story plug this week, even though he really doesn't need it from me is “[Fallout Equestria: Guise of Chaos](#)” by Fallingsnow. I'm very impressed by Snow's character building and the piece of Equestria that Ripple is carving out for himself. Keep it up sir, you are a great writer and a really cool dude.

Once again my thanks goes to Wirepony and Cadmium for their brushies and pre-reads. You are helping me make this successful and for that I thank you so so much.

I'd like to continue to thank all the folks in the IRC, who are too numerous to name right now. As always, I thank Kkat for her vision and the sandbox. It's been a blast.