

Fallout Equestria: Starlight

Chapter 20: The Sins We Commit

I'm sorry, Zecora, I'm trying my best, but... I can't stop thinking about Trixie. There was something different about her. It's like she's gone from high and mighty to mean and nasty.

Choice. What is it like to not have choice? Are we truly the product of our destiny? Is choice just an illusion? We like to think that we are the masters of our own fates, but what of the choices that life makes for us? We don't choose what we look like. We don't even choose what our cutie marks are. Do we even have the capability to choose who we love? I'm not sure. I only know that I am faced with a heavy choice to make. Do I try to save what's left of Spark? Or do I destroy her, confident that she will never harm another soul ever again?

I feel like Twilight herself must have made many choices along her path that led to the end of our world. Did she choose to let Spark do what she did? Or did she simply let fate be, and let her choice be removed from her? I wish I knew. I wish I had some clue as to what I was meant to do, what I was meant to be. I've spent so long wishing that I could go back to being me, that I don't even know who 'me' is anymore.

As I stand upon the precipice of disaster, I wonder... was it my choices that brought me here? Or was this all just some sort of cosmic joke, and I'm the punch line? Only time it seems... will tell...

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The door to Stable 180 stood immediately before me. Behind me... my friends and the collapsed tunnel that was both our savior and our destroyer. I knew I had no time to lose. It was time to find Pride, and put an end to everything. I stepped forward, touching the massive gear-shaped door with my forehoof.

"Everypony ready?" I asked.

Nods of agreement came from my friends. The ponies (and hellhound) that I had surrounded myself with were more than ready to support me in my time of need. I was glad that I had them, and in turn I knew they were glad that they had me.

I sighed. I was going to definitely need them if I was going to make it through this in one piece. "Alright. Whatever happens, we need to stick together. Don't get separated and keep each other safe."

My horn glowed, reaching out to the Stable's main door, enveloping it in a sheath of telekinesis. The door lifted away easily from its socket, and I set it aside with a clang. The removal of the steel cog revealed a long and dark tunnel that led deep into the underground complex. Like the flight through the tunnel, this was too easy. Almost like Pride was pushing us here. I knew that she knew we were coming from her intrusion into my dreams, but was she planning this from the very beginning? Were we walking into one giant trap?

"Okay..." I said as I moved into the hallway, beginning our long walk into the Stable. "Let's go."

We began to walk as Violet, Danish, and I ignited our horns with light spells, bathing the gray walls in an unhealthy mix of our magical colors. While the mismatched colors of our magic weren't pretty to look at, they at least provided some form of illumination. I looked at my E.F.S., trying to keep track of any possible hostile activity, but all I had was some error about it not being available. I looked over at Violet, who had a concerned look on her face.

"Is your E.F.S. acting up at all?" I asked as we continued forward. The tunnel into the Stable felt like it went on forever. It also seemed as if we were moving downward instead of straight. Violet nodded.

"Pretty much everything on my PipBuck seems to be on the fritz," she replied.

I scowled. The sheer depth of the Stable could explain the automapping failure, but that didn't explain E.F.S. Of course, even when it was working, I didn't understand how it worked., so I was unsure. Maybe something down here was blocking the device's spells?

"We're going to have to be extra careful then," I said quietly. "Everypony on full alert."

Nixis kept a rear guard with Steeljack, the two friends staying close to each other. Violet and I shared point. Lust, Danish, and Patch hung near the middle and sides, watching and waiting for Pride's first move. The long tunnel tapered down, dark metal panels appearing over the rough stone. After the transition from tunnel to hallway was completed, branching paths started to appear. There were no signs or guide markers on any of the offshoots. That made sense, at least. Pride certainly wouldn't make it at all easy for intruders to delve her secrets, or that of the Stable she called home. I wondered briefly what this Stable actually did. Gluttony had mentioned that he was originally an inhabitant of the Stable, but did not say what had happened here besides the fact that it now belonged to Pride.

We stopped at the first intersection that we came to, trying to get a better understanding of our surroundings by sending a light spell down each of the paths. It seemed like they only led into more featureless hallways. Each one was lined with not just typical gray Stable walls, but also massive pipework that lined the walls of each tunnel. Did the entrance of the Stable somehow take you to the maintenance areas if you just followed it straight? I felt very confused, and without the use of my PipBuck's automap feature I had absolutely no idea where to go next.

"Anypony have any bright ideas?" I muttered, more to myself than anything.

Lust spoke however, and I was a bit surprised at what she had to say. "I think... I think we have to go to the left," she said quietly. "I just have this feeling that's where we need to go."

"Are you starting to remember?" I asked.

Lust shrugged noisily in the power armor she wore. "I don't... I don't know. I feel like there's some bits poking through, but every time I try to really remember it... I lose it," she said, sighing.

We began moving down the hallway, as I pondered the mare's words. I felt truly awful for her, but there wasn't much I could do about it. She had to remember things on her own, but still... I felt horrible knowing even what I did know about her past life. Lilith... Lust... Lilith. What would happen when the pegasus fully remembered herself? Would she accept what she once was? Or would she choose to forget? My mind swam with worries as we walked. The cold gray walls felt like they were closing in on us. I'm not even sure I knew how long we had been walking for. The hallway finally opened up into another series of tunnels.

"How big is this place?" Nixis wondered out loud.

"Pretty big," Violet said. "I can't imagine how many ponies this Stable housed. We must be in the maintenance levels though, because there aren't any doors that go anywhere."

"I'm more concerned that Cranky hasn't shown himself," I said quietly. "Those ghouls on the way into this place? I'm pretty sure those weren't even the beginning of what he has in store for us." I glanced about, checking my E.F.S. again. Nothing. *Whatever's messing with it must still be active*, I thought. It was a very uneasy feeling, not having the E.F.S. to tell me if there were any hostiles about.

"If I may ask, who is this Cranky you speak of?" Nixis asked. "Maybe he's given up on finding us?"

"Ah... well Cranky is Sloth. He was an old friend of a friend of a friend..." I tapered off, groping for the best way to explain Cranky Doodle Donkey. "He's... He's a Canterlot ghoul of some sorts. I'm not exactly sure what he was before... but he's working for Pride, and he's not one to give up so easily."

"We met him on the way into Chicacolt. He wanted to try and bring us to Pride, but he just kind of... let us go," Steeljack commented. We rounded the next corner, chatting idly amongst ourselves when I heard it. That... *sound*. Sucking and gasping and clawing at the walls. *Ghouls*, I thought. I tensed up.

"Do you guys hear that?" I said. "There are ghouls nearby." I glanced about, relieved. *Where are they?* I thought as the sound began to grow louder and louder. We moved down the hall as silently as possible. I glanced at my E.F.S., hoping and praying that whatever was blocking it had magically stopped and that I could see where the monsters were. No dice. We stopped at the end of the hall, coming to another fork. The sucking sounds were deafening now. It was if they were everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"Where are they?" Violet said quietly. "Why don't they just attack?"

"I don't know," I said, motioning to the right. "Cranky's pushing us, he's got to be. Let's try this hall, hopefully we find where we're supposed to go before Cranky's ghouls find us."

I moved into the hall, worrying about the noises around me. In these cramped hallways it was going to be difficult to defend ourselves effectively. Ghouls were highly unpredictable to fight, especially ones that were controlled by a higher intelligence. Cranky was playing us every step we took. He was pushing us somewhere, but where? A loud clicking sound caught my attention over the din of the ghouls as we moved down the long hall. I glanced back, seeing the already dark hallway begin to grow darker. Another click, and the next section of hallway went pitch black.

"Umm... I don't like the look of that," I said, another click emanating from the ceiling, heralding the darkening of the section ahead of us. "I think we should move a little faster..."

I flared my horn, shooting a light spell behind us. It struck the darkness and disappeared without a trace, swallowed as if it had never existed.

"Okay, a *lot* faster!"

The darkness thickened as we started to canter forward, trying to keep ahead of the loss of light. We rounded the corner to the next hall, finding ourselves in a wider passage. Metal doors lined the gray hall, the signs that indicated where they led either blank or missing. I didn't care where they went to. We had to keep moving forward. The magical darkness behind us continued to fall, coming dangerously close to our rear. I didn't want to know what would happen if it reached us.

"Shit! Cranky, you're a BAD DONKEY!" I shouted as my canter turned into a gallop. *How the fuck is Cranky doing this?!* I thought in my panic. The sucking sounds of the ghouls were all I could hear. It was unbearable. Unfortunately, the next corner led to a hall that was extremely cramped. As we moved forward,

what light there was at the end of the hall began to darken as well. We were being boxed in. I spun about, looking for an exit but finding nothing. It seemed like there was nothing to do but wait as the darkness on each side of our group inched closer and closer. The sucking noises ceased, an empty quiet filling the hall. A waiting quiet.

“Somepony wanna tell me what’s going on here?” Lust said.

“Something wanted us here,” I said, pulling Stargazer out with my magic. After the constant din of the ghouls, the quiet was too much. The first ghoul launched out the darkness behind us without warning, growling loudly as it landed next to Lust. The black mare snarled, slashing down with her wings, taking its head off. I barely had time to look back as two more of the undead monstrosities came from the other side. Violet and I lifted our respective weapons, turning the two beasts into a bloody pulp. The sucking sounds began anew as two groups of ghouls lurched out of the darkness ahead of and behind us.

“Fan out! Don’t let them get close!” I shouted, turning Stargazer on the nearest ghoul and splattering its brains all over the metal floor.

“There’s not enough room!” Patch called back. “We need to find somewhere a little more open!”

I agreed, but with the darkness surrounding us, I wasn’t sure where we were going to go. More of the ghouls appeared, as if out of thin air. Patch bounced over onto Steeljack’s back, firing away at the undead horde with pinpoint precision. Her lover grinned widely and widened his stance. The armored pony was still able to shoot his rifle with Patch using him as a shooting platform, and the ghouls suffered for it. The loud ***crack*** echoed throughout the hall as it struck a nearby ghoul, turning it into paste.

“Shit. We can’t keep this up for long,” I said, using Stargazer like a club to knock back two more of the monsters. Pretty soon, we’d get tired or run out of ammo, whichever came first. There was no way out. I began looking around for something, anything that we could use to get out of this. I looked back at Lust, who was busy slicing two of the undead beasts in half with her wings. “Lust! We need an exit, fast!”

The black mare nodded, her eyes wide as she glanced about the cramped hall. “These maintenance tunnels, they always had some sort of access port that led into the ductwork!” she shouted as she began looking down at the floor beneath us. “Give me some light, Star. I can’t see down here.”

I nodded, sparing a flare of magic to stick a light spell to Lust’s head. The mare grinned widely as she began to pull on one of the tiles on the ground. With a grunt, she ripped it away, revealing an access shaft that went straight down. It was just big enough for everypony to fit. I grinned.

“Lust, you’re magnificent. Everypony, down the hatch!” I shouted.

Nixis went first, howling as he slid down the shaft. Danish followed, along with Steeljack and Patch. I glanced back at Violet and Lust. “You two go on, I’ll hold them back and try and seal it up so they can’t follow!” The two mares nodded, leaping down the hole in the ground. The horde of ghouls pressed forward, pushing against my defenses in the tight hall as I backed towards the shaft. I took a moment to access my PipBuck, praying the inventory - Yes! I pulled a specific item out and closed the inventory.

“Fuck you!” I shouted, as I dropped down the hole, leaving the grenade behind. As I slid down the device blew, a massive ***boom*** echoing down the shaft along with a plume of dust and grit. I fell free through the air below me, landing on the hard metal floor next to the others. I groaned as I pushed myself up.

"Next time, we take the elevator," Lust said groggily as she sat up next to Violet.

I looked up in awe. We had fallen into a large open hall filled with what appeared to be maintenance equipment. At the far end was a large set of double metal doors. A sign above them held the words **RESIDENTIAL ELEVATOR**. There was no sign of ghouls nearby.

"I think we found a way out of here!" Patch said, bouncing past me before stopping cold in her tracks.

I followed her gaze as I realized we were not alone in this room. In front of the elevator doors was a very familiar face. Cranky's red soulless eyes smoldered in the darkness, a savage grin on his face. Parts of his flesh were dripping away, splashing onto the ground below him. The stench of rotting meat assaulted my nose, apparently coming from the contents of his cart.

"Well, kid. You did it," the donkey ghoul said, his gravelly voice echoing across the dark hall. "You made it here. I'm impressed."

"Cranky," I said coldly.

The ghoul coughed. At least I thought it was a cough. It could have been a laugh. I wasn't sure. "My name's Sloth, thank you very much," he said.

"So what now? You come here to finish the job yourself?" I snarled.

"Soon. But first... I'd like to have a little fun with you. Makes the job more interesting, after all," the donkey said with a grin.

"What about Matilda?" Violet interrupted, anger in her voice. "What about your promise to her?"

"I told you before, kid. I have no choice in the matter," Sloth replied, growling. "Pride is my master, and I serve her because I have to." He glanced over at Lust. "Although, I hardly expected to see you here, sister."

"I'm here because I owe Pride a world of fucking hurt," the pegasus mare said. "She fucked with all of us, Sloth. Don't you know that? She's responsible for us, why we are the way we are!"

Sloth grinned again, nodding. "I'm aware of this," he said. "Unlike most of our brethren, I actually know what happened to me. I was a ghoul first, and I'm still a ghoul, after all."

"It was the statues, wasn't it?" I said. "She did something to you with them."

Lust's eyes widened. "What? What statues?" she asked.

Sloth snorted, interrupting us before I could respond to the mare.

"Yes... you would be correct there," he said. "I made a deal with the statue, and with Pride. I gave my service willingly, for my memories and the promise of my Matilda's return."

"Star?" Lust asked again. "What are you two talking about?"

"Lust. I saw... I saw a memory. Pride used these... things. These... statues. She used them to turn you

into... well... you,” I said.

“And you didn't think I needed to know this?!” Lust shouted. “Excuse me, but this is something you should have told me about!”

“Oh, ho... dissension in the ranks,” Sloth interjected, grinning widely. “You've managed to surround yourself with the most interesting characters, kid. I'm impressed.”

I shot a glare at the ghoul, then looked back at Lust. “Lust,” I said calmly. “I'm sorry. I should have told you, but this hardly the time to be discussing this. We need to press forward.”

Lust's eyes hardened as I looked up at Sloth. I would have to speak with her, but now was not the time. I had to deal with Sloth first.

“As for you... why? Why can't you just see that Pride is playing you? She's holding your Matilda, but she's never going to give her to you!”

“Because I know she will! She promised me!” Sloth barked angrily.

I could tell that by now we were hitting a sore spot with the ghoul. He was beginning to become visibly agitated, but he just stayed there, like he was waiting for something to happen.

Sloth growled under his breath. “No matter. You won't be going any further. I'm going to put a stop to this, now!” The ghoul opened his mouth, exhaling a blast of Pink Cloud that floated above us. Wasting no time, I lifted Stargazer with my magic, and fired a stream of bullets towards the donkey. Sloth moved to the side, dodging the bullets with relative ease. I blinked. There was no way Cranky should have been able to do that, superpowered upgraded Canterlot Ghoul or not.

“Nice try, Ministry Mare. But you'll have to do better than that to take me down. I haven't forgotten our last encounter by any means,” Sloth snarled. The swirling pink clouds hung above us in the air, preventing those of us that could fly from taking wing. The sucking and growling sounds erupted from all around us, indicating that we were not going to be alone for much longer. The donkey ghoul grinned widely. “Tell you what. If you can make it through the Stable... I'll consider helping you. But I'm not going to make it easy on you.”

“*When* we make it through, Cranky. Not if. And when we make it to Pride, we'll help you get Matilda back from her,” I said.

“We'll see,” Sloth grumbled quietly. “We'll see.” A swirling column of Pink Cloud surrounded the ghoul, and he disappeared in a flash of pink light. The growling and wheezing noises continued as the first group of ghouls burst into the maintenance room. Violet and I spun about, lifting our respective weapons into the air.

“Nixis! Danish! See if you can't get the elevator doors open! We'll hold them off as long as possible!” I shouted.

The hellhound and unicorn nodded, charging to the doors. Nixis began to pick at the terminal connected to the elevator. Danish stood guard in front of him, floating his carbine rifle into the air. I tried to trigger E.S.A.T.S., hoping that the spell would still be active. Fortunately, the familiar slowdown of time came upon me. I queued up multiple shots and released the spell. Stargazer aimed and fired, ripping holes into ghoulflesh. Violet took aim with Thunder Flash, the silver fire of the beam rifle turning several ghouls into sizzling goop on

the ground. I glanced over at Patch and Steeljack, the two lovers working in tandem as the familiar ***crack*** of the stallion's rifle was overshadowed by the powerful boom that was Para Bellum's. Patch targeted ghoul after ghoul, ripping into the undead monstrosities with her rifle. As good as we were, as practiced and united, the ghouls kept coming. Stronger ones had begun to appear as well, glowing spots marking their rotting frames.

"Fuck! There's too many of them!" Lust shouted as she pressed up next to Violet and me. She glared at me. "You and I are going to have a talk, later."

"Fine," I said with a nod, turning as another set of ghouls rushed us.

Lust snarled and lashed out with her wings, slicing two of the beasts' heads clean off. I looked back at Danish and Nixis. Despite our best efforts, several ghouls had made it past our barricade. Danish was holding them off as best as he could, but even he was being overrun by the monsters. Nixis snarled, slashing out at the nearest ghoul with his vicious claws. I glanced back over at my other friends. Patch and Steeljack were surrounded on all sides by the slobbering creatures.

There was just too many of them. Cranky had played his cards well enough this time, sending wave after wave of his mindless creations. I noticed that the ghouls were wearing Stable jumpsuits. Cranky was using the inhabitants of Stable 180 against us. How many had died here for his twisted plans? I shuddered at the thought of it.

"Pull back!" I shouted, as I fired into the mess of ghouls again. I flared my horn, knocking ghouls out of my path with a burst of telekinesis. Violet and the others fought their way through the ghouls as we tightened our defensive perimeter around where Nixis and Danish worked.

"Nixis! What's the status on the door?!" I called back.

"Not good, Star!" the hellhound yelled. "The terminal won't respond! And my claws are barely making a dent in the door!"

I growled. Ghouls filled the maintenance area, growling and hissing. Glowing ones dotted the swarm, which was slowly filling the space we had just vacated. They didn't seem to be in any hurry, knowing they had us cornered. We were trapped with nowhere to go. I looked over at Violet.

"What do we do?" my love said, fear in her eyes. "What do we do, Star?"

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The Zebra Orb

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My host's body was lean and strong. She felt like a powerful weapon, ready to spring into action at any moment. I realized by my host's size and the way she carried herself that she wasn't a pony. She was a zebra.

My host blinked as she looked across the ruined city of Chicacolt. The light of the morning sun was hidden behind a thick layer of cloud cover as the zebra mare stepped out of an abandoned building. She looked back at her flank. The number **180** was emblazoned on the jumpsuit she wore. She sighed, and turned back towards the city. My host trotted along, a cool breeze flowing across her coat. She stopped after a few steps.

"I know you are there, I can feel your energy in the air," my host said aloud, her voice deep and resonant. A chuckle from behind the mare prompted her to look back. Another zebra mare appeared out of the ruins.

"Evora," the other mare said.

"Sylva," my host replied. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I feel that I've missed some vital missive."

"Evora, my student. I merely wished to see how you were," the other zebra replied. "You have been... distant as of late."

"I'm sorry, Sylva," my host said with a sigh, breaking the rhyming. "It's just... all of this. Since we came out of the Stable, things have been... difficult for me."

"I know what you mean," Sylva said. "But we must press on. There is much to learn from this world. There is still ancient magic here, if we look hard enough."

"I can feel that, Sylva. In fact, I can feel the magic in this place stirring. Something is happening, something big," my host said. "Sylva... if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone. I'll be back to camp before nightfall, I promise."

"As you wish," Sylva said. "Be careful, my dear." The other mare stepped back, disappearing into the ruins silently.

My host turned back and broke into a full gallop into the city. There was no pony in sight as she moved from street to street. Evora grinned widely as she stopped in front of the remains of a building I knew I had seen before. The Ministry of Arcane Sciences. My host silently stalked around the back of the imposing building, stopping in the vacant lot behind it. Her eyes flashed and she twirled about, striking outwards with a hoof. A metal flying star deflected off of her extended hoof, soaring away to clatter harmlessly on the concrete ground. My host grinned.

"You'll have to do better than that, I fear," she said. Another projectile flew from seemingly nowhere towards the zebra. Evora moved swiftly with grace and poise, dodging the star easily.

"You're getting better by the day," a voice called out from above her.

My host glanced upwards, seeing a dark blue alicorn standing on the Ministry building. *Pride*, I thought. *She keeps showing up... what does it mean? But she's different this time. She doesn't look the same... is this before she changed?*

"Hello, Diamond," my host called.

The alicorn smiled and stepped off the building, snapping her wings open to soar elegantly into a landing in front of the zebra. I noticed that the zebra was studying every movement the alicorn made with reverence and... a little bit of admiration. It was clear that these two were not only friends, but that my host held something special in her heart for the other mare.

"Well met, Evora. I trust no pony followed you?" she asked.

“No. I believe Sylva might have suspected something, but she did not follow,” my zebra host responded with a smile. “So what are we up to today?”

Diamond grinned widely. “Well. I've been thinking. Everything I've read so far has suggested that the statues are real,” she said. “I think they might even be here.” She motioned up at the looming Ministry building.

“This again? Diamond, I think you've been poking your nose too much into those books of yours,” my host said.

“I have not!” the alicorn snorted. “But you can't deny that these things are worth the search! Can't you imagine it, Evora? With such magic at our hooves, we could make this city better!”

“And what if they're not real? What then?” my host said.

Diamond sighed, looking away for a moment. I could tell she was trying to come up with some excuse, some reason to believe in what she was searching for.

“What if, Evora? What if they aren't real? Even if I never find the statues, I'll still be happy with the life I've lead searching for them,” the mare said, tears forming in her eyes.

My host placed her hoof on the alicorn's shoulder. “Diamond. I just... I care about you, you know that right?” my host said. Diamond nodded. “We've been good friends for a while now, and I don't want to see you push yourself deeper into this.”

“I know, I know... I just... I just want to help. I feel like ponies still mistrust the alicorns,” Diamond said.

“But you're not like that anymore. You haven't been for a long time,” the zebra said. “You're a good pony Diamond, and your heart's in the right place... even if your head isn't always there.” My host chuckled, drawing laughter from the alicorn mare.

“Yeah... I suppose you're right,” she said. “I guess... I guess we don't have to worry about the statues today. We could just scavenge like normal.”

“That sounds lovely. By the way, where are Cutter and Lilith?” my host asked.

“Oh, you know those two. They're off somewhere having a party of their own,” Diamond said, rolling their eyes. “Cutter said something about dinner at the Theater. I figured I shouldn't intrude on their fun.”

“Indeed.” my host chuckled as the two equines made their way in through the docking area of the Ministry hub.

The long-dead skeletons of ponies lay strewn about the shipping dock. A long hall extended deep into the abandoned building beyond. My host and the alicorn made their casual way down this hall, picking through the odd locker and trash bin on the way. Evora turned down a second hall, splitting off from her friend. The hallway was barren, ending in a large set of doors marked with a cutie mark that I knew all too well. My host pushed on the doors. Locked. She looked around for any sort of terminal that might control the door. Of course, there was nothing.

“Well, shit,” my host muttered to herself. Looking down at her hoof, she tapped a few buttons on the device strapped around her leg. “Diamond? I found a door I can't hack into. Think you could help?” Static

emanated from the radio device.

“Sure, I'll be right there.” the alicorn's voice came out of the radio.

My host slumped to her haunches while she waited. Soon enough, Diamond came trotting around the corner. Her eyes widened when she saw the door.

“It's... Twilight Sparkle's office,” she said. “The things that might be in this room... I can't even imagine...”

“Do you think you can get in?” my host said.

Diamond studied the door for a few moments. She closed her eyes, igniting her horn. The doors were bathed in the soft blue light of her magic. Grimacing, the alicorn focused harder, intent on ripping the doors from their hinges. The doors bent inward, the metal bowing to the extreme pressure that the mare was placing on them.

“Come on...” Diamond said, growling. Her slender horn flared brighter as the intensity of her magic increased. With a final burst of power, the doors blew completely in. The light from Diamond's horn died down.

“Wow. I'm impressed,” my host said as she trotted past Diamond into the doorway.

The office beyond was incredible. The plush velvet carpeting in the room gave the entire office a warm and cozy feeling to it. It appeared that nopony had ever opened the doors since the end of the war. Arcane instruments hung off of every wall, and a massive crystal globe sat at the far end of the room. Centered in the room was a wooden desk, emblazoned with the Ministry of Arcane Science's logo.

“I... I've never seen anything like it,” Diamond said, her eyes wide with wonder. “Can you believe our luck?”

“I know... I've never seen this door here before. But yet, here it was,” my host said as the two friends stepped into the office proper.

Diamond moved to the desk, sitting down at the terminal that was there. After a few moments of tapping, her eyes lit up.

“Evora...?” she said.

My host glanced over at the alicorn, who motioned for her to come over. Evora trotted to the other mare's side.

“What is it?” my host asked.

The alicorn put her hoof up to the terminal screen. “They're... they're... they're *real*. Everything I've been looking for... it's all here!” she exclaimed.

My host's eyes followed her friend's hoof, reading the text on the screen. Her eyes narrowed as she reached the section of text the alicorn had been reading.

“Interesting,” my host said. “I don't know, Diamond... are you sure this is it? This seems like it's too good to be true.”

“I'm sure of it,” the alicorn said with a snort. “In fact, it appears that Twilight kept up a journal of her studies on the statues. I'm going to copy it off here to my PipBuck. It could be useful.”

“Does it say where these things are?” Evora asked.

The alicorn stopped dead in her tracks. “Well... no, it doesn't,” she said dejectedly.

“Then how do you know they even exist anymore?” the zebra said. “How do you know they weren't destroyed when the bombs dropped?”

Diamond silently glared at my host as she began to tap some more at the terminal, copying the files off to her PipBuck. My host continued to poke around the room, looking for anything small that could be salvaged. At the far end of the room, below the crystalline globe, was a silver footlocker. It was adorned with an ornate padlock. The zebra ran her hoof over the lock, feeling the energy pouring from it as she did.

“Diamond?” my host called out. “I think I found something.”

The alicorn stood, looking back at where the zebra was hunched over. “What is it?” she said.

Evora motioned to the footlocker below her. “Some sort of strange lock... I think it's magical. Can you unlock it with the terminal?”

Diamond looked back down at the terminal, shaking her head.

“No... there's no access on here for that. I'll have to try it the old fashioned way,” the alicorn mare replied, trotting over to where my host was sitting. She inspected the lock closely. “It's definitely magical in nature. Usually these kinds of locks have a specific sequence of magic that you have to feed into it in order to open them.”

“Interesting... I wonder what the Ministry Mare wanted to hide so badly she stuck it in that kind of protection?” my host said.

“I don't know, but I intend to find out,” Diamond said, a determined look crossing her face.

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The roar of gunfire sounded from Stargazer as I gritted my teeth at the oncoming onslaught of ghouls. We were pinned down with nowhere to go. The elevator doors had refused to budge, and I was beginning to get pissed. I had no idea how much longer we could hold out. I growled loudly, flaring my horn in the only chance I could think of to give my friends any sort of time to keep working on the terminal.

“Everypony stay back!” I shouted, releasing the magic into Shining Armor's shield spell. The purple barrier appeared around us, and immediately the base of my horn began to sear with intense pain. I closed my eyes, trying to force the magic out through the pain.

“Star!” Violet called out. “Are you alright?!”

I panted hard for a moment as I tried to get a grip on myself, before finally opening my eyes. I had done it! The barrier stood perfectly, preventing any of the ghouls from getting through to us. I nodded.

“Yeah... I'm alright,” I said breathlessly. “I can't hold this spell for very long, though. See if you can help Nixis and Danish with the door.”

My love nodded, rushing back to where the cream colored unicorn and the hellhound were still working away at the door. Violet joined in, connecting her PipBuck to the terminal and frantically poking at it. I turned back to the ghouls, watching them pound furiously on my shield. My horn continued to flare in pain, and I gritted my teeth. I tried to breathe deeply, but I couldn't manage a single full breath between the stabs of pain from my aching horn.

A loud beeping behind me drew my attention away from the shield. Violet sprang into the air as the doors hissed, steam rolling out from between them “Star, I got it!” Violet called, bouncing like a schoolfilly. I grimaced as the doors revealed a dark elevator shaft, extending up and down beyond our current floor. Violet and the others must have realized this as well as they looked up the shaft hopelessly.

“Lust, see if you can start taking the others up the shaft. Try and get to the residential section. I'll hold the shield as long as I possibly can!” I yelled.

The black mare glared at me, but finally nodded. She turned to Patch first. “Come on, greenie. Let's go.” she said flatly.

The green mare latched her forelegs around the pegasus' neck. With a blast of her wings, Lust launched herself up the shaft, disappearing from sight. A sharp pain emanated from my horn again, and the shield began to flicker.

“Star!” Violet exclaimed.

I waved her off, pushing more magic into my horn. The shield began to reform, albeit a little smaller than it had been before. Several moments passed, the only noise the sucking and slobbering of the ghouls on the other side of the shield. The flutter of wings and clanging sound of a combat pegasus landing heralded Lust's return.

“It's like four floors up, but I found the residential section. It's deserted. Patch is setting up a perimeter in case that donkey fuck tries to strike while we're split up,” she said. I nodded in reply as the black mare moved to Danish and Nixis. “Alright, I can take Danish, but I'm not sure about you, Nixis. Do you think you can climb up if you follow me?”

“I should be able to manage,” the hellhound said with a nod.

Lust grinned, pointing back at Danish. “Alright then, hold on tight lover boy. Don't get too frisky with me, or I might have to punish you,” she said, winking and turning away from the stallion. She shook her rump to emphasize her point, grinning widely.

Danish rolled his eyes and wrapped his forelegs around her neck. Lust took off, Nixis following quickly behind as he leaped into the shaft, using his claws to dig deep into the metal walls. He began to ascend the shaft after the pegasus. Only Violet and Steeljack were left.

“Like old times, right?” I said jokingly as my horn sparked. I closed my eyes, feeling the pain intensify.

“Old times?” Violet quipped, before her eyes went wide with fear. “Oh no. No no no no.”

I grinned as I turned about, reaching out with my telekinesis. I let the shield fall, grinning with pleasure as the pain washed away into a warm glow. The ghouls immediately charged forward, rushing after my retreating form. A spike of pain came when I relit my horn, but I pushed through it. Violet and Steeljack both screamed as they flew into the shaft in the grip of my magic. I opened my wings and leapt in after them, powering upwards and carrying them with me as ghouls poured into the shaft. The ghouls howled and snarled as they streamed in through the open doors, falling down the open shaft. I kept flapping my wings hard, trying to catch sight of Lust and the others. A pale cream colored light flickered above me, indicating an exit. I rushed towards the light, landing inside another drab gray tunnel. Danish's horn dimmed as I deposited Violet and Steeljack onto the hard floor. I slumped to my haunches, every part of me burning as I held a hoof to my horn.

“Star!!” Violet called out, coming to my side. “What's wrong? Are you okay?”

I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. I had experienced magic burnout before, but never this badly. Ever since Spark had left my body, whenever I had used magic in such extremes the burnout had become much worse. Now, even when I wasn't using magic my horn pulsed with pain on every heartbeat.

“Hurts...” I choked out through the tears. “Horn... magic... hurts like a bitch. Just need... need a moment to collect myself.”

Violet nodded, placing her foreleg around my neck. It was just what I needed. Lust sitting down in front of me however... was not something I needed.

“Before we go any further... before I risk my ass for you any more... talk. No more lies,” the black mare said.

Violet glared at Lust, death in her eyes. “Can't you see she's in pain, Lust?” my marefriend said. “This is hardly the time.”

“No. It's the perfect time. I need to know,” Lust said. “I need to know if she knows anything that involves me.”

I looked up at Violet, and nodded silently. I lifted a hoof to my eyes, wiping the tears as best as I could. There was no way I was getting out of this without telling her. I decided it was time to own up to the truth.

“Okay... you want to know? Fine. Gluttony gave me a memory orb. In it, I saw Greed become... well, I saw him become Greed,” I said. “She gave him some statue, that transformed his body. I assume that she did the same to you.”

“That's... that's it?” the pegasus mare asked. I nodded in reply. She sighed, looking troubled. “So there was nothing about me?”

“No,” I lied. I knew in my heart that it was wrong, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her about what Greed was doing, and why. I couldn't tell her about Lilith. Not yet. A little pink pony in the back of my head told me that telling a secret was the fastest way to lose a friend... FOREVEEEER. The little orange pony argued with her, telling me that I should pony up and tell the truth. I sighed, deciding that the lie was easier to deal with. “No. It was just Greed and Pride. She had already become... become what she is now.” Lust looked away for a moment, and then let her gaze meet mine.

"Alright," she said after a few moments of silence, her eyes softening. "I just... I really needed to know."

"It's okay, Lust. I understand," I said, wincing in pain. "I know you're trying to do everything you can to remember... just don't force it, alright? You'll remember who you were, trust me." I stood shakily, Violet supporting me. I smiled down at her.

"I... I'll try, Star," Lust replied. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, I'll be alright," I said, steadying myself. I took a step forward, feeling a little more stable. "So... where are we?"

Danish and Nixis were standing guard further down the gray hall. The cream colored stallion looked back at us. He grimaced as Nixis finished his scouting.

"It looks like we're near the residential section of the Stable," the hellhound said quietly. "From what I can see in the next hall, we're going to pass through the living quarters."

"We should ideally make our way to the medical wing," I said as we began to walk. "In the memory orb that I saw Pride in, that was where she had led Greed. It should be on the other side of the main atrium, if I remember correctly."

Nixis pushed open the door at the end of the hall, revealing another set of gray halls ahead of us. *Somepony at Stable-Tec must have really liked the color gray*, I thought. Granted, there was spots here and there of color in this section of the Stable. Dark bluish doors that led to individual residential quarters lined the walls. Some of them were closed completely, while yet others were halfway open, revealing dirty and dingy rooms beyond their entrances. This area was seemingly devoid of life. I thought of the ghouls that Cranky had used against us down below in the maintenance section. Did he really animate the remains of the Stable ponies? How long ago had the Stable gotten to this point? I felt confused. Gluttony had said he was an original inhabitant of this Stable, so what happened that forced the Stable open? Was it possible that Gluttony was lying to me in order to get me here?

The long and confusing halls were of no help. Without E.F.S. or our automaps, we were flying blind. Every corner we traversed just seemed to result in more gray halls to walk down. I struggled as we walked to remember the path that Pride and Greed had taken while traversing the Stable, but to be honest I couldn't quite remember any of it. After what had felt like hours of walking, everything around us began to look very similar.

"Shit... are we walking around in a giant circle or something?" I said as we passed by another open residential room. Despite the darkness pervading the hallway and the fact that all of these rooms looked practically the same, this one felt... familiar.

"I don't know," Violet said, poking her head into the room. "Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?"

"I doubt it," Danish said quietly. "It's gotta be some sort of trick."

"Regardless, we've gotta keep going," I said. "I don't want to be caught by surprise again."

The next hall over looked exactly the same as the first. More gray walls, more half open doors. More twists, more turns. *How large is this place?! I thought.* After about the sixth time passing by what looked like

the same half-open door, I stopped and stomped my hooves like a little filly.

“Dammit!” I shouted. “What in the Sorrel Hells is going on here?!” I growled, slamming my forehoof into the wall. My eyes widened as the wall *shimmered* around my hoof. I dragged my hoof along the wall. The shimmer followed along. “Oh, fuck.”

“What is it?” Patch said as she bounced up to the wall, placing her hoof on it, prompting another round of colorful shimmering. “Ohh... it's a reactive surface. I may be wrong, but none of this is even real. It's a hologram!”

“Pride,” Lust said. “She's running us in circles, trying to slow us down.”

“Okay, so now that we know what it is... how do we get out?” I asked, looking over at Patch.

The green mare grinned widely. “Oh that's easy. I just need to overload the converters in the walls with a focused pulse of electrical energy,” she said.

My eyes glazed over at the technical explanation. A technical pony I was not.

“Could you maybe... you know... speak plain Equestrian?” I said.

Lust snickered. Patch rolled her eye at me. It was a strange sight to see a one-eyed mare rolling her singular eye. I almost burst into laughter myself.

“Fine...” Patch said, groaning. “I'm gonna blow it up.”

I blinked as the earth pony reached into her saddlebags, pulling out a small apple-shaped device. It had a blue ring around its center.

“Erm... isn't that an E.M.P. grenade?” Danish said, his voice shaky.

“Yep. This'll only take a second,” Patch said, feeling about on the wall until her hoof hit something protruding from it. Grinning, she pressed the device up against the protrusion. Yanking the stem from the grenade, she turned and yelled. “Alright, everypony! Run!”

I turned tail and started booking it down the hall. Violet ran next to me, her eyes wide with fear. We made it just around the corner when the grenade blew. A tingling sensation wriggled its way through my entire body and I stopped cold. Everywhere around us, the walls began to shimmer. One by one, every wall disappeared in a spectacular blaze of light. The walls finally failed, revealing that we were in a large open hall with two large doors on either end of it. The others were standing a few feet from Violet and me, looking just as confused as I was.

“Well... that was certainly... different,” I said as I shook off the tingling feeling. “Just what was that?”

“Holo-reactor,” Patch said casually. “We had one in my Stable too. We used it for relaxation. It was supposed to help keep us from losing our minds being stuck underground.”

“So... wait... this was all just some big recreational facility?” Violet asked.

“Obviously... Pride modified the programming for her own use,” the earth mare replied smugly. “But no

matter how you wire it... I can fix it!"

"Well, shall we move on then?" Nixis interjected. "Pride's going to figure out soon that we're past here."

"If she hasn't already," Lust said as we made our way towards the doors at the far end.

Like most of the doors that we had found so far, they weren't locked. The locks had probably been disabled when the Stable had failed. On the other side of the large doors lay the Stable's Atrium. The large open-ended lounge area was where the Stable's inhabitants would relax and mingle on off-times. Chairs and tables lay strewn about. In the center of the Atrium was a massive fountain that was long-dry. The fountain had a large alicorn statue in the center of it.

"Wow... I'm impressed," Danish said. "This must have been one of the larger Stables in the city."

"It... it was..." Lust said. "I can remember that much... at least."

"You know... something has been bugging me about this place," I said. "All those ghouls that attacked us earlier... they were wearing Stable jumpsuits. And granted, this place could be big enough for that many ponies... but that many died here? How many escaped?"

"I... don't know offhand, Star. I can only remember snippets of this place," Lust said with a sigh.

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance, kid," a gravelly voice said. From behind the fountain stepped Cranky. The donkey ghouled had a grin on his rotting face.

"Cranky. I was wondering when you would show back up," I said.

A dry chuckle escaped from the ghoul's throat. "I see you made it past my ghouls," he said. "Of course... I've been watching you since you escaped. Your little friend there, the green one. She's smart. We're going to have to remedy that."

"I'd like to see you try it, buster," Patch said, glaring at the donkey.

"What do you want now, Cranky?" I broke into the conversation angrily. I was beginning to get really sick of these interruptions. "You ready to end this yet?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll be ending this soon, but not now. I'm more interested in seeing how far you're willing to go in order to get to Pride," Sloth said. His eyes narrowed at me.

"Aren't you afraid she'll take some action against you if you're supposed to be stopping us?" Violet said, cocking her head.

"Pride can't be everywhere at once. Unfortunately, she's a little preoccupied at the moment," he said, glancing over at Lust. "So you want to know more about this place?"

"What do you know?" the pegasus said. "What does it have to do with me?"

"I know more than you could possibly imagine, pegasus. I've lived a long time, seen a lot of bad things in that time. When you're a ghoul, nopony wants anything to do with you. Anyhow, that doesn't have much to do with you, I know," the ghoul said wistfully. "I met a pony a while ago. She was fresh out of the Goddess,

and had just started calling herself Diamond. We nearly killed each other, but both of us are fairly resilient creatures.”

“Pride,” I said coldly.

The ghoul nodded. “Yes, before she became the Pride you know today. When that Goddess-thing died, her memories all came flooding back... at least what she thought was her memories,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I said, cocking my head in confusion.

“I mean that her memories were not her own. They belonged to somepony else. Diamond didn't know what to do. She fled, trying to understand what was happening to her,” he said. “She came here to this city, and I followed her. I didn't know what I was doing, but she needed help. It was here that she met you, and the others. Her memories drew her to Stable 180, where she found the Stable already opened, its inhabitants having moved into the city. She made her home here, making friends and trying to fight the good fight.”

“But... then... what happened to her?” I said, trying to process it in my head. Pride had been good once? I almost couldn't believe it. She had somehow ended up with somepony else's memories when the Goddess had died. I knew how that felt, personally. Having had Twilight's memories stuck in my head for so long, I was well aware of what it was like to have to live somepony else's life. Sloth chuckled at my question.

“That's all I'm going to tell you... for now,” the donkey said. “Now then. That should be enough time.”

“Enough time for what?” Steeljack echoed. The stallion had been silent until now. Something Cranky had said had piqued his interest.

“Enough time for the automated defenses to start back up. The Protectaponies should be arriving shortly,” Sloth said casually. “Get ready, Radiant Star. It's time to keep up the fight.”

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The Earth Pony Orb

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As the memory filtered in, I immediately took stock of my host. I was a male earth pony, strongly built and very physically imposing. My host was also wearing a pinstriped suit and a fedora. A sharp, almost predatory grin was on his face as he trotted along the metal catwalk. I realized with a sudden familiarity that we were in the MMMM headquarters. The bakery below looked almost just as I remembered it. My host descended the metal stairs, stopping to nod at a few of the donut bakers as he passed them by. He continued forward, pushing open the door that led out of the massive bakery. The sky was thick with clouds, the thin grey light beginning to filter away. A cream-colored unicorn colt stood at attention just outside the door as my host regarded him. Peering closer at the colt, my host grinned again.

“Oy! Danish, what the fuck are ye doing out here at this time of night?” my host said. From behind the mask of my host's mind, I blinked. Danish looked so young! I didn't know that the stallion had grown up with his boss. *No wonder the two were so close*, I thought.

“I... I thought maybe you might show me some more of those cool moves,” the colt replied, falling over his words as he spoke. “Please, Grenadine?”

“Sure thing kid, but not tonight. I got business to attend to,” my host replied. “Why don't you go run off and see if your buddy Blueberry's busy, aight?”

The colt looked a little downtrodden at this.

My host chuckled. “Look, I promise. We'll hang out tomorrow. Just got stuff to do tonight.”

“Alright,” Danish said, hanging his head low. He trotted past my host towards the door.

“Hey kid?” my host called to him. The unicorn colt looked back at the earth pony. “Be cool, alright? Smile a little. Everypony's got something to smile about.”

“O-O-Okay,” the colt replied, stuttering. He cracked a little grin as he pulled the door to the bakery open. “Be careful, boss.”

“Sure thing,” my host said, turning back to the ruined streets of the city. He trotted along at a brisk pace, coming across the bustling settlement set off of the Chicacolt Theater. The outside of the theater itself was all lit up, the neon bathing the streets in soft light. My host nodded at the two guards as he entered. The marketplace was bustling as ponies flitted to and fro. At the far end of the theater lobby was the bar that I had met Lucky in. I recognized it immediately as my host made his way through the throng of ponies towards it. My host's eyes narrowed as he let his gaze fall on two ponies sitting at a table in the back of the bar. A white unicorn stallion that I recognized as Cutter, and a black pegasus mare that could only be Lilith were chatting idly amongst themselves. They appeared to be giggling and smiling at each other.

“Oy, you two. Get a room, wouldja?” my host said as he stepped up to the table.

It was at this moment that I got a really good look at Lilith. The mare was actually rather lovely. Gone from her wings were the metal that I had gotten used to seeing all the time. Her mane was well groomed, rather than the tattered and curly mane she wore as Lust.

“Oh come on, Grenadine. We're just having a good time,” she said.

Cutter sneered at my host. “Yeah, man. Sit down and join us. We're celebratin'!” he crowed.

My host grinned and pulled out the chair across from the two ponies. He flagged down the waitress, who brought the table another round of drinks.

“So what's the occasion?” my host said, taking a long draw on his drink.

“It's our one-year,” Lilith said. “Cutter and I. We've been together for a year today. It seems like only yesterday.”

“Ah. Congratulations, you two,” my host said. “I would have figured Diamond and Evora would have been here too, given the happy occasion.”

“They went off again on another one of Diamond's scavenger hunts,” Lilith said, rolling her eyes. “I swear, those two. Diamond's got her head buried in the past, and Evora's got hers buried in Diamond's plot.”

“Diamond still doesn't get it, does she?” my host said.

"Nah. She's too busy with that statue business she keeps going on about," Cutter said. He took a drink from his glass.

"She's still on about that?" my host said. Both Cutter and Lilith nodded in response.

"All she talks about," the unicorn said. "She keeps thinking that it's going to help her save this city or something."

My host nodded silently, taking another drink. His ears perked up as the din of the crowd got a little louder. He turned, seeing a group of ponies at the bar arguing with the bartender. Their clothing marked them as raiders, their eyes were wild with anger.

"Come on, give us your fucking booze, you stupid fuck," the leader, a blue unicorn with a green tinged mohawk of a mane, said.

The bartender snarled back. "And I said no, you fucking jackass. You're drunk and disorderly, and cut off. I'm trying to run a business here!"

My host nodded at Cutter. The two friends stood. Lilith's eyes went wide with fear.

"Oh... no sweetheart. Please don't," she said.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry," Cutter said, floating out a small pistol in his magic. He nodded at my host once more as the two made their way to the bar.

My host stepped up and tapped the lead raider on the shoulder blade. He turned, growling.

"What the fuck do you want?" he said.

"Oh, I dunno. How 'bout you leave poor Horace here alone?" my host's voice said casually.

The raider's eyes widened, and he snarled again at my host. "Fuck off, before I put you under the ground," he said. "You do not want to fuck with us, prick."

"Horace, might be time for you to duck, iff'n you get my meaning," my host said with a shrug.

The bartender tossed a quick salute and dove underneath the bar. The lead raider whipped a small shotgun out on a flare of blue magic, aiming it at my host. As the weapon came to bear, my host dropped under its murderous eye and lashed out with his forehooves. The quick strike took the raider in the throat, leaving the shotgun to fall unattended as he crumpled to the ground.

Seeing their boss on the floor gasping and clutching his neck, the other three raiders yelled in rage and drew their own weapons.

"Hey," a voice said casually from behind the four. Cutter had moved behind the group, his compact pistol bobbing along in his magic. A wicked grin split his face. "You guys better run."

The unicorn dropped his aim and pumped two quick rounds into the ground. The surprisingly loud bark of the pistol startled the already unnerved raiders, who then jumped back in disarray. My host was there to meet

them, weaving in and out of the raiders in a silent and brutal dance. One by one, the raiders fell to the ground next to their leader in a big ponypile. My host and Cutter stood over the four ponies, grinning.

“If we ever see your faces around here again, we'll do more than just put you on your asses,” my host said. “This here's MMMM territory, and you just got whooped by one of its chief enforcers.”

The lead raider snarled, but glared at his companions. He nodded, getting up from where he had been laying. The four raiders trotted out of the bar, giving dirty looks to anypony who stared at them. The bartender, Horace, popped his head out from underneath the counter.

“Thanks, guys. Those fuckers were getting rowdy, couldn't understand what cut off meant.” he said.

“Well, they shouldn't bother you anymore,” Cutter said as Lilith joined us.

She smiled brightly at her lover. My host grinned as he tipped his hat towards the bartender as the three friends trotted out of the bar. The memory began to fade to black as they exited the theater...

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“Shit shit shit!” I shouted as I dodged another blast of laser fire. The security drone that had fired on me exploded in a shower of sparks, thanks to a carefully placed shot from Danish's carbine rifle. I spun about, floating Stargazer out. I fired, tearing another two robots to pieces. Lust flew overhead, diving in occasionally to take out a drone or two before pulling back up to draw their fire. Steeljack and Patch worked back to back as they always did, firing in tandem at the approaching enemies. Nixis lurked around the walls, bouncing from drone to drone, slicing with his vicious claws. Violet moved next to me, laying down a thick stream of fire from Thunder Flash.

The Stable Atrium had become a war zone, thanks to Cranky. His little talk with us had been nothing more than a ruse to get us to stand still long enough for the Stable's automated defenses to come online. The donkey ghouls had disappeared once the first of the security drones filtered into the Atrium. I growled as another robot appeared before me, raising its metal hoof and spraying hot red death. I threw up a quick shield, deflecting the beam back at the robot before turning and laying down a stream of gunfire at a large group at the rear of the Atrium.

“Nixis!” I shouted.

The hellhound glanced up at me, a drone head in his claws. “Yes?!” he called back.

“We need an exit! See if you can find us a way out of here!” I exclaimed.

Nixis nodded, tossing the robotic head into another robot, knocking it to the ground. The hellhound bounded across the Atrium, slashing his way to the far end where the doors were. My horn still felt like it was on fire, but having no other choice but to grin and bear it, I lifted Stargazer again and took out another two robots who had come up behind me. Violet stepped up next to me, a grim look on her face as Thunder Flash incinerated a third drone that had approached while I was busy taking care of the other two.

“Thanks,” I said, a true smile showing through my pain.

Violet smiled back as she took aim at one of the drones heading towards Nixis. She pulled the trigger, the silvery fire soaring through the air as it sliced through the drone's body. The hellhound appeared to be busy

with the door, trying to slice his way through the solid metal.

I turned back to Violet. "Alright, let's clean house while Nixis is busy getting us a way out of this damn Atrium."

My marefriend nodded and we entered the fray once more, tearing the security drones apart as we rejoined the others. At the very least the robots in the area were beginning to thin out. I couldn't fathom how many of the damn things existed in a Stable as large as this one was. Steeljack and Patch were like one pony, covering each other with well timed fire from their respective weapons. I smiled. The two lovers were the ultimate tag team, their fighting styles meshing as well as... Nevermind. I felt a blush on my face as I saw Danish swing out from behind the two, providing covering fire with his carbine. The stallion grinned broadly when he saw Violet and me.

"Darlin', just havin' ourselves a little robot demolition derby!" he called out.

I couldn't help but giggle. Even with the searing pain still building at the base of my horn, this seemed a little too easy to me. The robots were annoying, yes, but they were far from life threatening. Was Cranky trying to passively help us by just slowing us down? What was his angle in all of this? I couldn't tell. There had to be a reason he kept showing up and just... talking to us! I briefly considered that maybe Cranky was trying to assist us without Pride knowing. Lust dove down from above, giving me a firm smile as she sliced open another drone. The mare had resisted using her missile launcher, even in this open room, for fear that the explosions caused by her choice of ammunition might hurt one of us. Against these surprisingly weak foes, her wingblades let her carve a swath of ruin through the bots.

As we cleared out the last of the drones, I slumped to my haunches, panting. I was tired, and this constant running and fighting and overuse of magic was beginning to get to me. I needed to sit for a moment. I looked down at the far end of the Atrium, where Nixis was working on the door still. The hellhound had managed to carve and pry open the doors just wide enough for us to fit through. I made my painful way to my hooves, and smiled at Nixis as I joined the others.

"Good job," I said.

The hellhound merely bowed as we followed the rest of the group into the next hall.

"Thank you," he replied. "But... if I may ask... are you feeling alright? You do not look so good."

"I'm... I'm alright," I said, waving a hoof. "Just... just a little exhausted from all this running and fighting."

"I know what you mean. It seems like things have been going non stop since we arrived in this place," he said. "We must press forward, though."

"Right, I know... you know, Nixis... I've been doing some thinking..." I started to say. "About what Cranky said... about Pride. About how she was trying to do some good in this place."

"Pay no heed to the donkey's lies, Star. This... Pride who we have sought, she who twisted the hearts of so many... do you really believe that she was once a good soul?" he said.

I looked at him and sighed. "I... I wish I knew what to think. It's just like with Spark. She did all these really bad things, but she was once good. I... I don't know what to do," I said quietly.

The hall we were walking down now was just as drab and gray as the rest of the forsaken place. A cursory review of where we had been and where we were heading, and it was determined that we were at least moving in the right direction. A sign had been spotted, pointing us to where the Medical wing was located. Without an automap function, our location remained sketchy and uncertain. As we stalked the hallways, my mind began to wander. I thought about Pride and Spark. Pride had said she had the spirit of Magic under wraps, but I couldn't believe it. I was sure that Spark was here somewhere, just waiting to strike. I sighed. Why couldn't I just choose? Why was I so sure that Spark wasn't redeemable, that she was so evil that she had to be destroyed?

While my mind played thoughts of my inevitable confrontation with the Element of Magic, I noticed that we had passed into a much cleaner portion of the Stable's hallways. By cleaner, I mean that the walls at least were a shinier gray. At the far end of the long hall was a larger sign that stated **MEDICAL**.

"Any of this look familiar, Star?" Violet said. I blinked. My mind had still been reeling with the thoughts of Spark, and I didn't exactly catch what my marefriend had said.

"Come again?" I asked.

"I asked if any of this looked familiar," she said, rolling her eyes.

I looked around the hall as we pushed through the door. "A... a little. I mean, this whole place looks the same, it's kind of hard to tell," I said.

Behind the door was a large open lobby, which appeared to be some sort of waiting room. The infirmary lay just behind a large window at the other end of the room. That wasn't all that was in the room, however. Two large security drones stood guard in front of the infirmary's doors. The instant we were in visual range, the drones began to fire their lasers.

"Shit!" I shouted as we ducked behind some nearby overturned furniture. The laser fire soared over our heads and struck the metal walls, leaving behind scorch marks. I floated out Stargazer, firing a stream of bullets at the drones. My gunfire struck something seemingly intangible, dissipating around the robot's shells.

"Oh, fuck. They've got shield generators!" Patch called out from the next group of furniture over from us. "We've got to figure out a way to disable them somehow. Otherwise, we're just sitting ducks!"

"How about I just blow through them?" Lust said, grinning. She stood, hopping up into the air as her wings gave her some lift. The Bitch rotated and slid out of its mounting, its rising whine sounding almost eager to fire.

"Wait, Lust! Don't...!" Patch started to shout, but Lust wasn't listening.

The Bitch let loose, sending its payload screaming across the lobby. If there wasn't a strong chance of fiery explosive death or this simply not working, it would have been a glorious thing to witness. The missile spiraled elegantly, demure little fins popping out to guide it in its flight. It nestled into the gap between the shields of the two drones almost lovingly, then exploded. The explosion in that confined space was thunder come to earth, reflecting the fury of its mistress. Smoke boiled through the lobby.

"See? Easy-peasy lemon breezy," Lust crowed. She looked down at us, grinning widely as a beam of laser fire that originated in the smoke struck her in the shoulder. She grimaced as she was pushed to the ground,

her power armor protecting her from the most of the damage. The smoke began to clear, revealing that the two... 'super' drones hadn't even been scratched by Lust's attack. They began to move forward, raising their blasters and firing.

"Patch! How do we get past their shields?!" I called from behind my cover. A laser blast struck the sofa we were hiding behind, melting a portion of it into red goop. I stood hastily, scrambling to move over near my friends. Stargazer floated behind me, spraying bullets at the robots as I ran.

Patch either hadn't heard me, or she had and had come up with a plan. She was hunched over her tools, poking through them frantically. She had a panicked look on her face, her ears pinned back.

"I can't find it!" she yelled. "I swore I had another E.M.P. Grenade! Ohh where is it?!" She shook her saddlebags violently, rifling through them and pouring out their contents amidst the chaos of laser fire soaring over our heads. A shiny blue apple bounced away from her as it fell out of the side of one of the bags. Her eyes widened as she reached forward, grabbing it in her hoof. She tossed it over, allowing me to catch the grenade in my magic. "There! Give those fucks a swift hoof in the ass with this thing!"

I nodded, lifting the grenade and pulling the pin. I levitated the small silvery item across our makeshift barricade, flicking it straight at the two super drones. The grenade struck the shield with a ***thunk***, hitting the ground between the two robots. A bluish light pulsed from it as its electrical field shot forth. The shield crackled with energy as it tried to prevent the grenade from damaging it.

The drones shook for a few moments. The laser fire had stopped, and the shield continued to light up in a blaze of electrical glory. I narrowed my gaze as the two robots finally exploded, showering the entire lobby with sparking parts of hot metal. I stood, grinning as I latched Stargazer onto its harness. I looked over at Lust, who was still sitting on the floor. I walked over, handing out my hoof.

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

She nodded, taking my hoof and pulling herself up. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little bruised," she said. There was a scorch mark on her armor where she had been struck, but otherwise she appeared to be alright. "Thanks."

"Not a problem," I said, looking back at the sparking remains of the two drones. Beyond them was a set of large doors that led into the infirmary. "Now, let's see what was so important that they had to guard this room."

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The Pegasus Orb

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My eyes opened, but I could not see. It was dark wherever my host was. She tried to move, but felt... restrained somehow. I recognized this body from other memory orbs, and I didn't like it. Seeing this would mean more things I had to keep from my friend, more lies. Lilith tried to move again, feeling the restraints around her body tighten. Her wings tried to open, but they too were bound to her. Wherever she was... she was not going anywhere.

"Hello?" she called out to the dark room. No pony answered. "Can anyone hear me? I need... I need

somepony, please? Help!” Her cries began to escalate in volume, fear shaking her wings and hooves as she realized that she was alone. “Please, somepony help!” Lilith struggled, managing to somehow reorient herself so that she could see the rest of the room. The room was dirty and dingy, appearing to be some sort of bedroom. My host was stuffed in the corner. She was tied down with a strong rope, binding both her legs and wings. The bed in the center of the room was broken down, its legs on one side completely gone. The mattress was soiled and wet. In the other corner near the door was an old rocking chair.

“Please... somepony help me!” my host called out again. She tried again to move her legs, but that proved to be worthless. Craning her neck, the pegasus snapped at her bonds with her teeth, hoping to break them. Unfortunately, she was unable to even reach them. The mare sighed as she hung her head. She was trapped, and there was nopony who was going to save her. Thoughts charged through my host's mind like a freight train. She was never going to see her friends again. She was never going to see Cutter again.

Cutter. He had to have known she was here, right? I mean, there was no way he would just abandon her here. I realized however... that he did know. That was why he was off, trying to decide whether to slaughter an entire village for the mare that he loved. Lilith's voice grew hoarse as she continued to cry out for help. After what felt like an eternity, her cries stopped entirely. She couldn't think of anything else to say. A shuffling noise sounded from the other side of the door. The door suddenly opened, letting in a stream of light across the dark room. My host's eyes widened as a pony stepped inside. It was one of the raiders from the bar. In fact, it was the lead raider. A wicked grin covered his face.

“Well, you're a bit of a screamer, aren't you?” he said.

My host's eyes narrowed at him. “Who... who are you?” she said quietly.

The raider snorted and stepped up to the pegasus mare. He lazily flicked a hoof out, striking my host in the face. A sense of warmth dribbled down the side of the mare's cheek.

“Shut up,” he said. “You don't get to talk.” My host went quiet, her face stinging with pain. “Better. Need to save that energy in case that buckfriend of yours doesn't pull through on his end of the deal.” The raider turned away for a second, grinning.

“What did you do to Cutter?” my host said.

The raider growled, spinning about and kicking the mare in the side, forcing her silence again.

“You don't listen too well, do you? That fucking son of a bitch, he thought he could just humiliate us? Well now look at him. He's gonna do a little work for us,” the raider said. “And if he does a good job, we'll let you go. But if he doesn't...”

A soft chuckle emanated from the raider's mouth. He ran his hoof over my host's cheek. The mare snarled, trying to move away. The raider grabbed her, forcing her face to the floor.

“Don't even think about it. You're going to lie here like a good little filly. Now then, I'm gonna go get things ready for your fuckbuddy,” he said, turning and leaving the room. The door slammed, bathing the bedroom in darkness once more. My host shifted herself so that she wasn't lying on the side where the raider had kicked her. Pain shot through every part of her body. A shine in the room drew her attention. A mirror was lying on its side against the side of the wall. My host shuffled herself over to the mirror, seeing her reflection within. She was dirty, and a little blood oozed from a cut where the raider had struck her. She sighed.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... please... Why... I just... I just want to see him again... please..." the mare pleaded with the mirror. Tears formed in her eyes as she laid her head on the floor. Sleep overtook the mare, giving her a brief reprieve from the events that she had just experienced.

A hard kick in the side woke the mare from her slumber, forcing a gasp from her throat.

"Get up." a harsh voice from above said.

Lilith coughed, trying to breathe. Her eyes drifted upwards, seeing the raider from before standing there. His eyes spoke of death.

"It's been a day, and your friend hasn't returned yet. Looks like he's reneged on his part of the bargain after all."

"What...?" Lilith said quietly. "Cutter..."

"There, there..." the raider said, grinning widely as he patted the mare on the head. "I'll make you feel all better... and then I'll gut you like a fucking fish." His horn flared, enveloping the mare in the soft glow of his magic.

My host struggled against his hold, but was unable to do anything as he lifted her. He set her on the dirty bed, stepping forward to run his hoof along the trembling mare's side.

"Oh... you're scared. You were such a screamer when you woke up... let's see if you we can make you scream some more."

"Get off... please... please stop!" my host shouted as the raider stallion pressed himself against her, nearly crushing her with his weight.

"Oh yes... keep screaming little one. No pony's coming to save you," he said as he reached down with his muzzle, extending his tongue to run it along the mare's cheek.

My host whimpered beneath him. I almost wished that I could have ended the memory right then and there. I did not want to see this... thing defile my friend. But the memory continued, ignoring my pleas to stop. Lilith screamed as the stallion pressed her down into the soiled mattress. She almost didn't hear the gunshot echo from beyond the doorway. The raider, however, did hear it. The pressure being applied to my host was instantly removed, the stallion climbing away from the bed and back onto his legs.

"What the fuck was that?" the raider said, moving towards the door. Before he could get there, the wooden door slammed open hard enough to rip it off its hinges. Standing in the hall was a white unicorn stallion with a black mane. An evil look of glee was written all over his face. The raider's eyes widened. "You... you fuck! What the fuck are you doing here, huh? We had a deal!"

"Deal's off, jackass," the other unicorn said with a snarl. His eyes gleamed in the darkness.

The raider stallion floated out a pistol, pointing it at the white unicorn. My host struggled as she watched the white unicorn step into the light, revealing it to be Cutter. The raider fired, the bullet striking him directly in the face. Cutter fell backwards, hitting the ground with a ***thud***.

"Cutter!" my host shouted, tears forming in her eyes.

"That's right, you stupid fuck! Thought you got the drop on us, didja?" he shouted, looking over at my host. An evil grin appeared on his face as he turned. "Now... where were we?"

"We were at the part where you die," a voice from behind the raider said.

The stallion spun around only to receive a rock-solid hoof to the face, sending him spiraling to the floor. My host looked up, seeing Cutter standing there. No bullet hole graced his face. He wasn't even bleeding. Cutter snarled, launching himself at the other stallion.

"Fuck!" the raider shouted as he tried to bring up his pistol again. Cutter swatted the firearm out of the air, knocking it to the ground as he pinned down the raider. His hoof came down, striking the other stallion in the head. It came down again and again, until the raider was silent. Blood stained Cutter's hooves as it poured from the body of the dead raider. My host whimpered as her lover sat there, panting hard.

"C-C-C-Cutter?" she finally said.

The unicorn turned, regarding my host. A sharp grin appeared on his face.

"Hey sweetheart," he said. My blood ran cold as I stared into the face of Greed. "It's gonna be alright. I'm here, now."

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"Where are they?" I said to myself, opening cabinet after cabinet. The medical bay was just as I had remembered in Greed's memory orb, but after several minutes of searching, we had found nothing. No statues, nothing of any importance whatsoever. I was beginning to get very frustrated. Granted, there were no more drones around, which I found sort of strange. It was almost as if Pride didn't care that we were here. And despite what Cranky said, I felt that he wasn't exactly putting his all into trying to kill us. What was his angle? He was pushing us somewhere... was it here in this Medical Bay? What was he trying to show us? My mind swam with all of these thoughts as I rifled through another set of cabinets. Behind me, the others were going through the rest of the cabinets in the Infirmary.

"Anypony find anything of use?" Violet said as she opened another empty cabinet.

"Nothing here," Steeljack called from the opposite side of the room.

"Same," Lust said. "Whole place has been picked clean. No medical supplies at all, not even bandages."

"Great," Violet said. "Star, there's nothing here. What are we looking for?"

"This is the same place that Pride brought Greed to when she converted him. The statues were *here*," I said angrily, slamming my hoof against a nearby cabinet.

Violet trotted up to me, placing her hoof on my shoulder. "Were, sweetie, were. That memory had to have been long enough ago that Pride would have moved them by now," she said softly.

I hung my head, nodding. "I know, I know... But then... why are we here? Where the hell is Pride? I don't get it. I thought she would have been on our tails already," I said. "This all seems too... too easy, Violet."

"I agree," Lust said. "Pride's never been one to hesitate. Something isn't adding up here."

Violet sighed, propping herself up against one of the walls. A soft hissing noise was heard from behind her as she nearly fell over. The wall behind her had slid silently and swiftly slid sideways, revealing a hidden entrance.

"What the...?" she said as she righted herself.

"There's another room," I said quietly. "Of course... there would have to be..." I stepped up to the entrance, nuzzling Violet as I stepped past her. The room beyond was small and simple. At the far end the wall was covered with medical equipment and computers, all of them blinking and beeping with each other. It was all very impressive, but it was nothing compared to the sole occupant of the room.

"Umm... holy shit... Star... is that...?" Violet said from my side.

I could barely respond, my mouth hanging open. In the center of the room was a large tube-like structure. It was clear, and its mechanisms appeared to be hooked up to the computer equipment on the wall. Suspended in the center of the tube was the body of an equine. It wasn't a pony. It was... a donkey.

"Matilda..." I uttered. "It's... it's Matilda."

"Umm, question here for those of us who aren't in the know... but who the hell's Matilda?" Danish chimed in.

"My love..." a gravelly voice said from the corner of the room. My eyes darted over to the shadows, seeing the red smoldering orbs that belonged to Cranky. Somehow this room was large enough to contain the donkey and his cart. "I've been alive a long time, kid. She was my one and only."

"Cranky," I said. "Matilda is right here. We can help you..."

"I've done told you kid, you're not going to be able to help me. Pride has her sealed up good in there. You can certainly try, but it's not going to do any good," he said with a sigh.

I glared at him as I stepped into the room towards the tube. The others filtered into the small room behind me, keeping their eyes trained on the ghoul. Lust looked away from Cranky. I could only imagine what was going on inside her head about all of this.

"No funny business," I said, keeping my eyes on the ghoul.

"Sure thing, kid. Knock yourself out," Cranky replied.

I stopped next to the tube and peered in at Matilda. The female donkey looked old, almost as if she had been perfectly preserved since the day the bombs had fallen. I looked down at the equipment attached to the device, focusing on the terminal with my magic. As soon as the arcane energies touched the device, a screaming pain shot through my forehead, forcing me back and to the ground in front of the tube. I put my hoof up to my horn. It was on fire.

"What the...?" I hissed through the pain.

“Told you, kid. Pride's got a psychic lock set up on her stasis machine. Only she's allowed into it,” Cranky said, a twinge of sadness in his voice.

I rubbed my head where my horn was. It still felt like it was burning up. Maybe something with the magic inside the lock?

“Why didn't you say something?” Violet said as she rushed up to me.

Cranky's rotting face turned into a semblance of a grin, some of his flesh dripping to the cold metal floor with a sickening ***plop***. “Would that have stopped her? Doubtful. She doesn't know when to take a hint,” he said. “It's her own fault she wanted to try so badly.”

“He's right. I can't break through this kind of lock. Not without Pride,” I said, looking at the others and then back to Cranky. “So what now? You try to kill us? You've had all sorts of perfect opportunities here, Cranky. But you haven't taken them. Why? What are you playing at?”

“Kid. It's been so long since I held my Matilda,” Cranky paused, heaving a deep sigh. When he resumed speaking, his voice was intense, harder than I had ever heard him. “If there's even a remote chance that I can get her back, I'll take it in a heartbeat. I miss her so much...” Cranky trailed off. I kept looking between the ghoul and the stasis tube. “Anyway, kid... If you can survive the Stable, I'll help you deal with Pride. You should head over to the Armory. There's something there that you will need to see for yourself. It's... *They* are important for when you face Pride.”

“You sound as if you think we're going to beat your little games,” I said angrily.

“That depends on you, kid. That depends on you,” he said as the wall behind him opened up.

Another entrance? I thought as the donkey sank back into the wall, disappearing from sight. The wall reappeared, leaving us alone with the stasis tube. I looked back down at the female donkey inside.

“I'm... I'm so sorry, Matilda,” I said softly. “I wish that things had turned out differently for him.” A hoof grasped my shoulder. I looked down to see Violet, tears forming in her soft green eyes.

“We'll find a way to get her out of here, Star. I just know we will,” she said.

I nodded, turning to the others. “I know that we're here to find Pride, but all of this... running will only wear us out in the long run. We need to rest, if only briefly. This infirmary appears to be a solid defense in case any drones do decide to come and attack us,” I said.

“We'll be ready for them if they do come,” Steeljack said in agreement.

Danish and Nixis nodded as well. Lust, however, appeared to be unnerved. While the others began to set up a defensible camp, I moved over to the mare, smiling.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“I keep getting flashes...” she said, shaking her head. “There's this... this stallion. I don't recognize his face or his voice, but he's telling me how much he loves me.” She looked away from me again. “I... I don't know who I was, Star. I don't know why, but I wish I did.”

"I know... it's hard, not knowing who you really are," I said. It was true for me, of course. I had spent so long with Spark and Twilight's memories inside my skull, that at some point I had begun to lose who I was. My own memories from before all of this were sketchy at best now. I found that Twilight's memories would inevitably float to the forefront of my mind, no matter what I did. "But you have to keep moving forward, Lust. You have to believe in yourself."

"I... I know, but I just wish I could remember. I'm tired of not having my memories," Lust said.

"Lust... you will remember. But you need to do it gradually, like I keep telling you. If you remember too much at once, it could be very bad. And Pride might use that to force you to do something you might not want to do," I said. "Just... please trust me?"

"Thanks... I'll try my best," she said, turning to go join the others.

I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to tell her, to speak the words. *I killed your lover*; I thought to myself. I couldn't do it. I truly didn't know how she would react. Would Pride use her anger over Greed's death to force Lust into attacking us? I knew that the alicorn wouldn't let something so sweet pass through her hooves that easily. She would readily exploit it, especially if she could get Lust to attempt to kill Cranky at the same time. A precarious game was being played here, it seemed. One that could end up in pain for all involved. I just wondered... who would get the most of it? Lust? Me? I turned to Violet and sat next to her, opting to stay in the room with Matilda. It was... creepy to say the least, but I felt that the old donkey mare needed some company. After all, it would give me some opportunity to try and study the psychic lock that Pride had placed on her stasis chamber.

As Violet rested next to me, I peered out at my other friends. No pony was actually sleeping. We were all still on alert, and with good reason. We needed to rest our muscles and our minds, but still keep enough of ourselves to move and fight if we had to. Our circumstances dictated it. I returned my gaze to the stasis tube, and Matilda. I wondered what it would be like for her if she were to ever be released. Would she remember Cranky? Would she even care what he looked like now? How would she react to knowing that every pony she ever cared about, every pony she ever knew other than Cranky... was dead?

As I studied the stasis tube, I noticed something etched onto the side. It looked like... a cutie mark? A very familiar one at that. Three stylized balloons were engraved into the metal. I reached out, tracing the mark with my magic. It had almost become instinctual at this point. The engraving lit up in hues of pink, blue, and yellow as a shimmer appeared in front of the stasis tube. The hologram coalesced into a bright pink earth pony mare. Despite the gray in her hair, her smile was wide and her eyes were bright. Beside me, Violet gasped.

"Star... are you... are you seeing this?" she said.

I looked to her and back to the hologram. "You can see it?" I said, cocking my head in confusion. My love nodded mutely in response. The hologram, unlike the others that I had seen, seemed to take notice of us and began to speak.

"*Hey there! My name's Pinkie Pie, and you're Radiant Star and Violet Iris!*" the holographic mare said. I blinked. It wasn't just noticing us... it was *talking* to us.

"Umm... what?" I said.

The pink mare bounced up and down in place. In midair, no less. It was... creepy.

"Oh don't worry, only you two can see me. I figured it would be easier this way," she said.

"Just how are you talking to us? This is just a hologram," I pointed out.

The hologram grinned and nodded. *"I know, cool ain't it? I recorded this message so long ago, that I forgot why I recorded it! I think it was supposed to be a message for Twilight, but somehow your names came up, and well here we are!"* Pinkie said. She looked down at the stasis tube next to her. *"Ohhh... it's Matilda! Hi Matilda! Oh Matilda looks like she's sleeping. Wait... if Matilda is here, where's Cranky at? Don't tell me he's abandoned poor Matilda."*

"Umm... no, he hasn't. In fact you just missed him," I said, trying to process what was even happening to us. I didn't spend much time trying to figure it out however. Pinkie Pie was Pinkie Pie after all. This could almost be considered par for the course for the pink mare.

"Okay! I'll just have to catch him later then. Anyways... I know why you're here, Star. You and your friends have an important task ahead of you," she said with a wide smile.

"You're talking about Spark?" Violet said.

The pink mare nodded excitedly. *"Yup! You're a smart one, Violet!"* she said. *"I know it's hard, but you have to do your best to help the Element of Magic. She really is good inside, and I can guarantee that everything will turn out alright. After all, things always turn out alright when you're with your friends!"*

"Do you really think that Spark can be redeemed?" I asked.

"I do. She's not bad, she just made some bad decisions! She just needs a push in the right direction," she said. *"Now... I suppose I should actually leave the message I was supposed to be recording... where is it...?"* The mare yanked a piece of paper out of thin air. *"Oh, there it is! Now, Radiant Star and Violet Iris: be good, and let your friendship strengthen you."* The mare's lifelike image reverted to a simple hologram as she began to talk once more.

"Twilight,

It's me... it's your bestest friend, Pinkie. I know things got bad between us, but I want you to know that I don't blame you. I know you only ever had my best interests at heart.

If you're seeing this... it means that I'm long gone, and I failed. I failed you, I failed Equestria. I failed my friends. But I'm not giving up. No sir! I'm going to make sure that this all ends in sunshine and rainbows! That's how good endings are supposed to go, after all!

Signing off for good, your bestest of bestest friends... Pinkie Pie."

The hologram disappeared into thin air, leaving us alone with Matilda once more. I sighed, hanging my head. Despite her enthusiasm about it, Pinkie Pie's words had left me feeling more confused than ever. Did I want to save Spark? Did I truly want to redeem her? Was there anything worth redeeming, or was I wrong? I looked over at Violet, and smiled.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Physically... yes. Mentally, I'm still a little scrambled. But I'll be fine. We should get going to the

Armory,” I said. “We have no more time to spare.”

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The Unicorn Orb

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My host was running, panting hard as his hooves touched down on hard concrete. I recognized my host's body as I had already seen a memory through his eyes once before. Thankfully, it was Cutter's body and not the insane power-mad Greed. Gunfire echoed behind the stallion as he pounded down the street. A pistol floated along in the air next to the unicorn as he turned on a dime and started down the next corner. My host glanced back, seeing several earth pony stallions behind him. Their haphazard weaponry, slick leather jackets, and insane glee filled faces marked them as members of the Hellraisers.

“Fuck!” my host shouted, spinning his pistol about with his magic. He fired several rounds, but they went wide and completely missed the charging raiders. He snarled, ducking as they returned fire. The bullets soared over the unicorn's head, barely missing him as he tucked in and rolled behind a nearby trash dumpster.

“Shit, shit, shit!” my host exclaimed as bullets pinged off the sides of the dumpster. He looked down at his pistol. It was nearly out of ammunition. He growled as the first Hellraiser rounded the dumpster, lifting its hunting rifle. My host lifted the pistol, firing point blank before the stallion could get a shot off.

The Hellraiser's eye exploded in a shower of gore. A click from behind my host caught the unicorn by surprise. He spun about to see a hunting rifle leveled directly at his face. The raider behind it grinned, speaking in a language even my host couldn't quite understand due to the stallion's foaming mouth and frantic speech.

“Fuck you,” my host said. The hunting rifle made another click, ready to fire. Then, just as suddenly the rifle was drawn away as the raider turned tail. My host cocked his head in confusion as a black mass slammed into the stallion's back, sending him sailing to the ground. It was a pegasus mare, sprawled out on top of the unconscious Hellraiser. She grunted as she stood.

“Get down!” a rough voice from behind the unicorn shouted.

The mare grabbed onto my host, pushing him down to the ground. Gunfire erupted above the two ponies as they huddled together. The mare grinned sheepishly at my host.

“Are you alright?” she said, her voice only barely audible above the gunfire.

“Just peachy, thanks,” my host said with a nod. Out of the corner of my host's eye, I could see another Hellraiser approaching, his assault rifle pointed at the prone mare. My host snarled, levitating his pistol and firing, striking the other stallion in the leg before he could pull the trigger. The gunfire ceased, and the ground beneath the two shook as another form loomed over the two. My host spun, bringing his pistol about.

“Whoa, there, partner,” a voice said as a hoof came down, stopping the pistol in midair. A light tan earth pony with a sharp pinstripe suit and fedora was standing above my host. “I just saved your life, buddy. Show a little gratitude, wouldja?”

My host blinked for a moment, and finally let his magic on the pistol drop. He stood, feeling the mare behind him grasp onto his side to get her bearings. The earth pony merely grinned.

"Thanks," my host said. "I guess I owe you two. Name's Cutter."

"I'm Grenadine Rose, and this here's Lilith," the earth pony replied.

My host turned and looked upon the pegasus mare fully. I could feel the heat coming off of his cheeks as he stared at her.

"Hi..." my host said.

Lilith giggled and held out her hoof. "Hiya," she replied.

My host extended his hoof, taking hers in a friendly hoofshake. Grenadine grinned.

"Oh, get a room," he said, snorting.

Lilith dropped my host's hoof immediately, a fierce blush arising on her face. "Grenadine!" she shouted angrily, fluttering her wings.

The earth pony rolled his eyes, turning to my host.

"Say, whatcha doin' out here by yourself pal? These streets ain't exactly the nicest, what with those Hellraisers all over the place," he said.

"I was... until recently mind you... a courier. You know, free for hire type job. But somepony decided it would be fun to try and have me send a message to those raider bastards," the unicorn replied as the trio walked out from behind the metal dumpster. "Unfortunately, they didn't like the message too much."

"Well then, I think perhaps you might wish to seek other employment, my friend," he said, chuckling. "Tell ya what. If you help me out a bit, I can give you a place to stay."

"Really? Well... umm... alright. Where are we headed?" my host asked.

"You familiar with Theater?" Grenadine said. My host shook his head in response. Grenadine nodded and continued. "Well, it's a settlement ran by the MMMM. We could use a buck like you. Help defend it, hang around a bit, and you're guaranteed a place there."

My host pondered this for a brief moment before nodding excitedly at the prospect of steady employment. Grenadine grinned as he pulled ahead of the other two, taking point. My host fell back, trotting alongside the mare, who seemed to be lost in her own little world.

"So... how do you two know each other?" my host asked finally.

The pegasus smiled softly. "He saved my life. Much like he did yours," she said. "I uh... used to live up above."

"Enclave?" my host said. "I mean... I've heard stories and all, just never really seen one."

"No. Civilian. Got lucky getting out too, without them sticking their damned mark on me. You do *not* want to know what I had to do to pull that off," Lilith replied, giggling. "Ever since I left, I've been a scavenger."

Been around a bit, met a few crazy ponies. Grenadine pulled me out of a pretty bad spot, and I've been hanging around him ever since."

"You two... you know...?" my host ventured.

The mare blushed again, shaking her head. Grenadine was a bit further ahead now, the streets still and silent save for the soft clopping of their hooves against the concrete.

"Oh, no no. We're just friends, that's all," she said. My host grinned at this. "Oh, when we get back to Theater I'll have to introduce you to some of our other friends."

"Others?" my host said.

"Yeah. like Evora! Evora's a zebra, she's pretty cool," Lilith said.

"Err... right," my host replied. "Sounds... fun."

Grenadine stopped up ahead and allowed the two to catch up to him. A sharp grin was written all over his face.

"Alright, kiddo. Welcome to Theater," he said, motioning at the large building across the street.

The lights were dim in the light of the day, but I recognized Theater nonetheless. My host stared up in awe at the building.

"This is the place?" he said quietly.

"So... you want in?" the earth pony asked. My host smiled and looked back at Lilith, who offered her own smile in return.

"I'm in."

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The hallway was of course... gray. *As is every hallway in this Celestia-forsaken place*, I thought as we trotted along. We were skirting around the Atrium, moving in the halls and trying to find the Armory that Cranky had mentioned to us. We stayed silent, keeping a close eye on any doors or empty halls we came upon. We had experienced several close calls with more of the 'super drones', barely escaping with our lives each time as we moved closer and closer to where we hoped the Armory was located. I was still thinking about Pinkie Pie's words. Spark had done so many bad things, made so many bad decisions. Could she just be forgiven, just like that? I glanced over at Violet. She had a determined look on her face, but I could see through the cracks. She was still thinking about it as well. I nudged her softly, getting her attention.

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

"I'm... No... Not really. I keep thinking about... that hologram. Is that really what you've been seeing all this time?" she said. I had shared with Violet the stories about the other holograms I had seen since we had been in Chicacolt.

"More or less," I said with a nod. "That's the first time one of them has ever actually spoken to me

directly, or been able to be seen by anypony else, though.”

“What do you think that meant?” Violet said quietly.

“I think, if anything... it just meant that it was Pinkie Pie. It's pretty hard to force any sort of logic to apply to that mare, dead or alive,” I said, laughing softly. “Seriously though... I... I'm not sure what do, Violet. I mean, Spark hurt you badly. How do I just let that slide?”

“I'm not sure I'm the best one to be asking that question to,” my marefriend replied. “If it were me... I'd want to make sure she suffered.”

“But there has to be something there... something I'm missing. Why else would Pride have not joined with her?” I said as we rounded the next corner.

“Maybe Pride thinks she can accomplish her goals without her help? I don't really know,” Violet said casually.

The hallway ahead of us was just as drab as the rest of them were. *These walls could really use something... like a mural maybe, that would really make it look nice*, I thought. At the far end of the hall stood a series of doors leading to other portions of the Stable. I was busy with my own thoughts as we stepped into the clearing, not really paying much attention to the others. My mind swam, thinking about Pride, Spark, and everything in between. Despite getting some rest, I still felt really tired. The quiet and nervous chatter of my friends slowly filtered away and I stopped in my tracks, realizing that I was suddenly... alone.

“Hello...?” I said, turning around in a circle. There was nopony. “Where is everyone? What's going on?” There was no way that they would just leave me alone like that. Cranky had to be behind this somehow. I pushed open one of the doors, wondering if maybe they had gone through and I just hadn't noticed. Nothing. I looked at my E.F.S. again, but it still wasn't working. “Violet? Patch? Nixis? Where are you guys?”

A cold breeze whipped across my sides. I shivered. *That's... that's weird. It's not supposed to be cold... or windy for that matter*, I thought, pushing open the door that the breeze had come from. My eyes widened as I gazed upon the scene before me.

“No... No no no no no!” I shouted, tears welling up in my eyes.

Blood stained the drab gray flooring in front of me, dripping from a familiar green foreleg that was lying in the center of the hall. Beside the leg, a green body that belonged to none other than Violet. Her eyes were closed, blood pooling under her cold and lifeless form. Beyond her, two other bloody bodies were lying. One of them was missing a head. My eyes widened further. It was Steeljack. His head lay just a few feet away, along with his spinal cord. Patch's body was next to his, her body torn open by some sort of shredder. I shrieked and screamed, slumping to my haunches in front of the macabre scene.

“Violet!!!” I screamed. “Steeljack... Patch!!! No!!!”

All sense of logic flew out the window, and I began to blubber like a foal. *How?! How did this happen?! My mind yelled. They were just with me... what happened?! My mind was reeling. None of this made any sense. I should have heard them... I should have been faster, should have been able to save them. I realized that my worst fears had come true. I was living it. My friends were dead, and I wasn't able to even save them. Where were the others then? What happened to Lust, to Danish, to Nixis? I blinked, stopping to think for a moment. Where was Lust and the others of my group? Why was it only Violet, Steeljack, and Patch? I had*

always considered those three to be my closest friends, so was that why it was only them? Was Pride doing something to me?

“Star!” I heard a voice shout from beyond my peripheral vision. I turned my head away from the broken forms of my friends.

“Hello?” I said. The voice continued to shout, but I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. I stood, trying to understand what was happening to me. I growled. “Who's there? Pride? Is that you?” A soft chuckle emanated from behind me. I turned back towards the bloody scene. A dark blue alicorn stood above the bodies, grinning.

“You would have to figure it out, wouldn't you?” Pride said. “And I was having so much fun, too.”

“You rotten, evil... bitch!” I shouted.

Pride yawned. “Really, now. Name-calling? Is that what we're resorting to now?” she said. “I told you that I wouldn't make this easy for you.” She motioned to the bodies below her. “Like it? It's a little something I cooked up. Forces you to see your worst nightmare. Your friends are all experiencing their own nightmares right now. Looks like yours is losing those pretty little friends of yours. Don't worry though... that one I can make come true.”

“Pride... enough of these games, already! Show yourself! Let's end this, now!” I shouted.

Pride giggled at my angry ranting. She was clearly enjoying this.

“Pish, posh. You and I will have our time, soon enough. For now... I'd prefer to let Cranky wear you down first,” the midnight blue alicorn replied.

“Cranky will never fully serve you. I will make sure of that,” I snarled. “Now, let. ME. **GO!!!**”

My magic, even though this was just a dream state, seemed to serve just fine to amplify my voice. A magical wave emanated from my mouth, knocking Pride back. The other alicorn disappeared into nothingness. I shuddered as her dream magic began to fail around me, the backlash of energy slamming me against the floor.

“Star...?” a voice from next to me said. I looked up, seeing Violet sitting next to me. She had a tired smile on her face. I groaned and pushed myself up.

“What's... what's going on? Are you guys alright?” I asked. The others appeared much in the same fashion. They all had tired, worn looks on their faces.

“What happened to us?” Patch said. “I feel like I've been hit by a freight train.”

“It was Pride...” I said, rubbing my neck. “She cast some sort of spell on us, forced us to view our worst nightmares. It was intended to tire us out, not kill us.”

“Is that why I feel like this?” Lust said, pushing herself off the floor. She cracked her neck, looking immensely more relieved.

“It's time we moved on,” I said. “Pride definitely knows we're here now, so we need to move fast.” I pushed open the next door, revealing another drab gray hall. *Of course*, I thought. *Always more gray*. We

started forward into the maze of tunnels, keeping a close eye on everything around us. I almost found myself missing Cranky's rotting face. At the very least, it would be some color other than gray. I sidled up next to Violet, giving her a quick nuzzle as we walked. I could tell that Pride's magic had taken a lot out of my marefriend. "Are you alright?" I asked as we fell back to the rear of the group.

"I... I saw... oh... Star it was so bad. You were with... with another..." she replied quietly, her head hanging low.

My eyes widened. Violet's worst fear was losing me to another lover? I gave her another nuzzle, smiling as brightly as I could.

"Hey. You don't need to ever worry about that, you know that right? It was just a dream," I said. "I'm never going to leave you."

"It was just... so realistic. All I could do was watch..." Violet said, nodding. "I had no idea Pride could do something like that... what are we up against, Star?"

"Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you. Any of you. If I have to..." I replied. I knew in my heart, that I would do anything to protect her, to protect the others. I would even give my life if I knew that it would save them. Violet smiled softly.

A cough from ahead of us alerted me to Danish. I glared at him. He always seemed to be the one interrupting my private time with Violet.

"You might wanna see this," he said. "We're here." I looked down at Violet, and then back to the cream-colored unicorn.

I stepped past him and the others, peering around the corner. A large set of double metal doors lay just beyond in the small clearing. A sign above the doors said **ARMORY**. I moved into the clearing, ready as ever to face what was next as I levitated out Stargazer.

That was when the turrets mounted in the ceiling lowered and began to fire.

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The Minotaur Orb

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This was a new experience. I was definitely not in a body that was equine at all. My host looked down, and I saw a three clawed hand clench into a fist before spreading out, cloven feet beyond it. *What in the Sorrel Hells am I?* I thought, before I remembered the sigil that had been on the memory orb. I was a minotaur... but I didn't feel like any of the minotaurs I had seen at Colter Field. My host was smaller, more lithe. It was an interesting feeling.

My host looked about, and I realized I had definitely been here before. It was Colter Field, but it looked... fresher. Newer and smaller. As my host walked, I noticed that the slave pens that had once littered the back area of the old stadium were missing. The minotaur guards didn't wear power armor. In fact... there was none of the insanity that we had witnessed while we were prisoners here. My host stepped into the throng of minotaurs that was milling through the large hall. At the far end there stood a large setup of wooden benches

and a statue of a grinning golden minotaur. In front of the statue stood an older minotaur, clad in blood red robes. His eyes gleamed as he regarded my host.

“Scribe Bronze Fist,” the minotaur spoke, nodding.

My host knelt before the older beast. “Honored Elder,” my host said. “What is it that you wish of me?”

“Our order has had been honored this evening, young one. We have a visitor,” the elder said, motioning behind him.

My host glanced up past the old minotaur, seeing a dark blue pony. It had a horn and wings. I realized that it was Pride, but she looked nothing like the Pride I had seen before. It looked more like Diamond. The alicorn stepped forward, bowing her head.

“Scribe Bronze Fist,” she began to speak softly. “My name is Diamond Night. I understand that you are the keeper of lore for the Cult of Iron Will?”

“Yes, I am. What brings you to our humble dwelling? It is not every day we receive such a blessing as a visit from one of your kind,” my host said, nodding excitedly.

The alicorn blushed fiercely. “You are too kind, loremaster,” she said. “Alas, I am here for business. I am seeking several documents that might contain some information on a few of the Ministry buildings located in the city.”

My host grinned, motioning for the mare to follow him. The alicorn stepped behind the minotaur as he led her through the halls of Colter Field. Eventually we arrived at what appeared to be a library in an old locker room. Books were stuffed into lockers all over, the final result a mess of paper patiently awaiting its chance to fall out of its precarious position. The alicorn smiled as she stepped up to one row, examining the reams of paper contained within.

“My apologies for the mess, honored guest. I am still in the middle of organizing this,” my host said.

“No worries, my friend. So... tell me, how does one with the name Bronze Fist become a book keeper?” she replied.

“My passion has always been for the teachings of the great Iron Will,” my host said. “His work is a testament to the strength we carry inside of ourselves. We can all be great, if we wish it.”

“And what of those within your order who think strength comes from conviction? From imposing one's will on others?” the mare casually asked as she pulled out a large book from one of the lockers with her magic.

“That is not how one strengthens one's life, my friend. True strength... comes from within,” my host said, motioning to his own heart. “We must live each day head on, and strength will come.”

“Well spoken, loremaster,” Diamond said. “I have a proposition for you then. I am seeking some items I found referenced in texts long thought gone to the world of today. I located them in an old mall, near Canterlot. I would ask if you might consider helping me.”

“Why me, honored guest? As you said, I am but a book keeper. A dogmatic practitioner, nothing more,” my host said.

Diamond's eyes gleamed as she looked back at me. "Because, I believe that your true strength will one day show you the true path to enlightenment, and you will share that message with the Wasteland. What I am seeking... may be the most important find that will ever be found in this hellish pit we call life," she said, a grin on her face. The alicorn motioned to my host to come closer. My host hesitated for a moment, and then stepped closer to the mare.

"You believe that I will be the one sharing the message of the Cult?" my host asked, his voice shaking.

"Indeed, I do. I believe you will show the Wasteland what true strength really is," the mare replied.

My host pondered the alicorn's words for several moments, before finally nodding.

"Show me what you have discovered," my host said.

The alicorn grinned, levitating out several scrolls. My host began poring through them, taking in their information. As best as I could tell they were schematics, detailing some kind of holding facility for historical artifacts. There were pictures of what appeared to be the statues that we had seen in the Museum.

"So... these statues... they're supposed to be magical emitters?"

The alicorn nodded excitedly. "Yes. They enhance magic, make it stronger. With them, I can do so much. We could finally get into Filly's Tower, take control of the Minotaur's broadcasting station and actually do some good in this city!" she said.

My host looked over the papers once more, cocking his head in confusion.

"But... these papers don't say anything about where these statues even are," my host said.

"No. They don't," the alicorn replied. "That's where you come in. I was hoping that you might be able to research these scrolls, and assist in locating and accessing the artifacts."

"I... I'm not sure that I can..." my host said.

The alicorn grinned, putting her hoof around my host's shoulder. "You can do it. I know you can. I have faith in you," she said. "And when you do... you will be the most recognized spiritual leader the Cult of Iron Will has ever had. You will save this city."

"I... I'll do it," my host said.

Diamond's eyes flashed in the light.

"Excellent," she said.

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I leaped around, dodging the red hot death that was spewing forth from the turrets. I growled, turning Stargazer about and firing wildly. The bullets flew through the air, melting as the laser fire struck them and continued onward to hit the ground at my hooves. A blast of silver raced past my head as Violet leaped out from behind the corner, aiming Thunder Flash at the nearest turret. The gun immediately spun about, firing a volley

of lasers that deflected the beam rifle's fire.

“Shit! They're tracking our gunfire!” I shouted, throwing up a shield as another beam came my way.

The laser fire sizzled as it struck the shield, dissipating but taking a serious toll on the strength of the barrier. A second shot hit, destroying the shield completely. A third shot soared past my head, singeing a few hairs off my mane. I barely missed getting a hole blown in my side from the fourth shot as I leaped to the side, firing another volley at the turret. The shots went wide, zooming past the turret and causing it to spin around to deflect them. As it spun, the laser blasts struck the other turret, causing the device to explode violently.

“Violet, now!” I called to my love.

Before the turret could return to firing upon us, Violet's blast of silver fire met my fresh round of bullets and destroyed the turret. With one down, we were able to overwhelm the other. Violet was the one to get the kill shot, a blast from her weapon flashing past the active defenses to melt the final turret into slag.

“Got it,” Violet said, grinning as she replaced Thunder Flash on its harness. The others stepped out from behind the corner.

“Couldn't help?” I said sarcastically.

Steeljack simply chuckled, rubbing the back of his head with his hoof.

“Umm, well you see... there really wasn't enough room for all of us,” Patch interjected. I looked around, blinking. Sure enough, the space wasn't really that wide enough to fit all seven of us.

“Ah, so there isn't,” I replied, turning to the door. I pushed on it with magic, forcing it open. Beyond, a musty smell greeted our noses. No pony had been in here in quite a long time it seemed. Rows upon rows of shelving extended into the darkened armory, filled to the brim with security lockers. As we entered, a series of lights began to illuminate, making the rest of the room visible. At the far end of the armory was a long row of terminals. I stepped deeper inside, keeping an eye out for any drones or more turrets. Instead I heard a foul sucking sound that I knew all too well. The first ghoul to appear dove off the top of a shelving unit, snarling and howling. A quick blast of magic knocked it away, and it gathered itself to charge. A sharp retort erupted from beside me and the ghoul's head exploded in a shower of rotting flesh. Patch crowed as she lifted Para Bellum, firing on a second ghoul that had leaped out from behind a row of lockers.

“Everypony, scatter and take them down!” I called out, floating out Stargazer.

Two ghouls crept out of the nearest row as my friends moved into position. I took aim and fired, splattering brains against the cold hard metal floor. I was beginning to get really sick of not having a working E.F.S. It was just plain annoying to get snuck up on all the time. From deep within the massive room, I heard the familiar ***crack*** of Steeljack's rifle. I growled as I blew a hole in another ghoul's body, putting it to the ground instantly. I stalked down to the next row, wondering what it was that Cranky wanted us to find here. Was this just another trap? Was Cranky just using this as an excuse to slow us down even further? The sounds of my friends went quiet as I made my way back to the center of the armory. I saw Violet first, floating Thunder Flash along in her magic.

“Was that all of them?” she asked.

I shrugged, looking again at my E.F.S. It was still non-functional. “I doubt it, knowing Cranky,” I

replied, motioning to the row of computers at the far end. "Let's check out the terminals, see if we can find any information on this place."

I trotted down the middle of the rows, stopping at the terminals. I tapped on the keyboard, the screen flickering to life and coming up to a password prompt. My friends stood guard, keeping an eye out for any more ghouls. I connected my PipBuck and fired up the password breaker. As I searched for the password, my eyes began to glaze over at the millions of lines of code on the screen. Finally I hit upon the phrase *Chicacoltagogo* and grinned. I input it into the password field and the main screen appeared. The only options to speak of were related to the armory itself, such as locker release and the main lighting systems. I began to poke around, trying to break past the main functions with my PipBuck. Nothing seemed to be working. I flicked a button, opening the lockers in the armory. A hissing sound from behind me indicated that the option had at least worked.

"See what you can round up from the lockers," I said. "Keep an eye out though. Cranky could just be waiting to spring a trap on us." I turned my attention back to the screen, noticing a flashing icon at the bottom left of it. I tapped the key to select it, bringing up what appeared to be some sort of radio application. A sharp gravelly voice emanated from the terminal's speaker.

"Took you long enough to get here, kid," it said.

"Cranky," I replied. "Would have been here sooner, if not for your little welcome party."

A dry chuckle came out of the radio. "Well, I had to make it hard on you," the ghoulish voice replied. "You understand."

"Right. Down to business then. What is so damn important here?" I asked. "Why the armory?"

"Because there's something there you need to see, I just need to give you the right access," Cranky said. "Hold on one second..."

The screen began to scramble and shift before it was finally replaced with a more standard Stable terminal interface. The radio application was still open, but now there were numerous more options available, including a map of the Stable.

"There you go. There's an option there for a locker that is located in the wall. Press it."

I shrugged through the menus, searching for the locker option. After several minutes of hunting, I finally found it. I pressed it, hearing a hiss from the wall across from me.

"Got it," I said, noticing that my friends had returned. Violet stepped up next to me as Cranky spoke again.

"Take care when viewing them. You'll see things that you may not wish to know," he said. "See you soon, kid." The radio application closed on its own, beeping softly as the terminal returned to the standard interface.

"Was that... Cranky?" she said.

"Yeah. Did you guys find anything good?" I asked.

The green mare shook her head. "There was some small firearms in some of the lockers. No

ammunition, and the rest of them were pretty much picked clean,” she said.

I looked over at the locker that had extended from the wall. I strode over to it, pulling it open with my magic. My eyes widened as a soft glow emanated from inside the locker. I reached inside, lifting the small case out of the locker and setting it on the nearest flat surface.

“Are those what I think they are?” Lust said, narrowing her gaze at the seven glass orbs in the case.

I nodded quietly. Inside of the small case were seven memory orbs, each one marked with a sigil belonging to a specific race. Zebra, Earth Pony, Pegasus, Unicorn, Minotaur, Donkey, and Alicorn.

“They're memory orbs...” I said. This is what Cranky wanted me to find? I was pretty sure I knew whose memories these orbs belonged to. They had to belong to Pride and the others. I shuddered when my eyes drifted upon the orb marked with the sigil of the Pegasus. *Lust*, I thought. How many more of her secrets would I learn here? Could I be honest with her about it, and tell her what I would see? Would she be able to handle it? I realized I had fallen back on an old habit of mine, where I had stopped paying attention to anything else going on around me, as I felt somepony poking me in the side. I blinked, looking over at Violet.

“Star?” she said. “You alright?”

“Y-Y-Yeah... I'm fine,” I said. “Sorry, just... lost in thought.”

“Star...” a voice behind me said. I turned around, seeing Lust standing there. She was glaring at me. “Those symbols. Those orbs... they belong to us, don't they?”

“Yes,” I said quietly. “Yes, they do.”

“What do you mean, darlin?” Danish interjected. “You mean one of these orbs was a memory that belong to Gluttony? And another belongs to Lust here?”

“That's correct. The symbols match up perfectly. This is what Cranky wanted me to see. He wanted me to see the memories,” I said with a nod. “He said that I would need to see them... to understand Pride better.”

“And what about my memories? Are you going to tell me what you see there?” Lust said, her continued glare weighing heavily on my conscience.

I met her gaze with my own cold stare. “I promise,” I said simply. I looked back down at the glowing orbs.

“If you're going to view them, I would make it quick, Star,” Nixis' soft voice came from next to Danish. “We will do what we can to ensure you are safe, but I fear that this Sloth character will not let us stay here for long. I can smell rot from beyond the walls.”

I nodded grimly and turned to the orbs. My eyes drifted to the first orb, the one marked with the sigil of the Zebra. I reached out with my magic, and let my world fall away into nothingness.

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The Donkey Orb

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As the memory filtered in, I immediately took an assessment of what I was. I was equine, for sure this time, but I wasn't a normal equine. I was a donkey. Not only that, my host's body felt old. It was wracked with intense pain that shot all the way from his hooves to his ears, or at least what was left of his ears. Rot and ichor dropped from my host's body as he stalked the streets of the darkened city. My host sighed, and turned down the next street. Dragging behind the old ghoul was a large wooden cart, filled with metal trinkets and doodads.

My host stopped as he looked up at the nearest building. It was the outside of Theater. The two guards at the front of the club stepped forward, narrowing their gaze at my host. Their weapons were held loftily in the air, pointed at the donkey.

"No funny business, or we'll put you out of your misery," one of the guards called out.

My host sighed slowly, before chuckling. "Kid, you don't know how much misery there even is to put me out of," my host's voice stated, the gravelly tone echoing across the street. "Besides... if I had wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead. No... I'm here to trade."

"Trade? What do you have to trade, old timer?" the other guard said.

"A little bit of this, a little bit of that," my host replied. "Hold on a second, let me get myself unhooked." He turned back, hitting a button on his harness, which released the ghoul from the cart. "Ahh... that's better."

"I suppose there's nothing wrong with a little friendly trade," the first guard said, turning to the other. "Go get Grenadine would ya?"

The other guard nodded and headed into the Theater. A few seconds later, he emerged again with a large earth pony wearing a pinstriped suit. He wore the same confident grin I had seen him with in another memory orb.

"Howdy," he said as he trotted up to my host, who was busy yanking bits and bobs from the back of his cart. "Name's Grenadine. Boys tell me you wanna do some trade." My host nodded silently in response. "What's your name? Don't recall ever seeing you in these parts before."

"I travel. All over, actually. Name's Cranky," my host replied, motioning to the small table he'd set up.

Grenadine moved to the table and began perusing the wares that my host had set out. He picked up what appeared to be a black head band with a socket in it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"That, young pony... is what they call a Recollector. It lets ponies of non-magical nature like pegasi and earth ponies view memory orbs," the donkey ghoul said. "It's an old pre-war thing. Some ponies think that Pinkie Pie herself invented them to be able to watch memories of ponies they interrogated."

"Oh? And what do you think about that?" Grenadine said.

My host shrugged, his ancient shoulder blades grating against each other loudly.

"I think some ponies spend more time theorizing about the past instead of paying attention to the here and now," my host said. "And the here and now has me wondering if you want that little device or not."

"Heh," Grenadine chuckled. "I suppose it might be something interesting to give to Diamond. She might have some use for it."

"Diamond?" my host said, cocking his head.

Grenadine nodded. "Friend of mine. She's a mite reclusive, but she's a good pony. She's one of them alicorns," he said.

"I tell you what, kid. You can have that thing, if you can set me up a meeting with this Diamond," my host replied casually, narrowing his gaze at the earth pony.

"I suppose I can do that," Grenadine said. "But why do you want to meet her?"

My host coughed dryly. "Let's just say... we're old acquaintances," he said.

"Deal," Grenadine said, sliding the recollector into his jacket. My host smiled as he began to pile the rest of his stuff into the cart. Grenadine motioned to the ghoul. "Follow me. She doesn't live too far away from here."

The donkey nodded, hitching himself back up to his cart. The two walked in complete silence as they moved through the abandoned streets away from Theater. A small ruined bank came into view. My host unhitched himself from the cart, following the earth pony into the abandoned building. Despite the bleak darkness inside, my host could clearly see the debris and rubble strewn about.

"Diamond?" Grenadine called out to the dark building. "You here?" A flapping of wings greeted the two, and a dark blue alicorn suddenly appeared in front of earth pony. He looked up, his eyes widening as he fell back on his haunches in shock. "Geez, Diamond! Don't do that!" The alicorn tittered.

"Oh, come on Grenadine. You know how much I like it when ---" she started to say as she caught the eyes of my host. Her eyes narrowed in fear and hatred. "You. What are you doing here?"

"Well, gee kid. Is that any way to greet an old friend?" my host grated.

Diamond snarled, igniting her horn and grabbing Grenadine with her magic.

"Hey what's the big idea!?" the earth pony shouted as he found himself moved to the side.

"Get out of here. Leave this place, now!" Diamond yelled.

Grenadine stood shakily and ran, dropping the recollector to the ground as he did.

The alicorn's gaze returned to my host. "What do you want with me? If you're here to kill me, then just get it over with. Luna knows I deserve it for the things I did."

My host chuckled as he turned to the side, picking up the recollector that the earth pony had dropped in his teeth. He dropped it at the alicorn's hooves.

"Not here to kill you, kid," my host said. "Besides... you know I wouldn't have given you any warning if I was."

The alicorn took a step back, looking down at the recollector. "Indeed. And my name is Diamond, not kid," she said, continuing to glare at the donkey. "I'd have thought you'd know that by now."

"When you're as old as I am... everypony's a kid to you," my host replied. He looked around the debris ridden bank. "Nice place you got here. See you've got yourself some friends. That's good."

"Yes... friends. They've been... very helpful to me," the alicorn said. "And what brings you to the city of Chicacolt? Last I saw you... we were in Canterlot, and I was still a monster."

"Travel, trade. Got out of the whole wanna-be hero business ages ago," my host said, chuckling. "What about you? Why are you here?"

The alicorn sighed, turning away for a moment. I could tell she was flustered by Cranky's appearance.

"When... when my memories came back, I felt... drawn to here for some reason. Like there was some part of me that needed to be here," she said. "I have these thoughts... I'm not sure where they come from."

My host nodded, sitting creakily down next to the dark alicorn.

"I know what you mean," the donkey replied wistfully. "Been this way for so long now... it's kind of hard to remember what it was like..."

"What was it like, anyways? I've always wondered..." Diamond said.

"It was... nice. Regardless of what anypony said about the war, before all that everything was pretty good actually," my host said. "I had friends. I had a good jenny that I loved dearly. I looked for her for a long time after I died... never found out what happened to her."

"Really? Never?" the alicorn said.

"Maybe one of these days," my host said with a nod. "But enough about that. That buck who brought me here... what was his name... Grenadine? He brought me here in exchange for giving you this recollector." My host motioned to the device.

The mare grimaced, lifting the device with her magic. "Looks as pristine as ever. I'm assuming that you have more trade?" she said. My host grinned, and nodded again in response. "Excellent. Show me to thine wares, old friend. We shall make trade this day, and perhaps... you can stay a while."

"I... I'd like that," my host replied, a slow smile making its way onto his face.

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My eyes flashed open as I looked away from the memory orb that had belonged to Cranky. The donkey was right about one thing that I had taken away from these memories thus far... every time I'd seen Pride she hadn't seemed to be evil. What had happened that had pushed her so far? Was she truly so desperate for validation from the others that she had taken the easy route? I didn't know. I looked down at the case of memory orbs, my eyes widening when I realized that one of them was missing. I had spent the better part of the

last hour viewing each memory, telling the others that I would speak with them regarding their contents once I finished viewing all seven. I looked up across the row and gasped.

“No,” I said softly.

Sitting across the row, with a black metal recollector strapped to her forehead... was Lust. The memory orb with the pegasus sigil on it sat snugly in the socket of the device. Danish and Nixis stood guard over her. Violet and the others stood in the middle of the row, keeping an eye on both of us. I stood frantically.

“What happened?” I said.

Violet looked up at me, fear showing in her soft green eyes.

“We couldn't... couldn't stop her. She forced her way through us and started watching it,” She said. “It's... it's not good is it, Star?”

I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. That was the memory that had most vividly stuck out in my head. The poor mare had nearly been raped and murdered, but was eventually saved by a pony who would go on to become an even worse threat to the Wasteland. A pony who would convert her to a soulless killing machine. As I moved to shut off the Recollector, Lust's eyes snapped open. Fear and anger glowed in her eyes as she yanked the Recollector off of her head. She snarled, glaring hatred at me.

“You...” she said angrily. “You lied... you lied to me!!” The black mare stood up, shoving Danish and Nixis back with a swift flap of her armored wings.

“Get down!” I shouted at the others before turning back to Lust. “Lust. You need to calm down. It's not what you think!”

Patch and Steeljack dove into the rows of shelves, Patch holding Para Bellum out. Despite the shouting, she seemed hesitant.

“Oh? Then what is it?” the mare said, pressing a button on her side. The Bitch cycled out from it's container. The persistent whine of the missile launcher emanated from the device. “Is it about how you lied to me? You knew, didn't you? I can see it on your face! Before you even saw... that. You knew about him! And you fucking killed him!”

“Lust. Calm thyself,” I said forcefully.

“No. I will not be calm!” the black mare shouted. “I... I hate you! You took him away from me! Before I could even remember who he was!”

“That's not true!” I shouted back. “Who you saw in your memory, that was not Cutter. That was Greed. Pride's fucking with you, can't you see that? Everything in this place has been designed to screw with our heads!”

“Pride was right! Everypony else... they don't understand us. They hate us! If anything, it's been your fault all along!” Lust replied. “You brought me back to this place, just to show me that you killed the stallion that I loved... Well, I'll fucking kill you, instead!” She leaped forward in a blur, slashing with her wicked bladed wings. One of them grazed me, drawing a thin line of blood from my side.

I snarled in pain as I jumped back. “Lust, stop! I don't want to fight you!” I exclaimed. “Just calm down! We can sit down and talk about this, just trust me!”

“Trust you? Trust you?! I did that... and look where it got me,” Lust said angrily. “No more talk. No more trusting. No more you!” She flexed her wings, launching at me with wild abandon.

I lifted Stargazer as quickly as I could out of my harness, raising it to block the mare's strike. The wing blades hit hard, forcing the gun backwards into my chest. I gritted my teeth as I ignited my horn, quickly raising a shield to deflect the next strike. I expanded the barrier, forcing it out at the mare, knocking her into a row of metal shelving. The metal lockers buckled under the impact of the power-armor clad pegasus, resulting in a huge dent in them. Lust stood shakily, growling loudly as she turned about, aiming right at me with the Bitch. It began to whine as it cycled in a missile.

“Star!” Violet shouted as she dove in, slamming into Lust with all the force she could muster. Lust fell to the floor with a loud ***thud***.

“Violet! Get back. Let me handle this,” I said.

Lust snarled, pushing herself up quickly. “Yeah, little miss Violet...” she said, panting hard. “You're just as much to blame. After all, you're the one who actually killed him.” She moved to strike at Violet with her wings.

I reached out with my magic, halting the metal wings in midair. Lust's eyes widened as I picked her up with my telekinesis, tossing her out of the metal rows and into the open clearing of the armory. I trotted forward, stopping in front of the prone mare.

“That's enough, Lust. Stop this, and let's sit down and talk about this like civilized ponies,” I said.

Lust groaned, pushing herself to her hooves. Her eyes were filled with hatred and anger as she glared up at me.

“Fuck you and your civilized pony ways. I'm just a weapon. That's all I ever was made to be,” she said angrily.

“You're more than that. Lust – I mean... Lilith, you have to believe me. I never meant to hurt you like this. Please stop this!” I said, tears filling my eyes.

“Don't use that name around me. I'm not Lilith anymore. I'm Lust. And I'm going to rip your lying face off,” Lust said, her wings flaring. The Bitch whined again as a missile ripped from its barrel. Lust's visor dropped down across her face.

My eyes widened as I called upon my magic again. Shining Armor's shield spell shimmered into existence just as the missile struck, exploding in a violent blaze of color. The barrier rippled as it dispersed the energy released by the explosion, and my horn seared in pain. I looked beyond the purple glow of the shield, noticing that the blast had only scorched the immediate area in front of me. Lust stood across the room. As her visor lifted, I caught sight of her eyes. They were filled with frantic rage. The mare was completely undamaged from her own attack, despite her proximity when she had fired the missile.

Lust snarled as she launched herself at me, slashing like a wild animal at my shield. Each strike was brutal, the attack of a gifted fighter at the top of her game. I could feel the shield spell fading under her attack.

At this rate, I wasn't going to be able to hold it more than a few seconds at most. Sure enough, the shield began to fade as my horn released the last of the magic held aside for it. I dodged to the side, narrowly missing another wicked slice from Lust's wing blades.

"Lust, stop this!" I shouted, dancing about as I dodged another strike. "I'm... I'm sorry! But no matter what I did, I still believe in you! You can be better. I just know it. But you have to trust me. Let me explain what else I saw. You only saw a snippet, a small piece of what you are."

"I don't care!" Lust snarled, lunging forward and reaching out with her wings. I ducked as they soared over my head. "You know nothing about me! Not really! I'm just a weapon, a tool! Lilith... she never existed!"

I was about to respond, before I heard hoofsteps behind me. Patch stepped out from the row of lockers, tears flowing from her good eye. She stopped in front of the raging mare, silently dropping to her haunches. Lust stopped in her tracks, unwilling or unable to press her attack through the green earth pony. Behind me, the others had stepped out, brandishing their weapons. I glared at them, motioning to hold back.

"You're wrong. Celestia, can't you see it?" Patch said, sobbing as she tried to choke out the words. "You're not just a weapon. You're... you're my friend, Lust. And Star never meant to hurt you. She was trying to protect you... Please listen to me..."

"P-P-Patch..." Lust uttered. Her eyes widened as she took a few steps back. She lifted her forehoof to her head, her entire body shaking. I cocked my head. Despite her anger, the mare's attitude had changed from one of rage to one of fear in the span of a moment. It was as if the sight of her friend had stopped her rampage cold.

"Lust, please calm down. We're not here to hurt you," Steeljack said.

Lust shook her head almost as if she was trying to get something out of her ear.

"No... No... please... get out... get out of my head!!!" Lust stepped back, turning towards the door to the armory. The Bitch whined again, and a missile shot over our heads to obliterate the door to the armory. Lust leaped over us and soared towards the door.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Lust stopped in the doorway, turning back with a gleam in her eyes.

"Oh, Ministry Mare... come and get her," a voice that was clearly not her own called from the mare's mouth. "She'll be waiting for you..."

"Pride?" I said aloud, realizing what was going on.

Lust's eyes flashed red, and she fled into the hallway. I looked down at Patch. The green pony looked just as confused as the others did. Without thinking I shot past her and through the doorway.

"Come on, we have to go after her!" I called back as I flared my wings, gliding into the hallway outside of the armory. Lust was near the far end of the long drab hall, already galloping hard. I heard hooves and paws behind me, and I began to run, trying to keep the black mare in sight as she rounded the corner. The boring sameness of the Stable flew by as my other friends tried to keep up.

I pushed forward, using my wings as best as I could to keep up speed in the cramped hallway. I turned the next corner, finding myself in the Atrium of the Stable. Lust had stopped just ahead. The black mare stood facing away from us.

“Lust!” I shouted.

Lust turned around, a mad look on her face. “Ministry Mare,” the mare said. I could tell immediately that it wasn't her. It was still Pride. I growled.

“Pride. Let her go,” I said.

Lust laughed coldly as my friends fanned out on each side of me. They looked unsure of what to do.

“Why? You never seemed to care this much for her before now. It was her moment of weakness, Ministry Mare. I've been inside her head since she stepped in here, but it was you who gave me the opening I needed. And now Lust is mine completely,” the black mare said.

“Why?” I growled. “Why do this to her?”

“Because the bitch deserved it. It was a mistake on my part, I suppose, to let her think she could be free of my mind control,” she replied, fluttering her metal wings. “Now, then. I'm going to make her attack you. I'm going to force you to kill her.”

Patch gasped from my side. “No!” she shouted. “Let her go! She never did anything to you!”

“She did **EVERYTHING** to me!” Lust yelled, glaring at me. “You once asked me if I loved him. Of course I did. And I hated him. I hated him so much for wanting to share my gift with her. So I wiped her memory when I turned her. I made her my willing slave, my weapon.”

“You... you monster,” Patch replied, brandishing Para Bellum. “Give her back!”

My hoof shot out, cutting off the green mare. “Enough, Pride. Let Lilith go,” I said.

“Nah, this is much more fun anyways,” she said, the visor in her power armor closing. The Bitch began to whine as she flapped her metal wings, rising into the air. “Now... let's begin shall we?” The missile ejected from the launcher, streaking across the Atrium.

“Everypony, scatter!” I shouted, taking to the air myself as I reached out with telekinesis. I grabbed the missile, pushing the slippery projectile into the walls of the Atrium. It exploded violently, ripping off a chunk of gray wall. Lust used the opportunity to soar straight at me, slashing out with her wicked wings. I dodged, almost evading her attack. A thin line of blood marked my coat on her wingblade. I roared in pain as gunfire erupted from below us. Curiously enough, the gunfire wasn't directed at Lust. I looked down for a brief moment, seeing more of those security drones entering the Atrium. Lust cackled wildly in her armor.

“It's just you and me, Ministry Mare. It's amazing. You should really feel how much this pegasus hates you,” she said. “After all, you killed the stallion she loved so dearly. What did you see, when you watched her memory? Did you see her pain and suffering?”

“I saw a good mare. One who deserves a second chance to be whoever she wants to be,” I said coldly. “Now... **LET. HER. GO!**”

I surged forward, catching Lust by surprise as I slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground in front of the fountain. I dropped down, landing on top of the black mare. She was attempting to push herself back up. I pushed down hard with my forehooves, holding her down. "Time for you to go, Pride. Get out of my friend's head, before I make you get out."

The mare beneath me laughed wildly. "Fuck you, she's mine," she said.

I growled angrily, and Lust laughed as the Bitch began to whine.

"Your funeral," I said, reaching out with my magic and grabbing onto the mare's helmet. With a grunt of effort that hurt my horn like hell, the helmet wrenched loose, revealing the black mare beneath. I knew that Pride was controlling her mind, so the only logical place I could think of to expel the alicorn was from within Lust's waking dreams. The mind dive spell activated, and I fell away to nothingness.

* * *

I blinked. I was in a dark room, one that I recognized all too well. The dark bedroom where I had watched Lust's memory of her capture by the raiders. In the corner of the room, curled up and shaking in fear, was a black pegasus. She looked up at me, tears showing in her dark eyes.

"Who... who are you?" she said, her voice tinny and small. I realized that the voice belonged to the real mare, the one that I had truly gotten to know in her time with us. The real Lust. Lilith.

"It's... it's okay," I said softly, stepping up to her. "I'm your friend. Lilith... it's me, Star. Do you understand?"

"Why?" the mare said, nodding slowly. "Why didn't you tell me...?"

"I should have. I messed up. I'm a horrible friend. I should have told you about Cutter as soon as I knew," I said, slumping down to my haunches in front of her. "And for that... I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

The mare looked away for a moment and then back to me. Her eyes flashed red.

"No!" she shouted. "You lied to me! You fucking lied about Cutter! You told me you didn't know anything!"

"I was going to tell you," I said. "I just... I wanted to protect you. I wanted to help you remember on your own."

"Fat lot of good that did, didn't it?" Lilith spat. "You wanted to protect me? From what? My own mind? My own memories? They're *my* memories, Star. You should have told me!"

"I know," I said, pinning my ears back.

Lilith's eyes flashed again. She snarled, striking my face with her hoof. I pulled away, rubbing my cheek. Even in this dream world, I could feel pain.

"I hate you," Lilith hissed. "I hate you so much. You took him away from me. You lied about it, too. You probably acted like some big fucking hero too, didn't you? The Great and Powerful Radiant Star. See how

she ruins lives, and destroys ponies hearts!”

“Lilith, I never meant it. I swear I didn’t,” I said hurriedly. The black mare’s eyes flashed again. Something wasn’t right here. Was this really Lilith? Or was Pride playing me, like she had before? “Believe me, I truly want you to be happy. You deserve a second chance!”

“I don’t want your second chances,” the mare growled. “I want Cutter back! I want my love! And you had to go and fuck that up!”

I shook my head in fear. I wasn’t getting through to her! *Luna, grant me the strength to help her!* My mind screamed as I reached out towards Lilith.

“Please, Lilith. Let me help you,” I begged. “Pride’s still inside you, and she’s making you do this. She’s making you say these things!”

“No, Star. Pride isn’t making me do anything. She’s shown me the truth of things,” she replied, batting my hoof away. “She’s shown me how fucked up you really are. How you claim to help, and how you destroy lives in the process!”

“Lilith, snap out of it!” I shouted. “I know you are angry, and I know I messed up. But you have to trust me! I know what happened to Cutter was bad. I was there. I saw him die with my own eyes. He wasn’t the stallion I saw in those memories, Lilith. The stallion in those memories was a good pony. He loved you very much, and he wouldn’t want you to give yourself up like this.”

“And yet you killed him,” Lilith said quietly. “How do you justify that?”

“I can’t, Lilith. But what you don’t understand is that Cutter wasn’t really Cutter when we fought. He was Greed. Pride fucked him up, turned him into her own little personal slave because she loved him too. Don’t you get it? Pride has been playing you two since the very beginning!” I said. “She turned you into Lust because she wanted you under her hoof while she got what she wanted the most.”

Lilith stopped cold at my words. Her eyes gleamed in the darkness, flashing that same sinister red they had been the entire conversation. She smiled after a few moments.

“Well played, Ministry Mare,” she said, a sinister laugh echoing from behind her. Lilith’s eyes flashed again, the red leaving them for good as the laughter subsided. When Lilith looked up again, it was really her. I breathed a sigh of relief. The mare still had an expression of hurt on her face.

“Lilith,” I began. “I know things got out of control. And I thought about what would happen if I had told you. Would you have reacted any different? Would you have forgiven me so easily?”

“No...” Lilith said. “I probably wouldn’t have. Why does that change anything between us?”

“Because we’re friends, Lilith. Friends disagree. Friends get angry at each other. What you’re feeling isn’t anger, Lilith. It’s hatred. And that’s not you. That’s not what the mare I saw in those memories would do,” I said. “That’s Pride’s influence. She was still using you, trying to force you back into her service.”

Lilith’s ears pinned back as she looked down at her hooves. She was silent for a good amount of time before she looked back up at me.

"I messed up, didn't I? I let *her* in," she said. I nodded. "So how are you here, then? I don't get it."

"Something I learned from a friend. Mind diving, spirit linking, call it what you will, I'm inside your mind. And we have to get you out of here," I said. "To do that, I'm going to need your help."

"What can I do against her?" Lilith said. "She's too strong, Star. I can't fight her."

I shook my head fiercely. I knew deep down in my heart that Lilith could do this. She could fight Pride.

"No. You can do it, Lilith. You are stronger than you think. And you have something she doesn't," I said, smiling.

"What's that?" the mare asked.

"You have friends. Me, Violet, Patch... even Danish. We're all here for you," I said, reaching out towards the mare with my forehooves. She shied away for a second. "Look... I know what I did was unforgivable... and I don't deserve your friendship at all, but I want to help you. I've seen the real you, and she's a glorious, magnificent mare who's truly loving and warm."

Lilith looked up at me, and lunged forward into my embrace.

"I... I forgive you," she said, tears spilling out of her eyes. She held me like that for a few moments, before pulling back and wiping her face off. "Now then. You said something about getting out of here?"

"That's my girl," I said, pushing myself up off my haunches. I was helping Lilith up when I heard a cold voice come from behind us.

"Oh, I don't think you're leaving," Pride said. I turned around, glaring at the midnight colored alicorn that was now standing in the doorway. "After all, the fun is just beginning." I started to speak, but was cut off by the black mare beside me.

"No!" Lilith shouted. "I am through with you, Pride. I'm not your puppet any longer!"

"Pssh, Lust. You never stopped being a puppet. You just traded one set of strings for another," the alicorn tittered.

Lilith stepped forward, flaring her wings.

"That's shit, Pride, and you know it. Star may be an idiot and a liar -"

"Hey now!"

"Hush, Star." Lilith said, shooting me a glare. She winked then, before turning back to Pride. "But Star never tried to control me. She tried to protect me! Protect me from things like **YOU!**" Lilith shouted. The mindscape stretched and warped with the force of her anger, pulling Pride's alicorn form closer.

"And another thing. My name is **Lilith!**" she shouted, surging forward at the dark alicorn. "Now get the fuck out of my head!"

Pride snarled as she disappeared and Lilith flew out the door. I followed behind, keeping close as we

stepped into the dark hallway. The long hall extended out in both directions endlessly. It almost reminded me of Twilight's crazy mind dreams. Pride's laughter echoed all around us.

"I'm impressed. You're trying to be assertive. It's rather... cute," the disembodied voice said. "And you forgave the very mare who killed your lover. I'm surprised. I thought you hated her."

Lilith looked over at me and smiled before turning back to the empty hall. We began to walk along, hoping to find some form of exit.

"I don't hate her," she said. "I'm... I'm mad at her still for lying to me, but I can get over that. What's more important is what you did to Cutter and me."

"Yes... I gave you a gift. Don't you see how important that gift was?" Pride replied.

"A gift? You made her into a mindless killer," I snarled. "You call that a gift?"

"Why, Pride? Why did you do this to me? Why did you do it to Cutter?" the black mare pleaded. "I know that you secretly wanted him. Is that it? Was I such a threat to you?"

Pride never responded. Her presence lifted from the air as quickly as it had appeared. I looked down at Lilith as we finally came to the end of the hallway. A large white door hung waiting.

"And it all comes down to Cutter," Lilith said. "I had him. Pride wanted him, and you just wanted to stop him from hurting others."

I sat, and nervously stretched out a hoof to rest on Lilith's shoulders. She looked up at me with a warm smile. "I still miss him, Star. But at least I know who's to blame for his fate."

"Pride."

"Yes. Let's do this, Radiant Star. My friend."

We embraced, a quick hug before we turned to face the pure white double doors.

"So I guess I'll be seeing you back on the other side?" I said.

The other mare grinned widely. I could already see that she truly was becoming Lilith once more. That mare was returning in force.

"I guess so. Thank you, Star. For everything," she said. I smiled brightly as the connection between our minds severed, and I fell back into the void once more.

* * *

My eyes flittered open as I felt a hoof shaking my shoulder. I looked up, seeing the familiar black pegasus sitting next to me. She had a soft smile on her face.

"Hi," she said softly. "You... you alright?"

I nodded as I pushed myself up and looked around. We were still in the Atrium. My friends had

destroyed the security drones. Violet sat on my other side, a concerned look on her face. Patch and Steeljack hovered next to Lust, the former with her foreleg around her friend's neck. Nixis and Danish were off in the far end of the Atrium, keeping an eye out for any more drones.

"I'm... I'm fine," I said. I was lying of course. My horn still seared in intense pain, and now my body felt like it had been tossed through the wringer as well. I looked over at the pegasus. "And you?"

"I'm fine. In fact, I've never felt better," she said with a nod. "She's gone. For the first time, in a long time, she's gone, Star. I'm free."

"That's good to hear, Lust," I said. "Or would you prefer... Lilith?" I grinned, remembering what the pegasus in her mind had shouted at Pride.

"I think... Lilith will do. I may be a Lilith without a Cutter, but I'm still her. And I know... I know that you two didn't intentionally kill Cutter. Cutter died when Pride turned him into Greed," the black mare said.

Patch leaned in, pulling her friend closer into a hug.

Lilith grinned widely at me. "And I owe that bitch a world of pain."

"You and me both, kid," a voice from behind us said. I scrambled to get up as I looked back. On top of the ruined fountain, stood Cranky. The donkey ghoul grinned, his rotting jaw showing through the heavy flaps of dead skin. "And you'll get your chance, too."

"Cranky," I said, cocking my head. "What do you mean?"

"All this time, I've only been trying to slow you down so you'd have some damn time to think," the donkey replied angrily. "You saw the orbs. You saw what we were, and you know what she did to us. What she did to me."

"But... Matilda..." Violet said.

Cranky shook his head. "Pride never did have the power to save her. That's something I'm going to have to find out on my own. You were right... she lied to me. But I know something she doesn't know," he said.

"And what's that?" Patch said.

"Do you remember the swamp? Specifically, do you remember when I left you?" the donkey said whimsically.

"It was right after you hit me with your pink cloud," I said. "But why...?"

"It was a test. I had a hunch, and I was right," Cranky replied. "By turning me into this... thing. This monster... she sealed her fate. She gave me the power to kill her."

"The pink cloud," I said. Cranky nodded in response. "Of course. It hurt me. So it would stand to reason it would hurt her too."

"So what now?" Steeljack said as Danish and Nixis rejoined the group.

"I think perhaps, we should be findin' this Pride bitch, and puttin' her six feet under," the cream-colored unicorn said.

Cranky chuckled, a dry cough erupting from his rotting mouth.

"You'll find her in a hidden sanctum, below the Overmare's Office. She'll know we're coming. She always knows," he said. "But first, there's one more thing you need to see." His hoof shot out, a silvery orb held upon it. The orb held the sigil of the one memory I had failed to see before Pride had attacked Lilith's mind. The sigil of the alicorn.

"Pride's memory?" I said. "I'm not sure I want to see it now."

"I think... I think you should," Lilith spoke. "If it's going to help us in the fight against Pride, after all." I sighed and looked at my friends.

They nodded encouragingly and Violet nuzzled my neck softly, letting me know that I would be safe.

"It'll be alright. We'll keep watch over you while you're in the memory," she said. I looked down at the silvery orb, and latched onto it with my magic, letting the world fall away once more.

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The Alicorn Orb

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I knew immediately that I was in the body of Pride, but even I could tell that this wasn't the Pride I knew. It was the mare I had seen in all the other memories. Diamond Night. The alicorn had a wide smile on her face she tapped at the brightly lit terminal in front of her. A cursory glance around revealed that she was sitting in the office that she and Evora had discovered in the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub. Lines of code scrolled down the screen as my host scanned the screen.

"Come on... what are you hiding in there?" she muttered to herself, tapping another key. She looked back at the footlocker sitting behind her. Nothing. My host sighed and returned her gaze to the terminal. "I don't get it. I've tried everything. Nothing opens this damn thing."

My host groaned, turning away from the keyboard and staring back at the locker. Her horn lit up, reaching out to take hold of the magical device attached to the lock on the chest. The lock began to glow fiercely, surging with power. My host grunted as the magical feedback from the device began to devour her energy. It was a defense mechanism to prevent the lock from being opened with simple telekinesis. A stray thought floated through my host's mind. She had tried this already and had failed. But there was nothing else. Nothing else had worked on the lock. Whatever was in the chest was so important that Twilight Sparkle had made it impossible to open.

"Impossible is for the weak," my host snarled, gritting her teeth as she poured more magic into her horn, trying to overpower the magical feedback. A vivid pain seared my host's forehead as her horn glowed brightly, illuminating the room with a soft blue light. "Come on, come on, come on!" Power surged out of the device, trying to keep up with the alicorn's magic. The color on the lock changed from a blue to a deep and angry red. My host's eyes widened as the lock exploded violently, knocking the dark alicorn to the ground. Everything went to black for a few moments.

"Ugh... my head," my host said as things came back into focus. She sat up, rubbing the back of her head. Smoke drifted from beyond the desk where the chest had sat. My host stood, trotting over to the smoldering remains. The chest was the source of the smoke, now smoldering wreckage surrounding its original location. My host's eyes widened. Seven blue statues stood on the metal floor. They looked as if they were intact, undamaged by the explosion. My host's gaze drifted down to the first statue, one of an alicorn. Instinctively my host reached out, touching the statue with her hoof.

Oh... somepony awakens me after all this time? a voice said in my host's head.

"What? Who's... who's there?" my host said aloud.

An alicorn? My, how the times have changed. Tell me, young one, what year is it? the voice replied.

"Y-y-year? It's... it's around 200 some-odd years since the end of the War," my host said. "Who are you?"

The war ended? Who won? the voice asked.

"Nopony won. The world lost. Since then, we've had a hellish radioactive Wasteland that's become our homes," my host said.

The voice chuckled. *No doubt that it was pretty Princess Luna who caused the end of the war. I'm not surprised. And now, after all this time, my essence is awakened,* it said. *I am grateful for this. I feel as though I should be... gracious and give you a gift.*

"A gift? What kind of gift? Are you in the statue?" my host said, looking with incredulous eyes at the object still in her hooves.

I can see your deepest desire, young one. You wish to be important. You want everypony to worship you. You want power. You want to rise above all, the voice said. *I can give you this, and more.*

"Why? How could you know these things? What do you get out of this?" my host questioned, feeling frightened by the disembodied voice.

Because you freed me. And for that I shall bestow the power I once wielded upon you. The power to enter minds, to influence dreams, to manipulate, the voice said as a dark blue energy began to pour out of the statue, engulfing the alicorn mare. Lightning arced over her body as the energy began to seep into her skin. Thoughts and images seared into the mare's mind, along with emotions. My own mind cringed at this. The emotions were among the most powerful, most negative things I had ever felt in my life. They tore at my host's mind, enhancing it and at the same time... corrupting it. After several moments of pain and torture, my host opened her eyes.

"I... I can feel it. Such power, such amazing power. I can see it all so clearly now," she said. I shuddered at the sound of her voice. This was Pride, in all of her corrupt glory. "I shall seek vengeance for what the world has done to us, and the entire Wasteland shall know me as their true Goddess."

Excellent... my loving subject. I expect no less, the voice said.

My host made to stand, gathering up the statues in her magic and setting them in her saddlebags. As she

turned, another voice, this one real, stopped her.

“Diamond?” the small voice said. My host looked across the room, seeing the zebra Evora standing there. Her eyes were filled with tears. It was the first look I had gotten at the zebra from outside her head. Her eyes were a vivid blue, and her body was lithe and strong. A black and white curly mane extended from her forehead down her neck. “Are you alright? I was on my way to see you. You weren't at your home, so I figured you'd be here, but then I heard an explosion.” My host smiled.

“I'm fine, Evora. I finally got that chest open!” my host said, her voice returning to her normal tone. “You'll never believe it!”

The zebra's expression changed to that of surprise. “You... you did?” she said. My host nodded as the other mare trotted over. “That's great! What was inside?”

My host smiled, opening up her saddlebags to reveal the statues inside. Evora's eyes widened.

“You mean... they're real? All that work we've been doing, and they were actually real?” she said. My host grinned.

“Yes. And once I'm done studying them, we'll be able to save the Wasteland,” the alicorn said. “It's all we ever dreamed of, Evora.”

The zebra leaned in, hooking her hoof around the alicorn's neck.

“I'm... I'm so happy for you, Diamond. I knew you were right. I just knew it,” she said.

My host shook off the affectionate behavior and stepped back from the zebra, prompting an expression of confusion.

“Diamond? What's wrong?”

“Nothing, Evora. I already told you this,” my host said, raising one of the statues out of the bag. It was the one of the zebra. “In fact, I appreciate your friendship so much, that I want you to have this.”

“Are you... are you sure?” Evora said, cocking her head in confusion.

“Of course. What sort of friend would I be if I didn't? You've spent so much time helping me, after all,” the alicorn replied.

Evora chuckled nervously. Her cheeks flushed red.

“Well, you see... that's because... well... oh geez how do I say this...” the zebra stumbled over herself as she stared into my host's eyes. “I... I really like you, Diamond. I... I love you even.” My host remained silent. “I know that you probably don't feel the same way, but you deserve to know. That's why I was coming to see you tonight.”

“I... I see,” the alicorn said. “I had no idea. I... You're my best friend, Evora. I don't know that I...”

Evora hung her head silently.

"I get it. I really do. You're not interested. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up," she said. Her eyes drifted up to the statue. "You can keep it. I don't deserve a nice gift like that."

"On the contrary my dear friend, you deserve it more than anypony else," my host said. "Please. I insist."

The zebra reached out, hesitant at first, but decided that the reassuring look on my host's face was enough. She touched the statue, the dark energy pouring out of it as she did. Her expression quickly changed to that of fear.

"Diamond, what...? What is this?" she started to say as the energy engulfed her body. Lightning and power seared across the zebra mare. She howled in pain, falling to the ground.

My host smiled as she stood over the zebra. Her eyes flashed a deep red.

"Yes... give her your blessing. Your gift. Share it with her..." my host said. The voice in the back of her head cackled wildly as the energy finally lifted from the zebra mare. Arcane symbols glowed upon the surface of her skin, disappearing as she began to stir. Her eyes fluttered open, the bright vivid blue replaced by the familiar green that I knew her for. She stood, and I could tell that she was no longer Evora by the way she carried herself. A savage grin flashed across her face.

"I am at your bidding, my queen," she said, bowing deeply before the alicorn mare.

"Your devotion is admirable. Now... we have much work to do, to spread our message across the Wasteland. But we cannot do it alone. We must share our blessing with those like us," my host said. "From this day forward, I am no longer Diamond Night. No... Diamond is dead, as is Evora. We must forge new names for ourselves, ones that better represent our blessings."

"I will do whatever you ask," the zebra replied.

"Excellent. From this day forward, you shall be known as... Envy," my host said. "For within your green eyes hides the soul of the jealous ones."

"Thank you, my queen. And what shall I call you?" Envy said as she looked up at my host.

"Pride."

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I came out of the memory feeling groggy, but rested. My mind buzzed with thoughts over what I had seen. Pride really was a victim. A victim of something that felt... *evil* in the most basic of ways. Something had lived in those statues, and had taken her over, forcing her to share this so-called 'blessing' with those closest to her. I had thought originally that Greed was the first one that Diamond had converted, but now I knew that Envy was the first. She had forced a mare who had loved her truly into servitude. Why then, had Envy left her mistress's side? Was she like the others? Had she started to remember who she was, and what Pride had done to her? I realized that Pride's control over them must have been very tenuous. Perhaps it was the fact that she had split her blessing up in so many ways.

"Star? You alright?" A voice beside me broke me out my thoughts. I looked over, seeing Violet. She had Thunder Flash out, and had been cleaning it.

"Yeah... Yeah I'm alright," I said, pulling myself to my haunches. I looked back over at the fountain, seeing Cranky and Lilith sitting there. "I need to speak to Cranky." I stood, trotting over to the two. Cranky's red eyes seemed to drift upward as I approached.

"Kid," he said.

"Cranky," I replied. "So... there was something behind those statues. Something that was even controlling and corrupting Pride. She was just as much a victim as you and the others were."

"Diamond was obsessed with those things. She knew that they existed somehow. I keep thinking that maybe whatever it was, was pulling her to them. Like it wanted her to find them," he said. "I doubt that there's any piece of her left."

"I will be the judge of that," I said. "I... I have an idea. If I can knock Pride out enough to perform a mind dive spell on her..."

"That would be incredibly dangerous," Cranky said. "Pride is a master of mind manipulation. She could force your mind out of its body."

"Good. Because I haven't had that happen to me at all," I said sarcastically. "Been there, done that. Got the horseshoes." Cranky raised a brow suspiciously. "Long story. Don't ask. I'm done with waiting and planning. It's time for action."

I looked over at Violet. She nodded as she began to pack away her things. Nixis and Danish stood nearby, ready to go as ever. On the other side of Lilith were Steeljack and Patch. The two lovers had determined grins on their faces.

"We're ready," the grey earth pony stallion said.

I nodded, latching Stargazer onto its harness. Cranky stood, and took up the front position to lead us to the Overmare's Office. We stepped into the far hallway, walking silently through the dark grey halls of the Stable. As we walked I thought about everything that had led up to this point. I thought about Spark, Pride, Lucky. My mind soared over thoughts of Cranky, Lilith, Evora, Grenadine, and even Cutter. Even the bookish minotaur, Bronze Fist tumbled over in my mind. I knew deeply that I had to do something for them. I thought about my friends. Would they survive this? I had to do everything in my power to make sure that they did. I had to stop Pride, but what would I do once I got inside her mind? Was there still a piece of Diamond Night, the kind and confused alicorn that I had seen within their memories? And what was I going to do about Spark, once I finally confronted her? I still had no clue.

"We're here," Cranky's gravelly voice grated over the quiet.

We stood in front of a simple door, marked **OVERMARE**. I snorted. It didn't totally surprise me that Pride would place herself in a place where she was above everypony else. The donkey ghoulish pushed the door open and we stepped inside. The office was bare for the most part, filled only with a simple desk, a terminal, and a wall locker. Cranky moved to the far end of the office, stopping in front of the locker. He tapped a few buttons on its lock, causing it to recess into the wall and open. A large spiral staircase appeared from beyond the secret entrance, curling away into the darkness.

"Pride keeps her sanctum down below. We should be prepared for anything," Cranky said. "I will try

take her by surprise. You will only have a few moments to knock her out.”

“Everypony else, hold your fire unless she tries something. I want her alive,” I said to the others. They nodded in agreement. “As far as Spark is concerned, Pride has her under lock. If everything works out with Pride, I’ll be able to take care of Spark afterwards.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Patch asked quietly.

Violet shuddered against my side. I grimaced as I tried to come up with a response.

“I don’t know. Stop Pride, stop Spark.”

In silence we moved single file down the ancient metal staircase. As we descended, the metal changed to stonework, a soft light emanating from below.

“A long time ago, before Chicacolt was built... there was an ancient civilization that lived here,” Cranky explained as we walked down the stairs. “At least that’s what the history books said. They built the city on top of the ruins, never knowing what lay below the surface. Stable-Tec built this Stable underneath the city, including an access to the ruins in case anypony needed to go further underground to escape the death from the skies above.”

“And just what was this Stable’s experiment?” I asked quietly, my curiosity piqued now. “From one of the memories, Evora had a Stable jumpsuit.”

“The Stable’s experiment was rather simple”, the donkey said. “Multiculturalism, just like the city above that supported it. Every race had a place in this Stable. That’s why it was so big. Pride described it to me out of Evora’s memories.”

“The point was to promote working together?” Violet said.

Cranky nodded as we continued down the stairs. It seemed like they went on forever. The light from below began to grow in intensity, until finally it was bright as day. Torches lined the walls as we reached what appeared to be a stone landing. At the far end of the landing was a set of large stone doors. Two massive torches sat on each side of the doors. I stepped forward and pressed upon the stonework with my magic, forcing them open. We moved into the darkness, ready for anything. The room beyond was enormous. Bowls of fire ringed the circular room. In the center was a large stone disk surrounded by giant pillars. My eyes were drawn however, to what was above the center of the room. Floating high in the air were two ponies. They appeared to be unconscious, gleaming purple chains holding them in place. One was an alicorn with a black mane and purple coat. The other... was a pony with wings and a horn. One that I knew quite well.

“Lucky? Spark?” I said quietly, my eyes widening. My gaze drifted from the two spectral mares down to the pony in the center of the stone.

A midnight colored alicorn waited for us as we stepped forward. Her eyes were closed. As I pulled myself up onto the disk, they flashed open.

“Welcome, Ministry Mare. Welcome, to your death,” Pride said, her wings flaring out.

“Pride,” I said coldly. I was ready for this. I could do this!

I nodded to my friends, as they fanned out behind me. Cranky nodded as he began to move into place.

“We meet for the last time,” the alicorn said. “Ah, and I see you've brought the slut and the donkey with you. Sloth, I am surprised that you would turn on me so quickly.”

“I'm not doing this for the Ministry Mare, Pride. I'm doing this for Matilda. You never could release her,” the donkey said. “Now, I will give you no quarter. You are finished!”

Cranky surged forward, expelling a violent blast of pink substance from his mouth at the alicorn. Pride snarled and unleashed a wave of magic, deflecting the cloud to the ground. I looked up at Lucky and Spark. They would have to wait. I leaped towards the mare, unlatching Stargazer and taking aim. I fired a torrent of bullets, beating my wings as Pride looked up. She raised a shield, dissolving the bullets into nothing. I pressed on, crashing into the mare and forcing her to the ground. I locked eyes with the sinister mare as I focused on my mind dive spell.

“Well, you think you have the upper hoof, do you?” Pride said, grinning. Her horn flared to life, picking me up in her magic and tossing me aside into one of the pillars. I hit hard, coughing up blood as pain flowed up and down my body. I pushed myself up in time to see Cranky moving on Pride's other side. He pawed at the ground, spewing forth more Pink Cloud at the alicorn. Pride grinned as she slid aside, ushering the corrosive Cloud past with a flicker of magic. Gunfire echoed across the room as Patch and Steeljack made their move. Their shots were intended to distract, not wound or kill. Pride snarled, firing two blasts of concentrated magic at the two earth ponies. The blasts hit quickly, knocking the two to the ground with grunts of pain.

“Steeljack! Patch!” I shouted as I flared my horn, teleporting next to the two.

Patch waved me off as I appeared. “We're fine. You worry about her,” she said.

I nodded, turning my attention to Pride and Cranky. Lilith soared in on metal wings, taking aim with the Bitch. The missile launcher's whine was hungry as she fired. Pride looked up and latched onto the projectile with her magic. It exploded before it ever reached her, knocking Lilith out of the air into one of the pillars. I flared my wings, pushing myself forward. I landed next to the other alicorn, striking her across the face with my forehoof.

“Enough of these games, Pride. Release Lucky, and let me deal with the other one,” I said angrily.

Pride laughed as she whipped around, hitting me in the chest with one of her back legs. I grunted in pain.

“The so-called Spark of Magic? I will see that she is properly taken care of,” she said. “As for the other one, she's nothing. She died once because of your failure, and she'll do it again just fine.” I growled, whipping Stargazer around and slamming it into her stupid lying face. The blow sent Pride to the ground, howling as she struggled to get up. Before she could move, I straddled her, grinding her face into the ground with the business end of Stargazer.

“This game is over, Pride,” I said. My horn ignited with fury as I cast it, holding Pride as the connection between our minds was made.

* * *

The sanctum reappeared, except that instead of my friends and Cranky, I stood alone with Pride and the

two prisoners. They were at ground level in here, though. Their purple chains glinted more than the flickering firelight could account for.

Pride growled as she shoved me off of her, making her way to her feet. Stargazer hadn't come in with me, more's the pity.

"I knew it would come down to this," Pride grumped. "You and me. We're the same, you know. We want the same things."

"No, Pride. We don't," I said coldly, turning my attention away from the prone mare for a second. "Lucky, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

The green mare nodded from her confinement. Her expression was one of sadness. "I'm... I'm alright. But I'm so sorry, I... I messed up," she said.

"No... you didn't. You only did what you thought was right. If you hadn't followed Spark, if you hadn't met the Smooze... if you hadn't left me your gift, I would have been broken," I said. "I wouldn't have made it this far. Thank you, my friend." I glared over at Spark. "And you? What about you, Spark? Sad that you finally met your match?"

"Please. As soon as I'm out of here, I'm going to find a much better host," the black-maned alicorn said scornfully. "Or at least one who knows how to treat an honored guest." She rattled her purple chains. I had to stifle a completely inappropriate giggle as I turned back to Pride.

"Now then. I've seen your memories, and of the those you corrupted. So tell me this... where is Diamond?" I said. Pride was standing now, looking more confident and powerful.

"Diamond? That mare is dead. She was a coward. A freak, filled with memories that were never hers. I killed her, and took her place," she said.

"No. There's still some piece of you that belonged to her. Otherwise, you wouldn't have wanted to hurt Lilith as badly as you tried to. Diamond, listen to me. You can stop this. You can stop all of it," I said, holding out my hoof.

Pride slapped my hoof away, snarling. "There's nothing that you can do to help me now, Ministry Mare," she said, flaring her horn. A blast of energy shot forth from it, soaring past me and striking Spark's chain. The arcane bond shattered, freeing the dark alicorn. She dropped to the stone ground, stretching her wings and grinning widely. Pride glared at the Element.

"Time for you to make good on your promise, Spark. You wanted my body? Well, I'm giving it to you."

Spark grinned as she stepped forward. She was ready to give her power to Pride.

"No!" I shouted, turning back to the Element of Magic. "I cannot allow that to happen. Diamond, please... if you're in there... please listen. You cannot let Spark have your body. You will be under her complete control, no mind of your own. It will only be her."

"And what if that's what I want?!" Pride growled back at me. "I want her power. I want Diamond Night to disappear forever!"

Spark moved out of the corner of my eye faster than I could think. I knew I couldn't keep track of both of them. Pride cackled wildly. I expected Spark to be there, to take over. A burst of magic behind me caught my attention and I spun about. Standing there, holding a vivid green blade in her magic, was Lucky. Spark was on the ground in front of her, having been knocked down by the mare's sword.

"I'll hold her off!" Lucky shouted. "You take care of what you need to do. I'll keep this one under control."

"L-L-Lucky?" I said, flabbergasted as Spark began to stand again.

She snarled at the green mare, lunging forward, only to meet the flat of Lucky's magical blade. Spark reeled at the strike, stumbling away with little grace. The alicorn lifted herself off the ground, forming her own blade.

"I'll be fine, you take care of Pride!" Lucky called back. She surged forward, slashing at Spark with her blade wildly.

I turned about, nearly catching a hoof in my face as Pride struck. I leaped back. I wasn't sure how much control I had in this dream world. I had to trust that Lucky could take care of herself, after all. There were more immediate concerns to deal with. I focused on my magic, forming my own magical blade.

"Diamond. Please, you still have a chance to stop this," I said.

Pride snarled, summoning her own blade. "No. What's done is done. Diamond is gone. There is only Pride now. And Pride will be your downfall!" the mare shouted, rushing forward.

I lifted my blade, deflecting her strike. The alicorn pressed on, pounding at me with her own sword. Her horn flared, trying to trip me by pulling on my legs. I pushed back, slashing down to break her focus. Her blade came up, blocking it easily. The sounds of battle behind me indicated that Lucky and Spark were still fighting. I dodged to the side as another strike came my way, barely missing me. I responded with a counter-slash, slapping away Pride's blade. I fired a blast of energy from my horn, hitting a shield conjured up by the blue alicorn. She scowled, bringing her blade back up.

"Why do you persist, Ministry Mare?" she asked, lunging forward with a thrust.

"Because I know that there is some good in you, Pride. Diamond is still there, somewhere," I said, deflecting the strike. "Your memories showed me that much. I know what it's like to not know who you are sometimes. I've been living Twilight Sparkle's memories now for so long, I can barely remember who or what I am."

"You have no idea what I felt like... when the Goddess died my memories didn't come back like yours. Mine were a jumble of multiple personalities. There never was a pony named Diamond Night. I made her up, thinking that I could find semblance of sanity in this fucked up world!" Pride replied angrily. She was keeping back, waiting to find an opening in my defenses.

"That's not what I saw," I said. "I saw a mare who wanted nothing more than to help this world. She wanted to be kind, and she had friends. She was also loved," I said. "But you were deceived. That thing inside of you took that away from you!"

Pride laughed madly. Her eyes flashed red with anger.

"No, Ministry Mare," she said, slashing at my side with the magical sword. "It gave me what I wanted. It gave me the power I needed to take what I desired. I desired Cutter, and so I had him. I desired to turn Lilith into a simpering, groveling little bitch, and I did it!"

I brought my blade around, matching hers blow for blow as we danced back and forth.

"You're wrong," I said, swinging my sword around and locking it into a fierce grapple with Pride's own. "You *loved* Cutter. You couldn't stand the fact that he didn't love you. And so you gave in to temptation. You let yourself be corrupted!"

"Fuck you. I did what I had to, which is what I'm doing now," the alicorn replied, trying to shift her blade out of the grapple.

I growled, flaring my horn and holding my own sword steady. I knew that Diamond was still in there somewhere. I just had to reach her. I had to get rid of the corrupting influence there. I had to do something, and fast. I summoned what magic I could and struck hard at the mare, pulling her legs out from under her and putting her headfirst into the stone. She groaned as she passed out. The form of the world around us began to start shimmering away as I stepped over her. This was Pride's dream world after all. It wouldn't last too long if she was out cold.

"I'm not going to kill you. No... I can't. That wouldn't be my style, after all," I said simply as I looked down at the dream mare. "After having seen what I have, I know that there's something else there... something else that was controlling your actions. And now I'm going to end it."

My horn flared and I reached deep inside, searching for something, anything that was out of the ordinary. I found it easily enough. The dark energy that had come from the statue radiated throughout the mare's mind like a parasite. I snarled as I overloaded with magic, feeling intense pain rolling from my horn as I tried to eradicate the darkness. It wasn't working. The darkness fought back, attacking me with vicious fury. *No! I will stop you!* I thought, as I pushed back. A sinister voice growled at me from within the darkness.

You think you can stop me? Pathetic fool, it said. *I am darkness incarnate.*

Come on... Diamond, I know you're there. Please help me stop this! I thought. *Think about Evora! About Grenadine, Cutter, Lilith, and Cranky! Think about Bronze Fist! Think about your friends! They stood behind you once, let them be the source of your strength!* I howled, trying to keep the darkness from pushing me out.

E-E-Evora? a different voice rang out in my mind. It was a timid voice, filled with fear. *I... I remember them. All I ever wanted was to help them all.*

You foal, the darkness replied. *You are mine, and mine alone. You only live at my whim.*

Diamond, listen to me. You can help them, like you wanted. But you have to help me! Help me beat this thing, and I promise you that you'll see them again! I thought.

I... I can't, she's too strong! Diamond's voice said. *I'm too weak.*

No! You're not weak! Feel the strength of your friends, Diamond. Feel my strength. Let it help you! I thought. *Please!* I groaned under the stress of the spell. My horn began to shimmer, and I could feel my magic

fading, along with the dreamworld. Before it did though, I felt Diamond's presence begin to bolster it. The mare was fighting back! The magic began to flow once more, and I gritted my teeth. *That's it! Keep going, Diamond! You can do it!*

What are you doing? the dark voice said, the fear evident in its tone. *Stop that! Stop!*

You've controlled my life for too long! Diamond shouted, her voice more confident. *And now I want you out!!!* Light poured out of every part of Pride, finally expelling the dark power. A scream tore a path through my mind as the darkness left the mare's body. I shuddered as I fell backwards, hitting the ground hard. My eyes closed for a brief moment.

"Star!" I heard Lucky shout. I opened my eyes and looked up, seeing the green mare holding her blade against that of Spark's. "Get up! You can't give up now!"

Every inch of me hurt, but I still tried to stand. Finally I managed to get onto my hooves, and I looked down at Pride. She was out cold it seemed. I ran over her with my magic, looking for any trace of the dark energy that had consumed her. There was nothing left. I turned my attention back to Spark, who grinned, her form a concrete point of reference in the wavering mush of a faltering dreamscape. *One more thing to take care of*, I thought, groaning.

"Oh. Too bad. I guess that means I won't be joining with her after all," she said. "Too bad, too. I liked her. She was my kind of evil."

"Spark," I said shakily. "We've been through a lot, you and I. I was told that once I confronted you, I would have to make a decision. A very important decision, that would affect everything. I was going to have to decide whether to kill you or save you."

"You never could make a decision to save your own life, Radiant Star," the black-maned alicorn chided. "Besides... you don't have it in you to kill me."

I nodded as Lucky watched the two of us talk, her magic blade at the ready.

"You're right," I said. "I don't have it in me to kill you. That's why there's only one thing left to do. I've taken care of Pride. This mental construct of hers is breaking down, and we'll soon be back in the real world. Spark... you're just as much a victim as she was. She never deserved this life, and neither did you. You were twisted by Nightmare. That was never your fault."

"Yes, but it did happen, didn't it? And the others, they never stopped to think if I needed their help or not. They tried to murder me, in cold blood," Spark spat.

"Maybe so... but that doesn't excuse your actions. You tried to hurt everypony. You destroyed Twilight's life, her brother, everything, just to gain immortality," I said. "And I think I've finally figured out what I'm going to do about it."

"And what's that? Pout? Whine? Cry about it?" the alicorn replied.

"No. I'm going to let you merge with me," I said.

Lucky's eyes shot wide open. "You're going to *WHAT?!?*" she shouted.

I nodded. Spark grinned widely. She knew as well as I did that it was the only way to end this.

“Really, now? Just like that?” the dark mare said. “I must admit. I am surprised.”

“Star, you can't do that. Remember what happened last time? This won't work like that. She'll take over completely!” Lucky said frantically.

“I know. But I have to do this. I have to try and save her. To redeem her,” I said. “Equestria needs the Element of Magic. They need Spark.”

“Yes... you see the truth of it now, don't you?” the alicorn said, pushing past Lucky and stepping right up to me.

I gazed into her cold eyes, nodding.

“Promise me one thing,” I said, prompting the mare to cock her head.

“And what's that?” Spark asked.

“Leave Violet and the others alone when this is all over. I want you to go where nopony can find us,” I said.

Spark considered this for a moment. She finally nodded. “Of course. I will leave your marefriend alone, as you request,” she said, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

“No,” a voice from behind her said. Lucky surged forward, tackling the dark alicorn to the ground. “Star, I can't let you do this! You'd be sacrificing yourself for nothing! You're letting her win!”

“Lucky, don't you see? She's my responsibility! I let her out into the world. I have to try to help her. I have to purge the corruption from her,” I said.

“Take me,” she said softly, looking down at Spark. “Take me instead.”

“What?!” I shouted. “No... no you can't. You don't even know what that will do!”

“I know it will save you, and that's all I care about,” Lucky said. She glanced over at me and smiled. “Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. After all, you don't owe me anything anymore.”

“Yes I do! I promised you! I promised that I would get your body back!” I exclaimed.

“You don't need to do that, Star. Let go, and everything will be alright,” Lucky said with a shake of her head. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I can't! I can't do it, Lucky!” I said, choking the words out through my own tears. “I... I failed you! I let you die! It was my fault!”

“Star... you silly filly,” Lucky said softly. “You want to know why I joined you in that Ministry hub? Why I was in that bar that night we met? Because I was destined to. A long time ago, a wise pony told me that one day... one day I would meet a purple mare who was like me, but not like me. She also told me very clearly that she would need me when it mattered the most. Well it matters now, Star. You need to live. I don't. I've

been stuck as this non-pony for too long. It's time for me to be free.” She looked back down at Spark, allowing the mare to stand. “Do it, quickly before I change my mind.” Spark glanced over at me first, and then nodded. Her horn ignited, ensnaring the green mare in her magic.

“Let it begin, then,” she said, grinning. “Not what I expected, but whatever. At this point, I'll take what I can get.” I stepped forward, intending to stop the two, but ran face first into a dark purple shield. Spark tittered. “Sorry, Star. But you can't stop this. We'll have our confrontation soon, I promise.”

“And I will still choose to save you,” I said angrily. “If you hurt her though, I might change my mind.”

“She will not come to harm,” the dark alicorn replied. “That I will promise you.” She turned to Lucky, flaring her horn and grabbing a hold of her shoulder. A brilliant light emanated between the two as both ponies disappeared. White light began to boil through the rolling fabric of the sanctum. The world finally broke apart, and my connection to Pride's mind finally severed.

* * *

My eyes opened with a flash of white as a bright light erupted in the air above me. I heard my friends calling out for me, but I could only focus on one thing. Lucky and Spark were still floating in the air, but they were now overlaid against each other. The two spectral ponies began to shimmer as they merged together. Gasps from my friends indicated that they could see them as well.

“Lucky!” I shouted.

The green mare looked down at me, and smiled as she faded into Spark's magic. Flesh and blood began to seep into the spectral image, coalescing into a green alicorn mare with a jet black mane. Her eyes glowed an unnatural white as she regarded me.

“Radiant Star,” the new pony said, grinning. “This new form is one that suits me well. I half-expected to be a spectral pony like your friend.”

“Spark?” I said, cocking my head. The mare nodded in reply. I shuddered. What had I done? Why did I let Lucky take my place? I had just given Spark physical form!

“And Lucky too,” the mare replied. “We're both here. I'm... not totally sure how that works, but it is what it is. And now, it's time for me to leave. I have things to do, after all. Should you wish to seek me out, find me where it all began. I shall be waiting for you.” The mare shimmered in place, disappearing into thin air.

“Lucky!!! Spark!!!” I shouted. It was no use. They were gone. I felt a hoof on my shoulder. I looked down, seeing Violet standing there.

“What do we do now?” she said. I shook my head, looking down at the ground.

“I don't know, Violet. I don't know.”

Author's Notes

So... there we have it. The single longest chapter I've ever written so far. This chapter was a beast, but at the

same time, I opted to not split it due to many factors. First off, was the memories of the Sins. I wanted to show each one and how they became who they are.

Second of all, it was imperative that we see Star and Pride's fight, as well as Lucky and Spark. I've been leading up to this for several chapters now, and I am so happy to have finally gotten there!

If you enjoyed this chapter, or this story overall, feel free to leave a comment, a favorite, and an upvote! Every little bit helps! Thanks to you guys, Starlight has now accrued over 25,000 views on FIMFiction itself. I'm still in awe at how many of you like this. Fear not, Star's adventure is not over, not even close. There's still plenty to go.

Now, onto the plugs! As always, Radiant Star's tumblr is open for business! <http://askradiantstar.tumblr.com> is the address. Check it out!

Also, a while back I started a contest for a cameo in the story which was for fanart. Unfortunately, I got very few entries, which made me quite sad. At the very least though, we do have a winner. The winner is amanekudara, with his awesome pic of Star/Violet. Check it out [here](#)!

My story plug is of a well known one in the FoE community, but it's still a good one. "[Fallout Equestria: Tales of a Courier RELOADED](#)" is a great fic, and its author a friendly hobo is also one of the hosts of Waster's Weekly, a great podcast devoted to all things FoE. Check it out!

Once again, much thanks to Wirepony and Vialal. You guys helped a lot with ideas for things and how to progress this chapter, even if I was slightly cryptic about a lot of stuff.

I also want to extend a huge amount of thanks to one Snipehamster. I'm sure most of you people out there know Snipey as one of the editors of Project Horizons. During the editing stage of this chapter, Wirepony sought out some sage advice from this master of wordcraft, and this whole thing ended up in a far better state of mind because of it. Thank you sir from the bottom of my heart. You're a genius, and I really appreciate the assistance.

Major thanks to the folks in the FoE Resource chat, you are all awesome (especially McMesser!). Also, big thanks to Kkat, for creating this crazy little world.

Author's Author's Notes:

So... some changes got made to this chapter. The former Puneta's have been rewritten to become the Hellraisers, a gang of raiders in Chicacolt, due to the fact that they were in a sense blatantly a bad Mexican stereotype that was unintentional in the end result, but still could be construed as offensive to some. As always, the message of Starlight remains to be one of hope and the power of second chances. And the best thing about them is that everyone deserves them. So... the gang, however small their part really is. If anyone had noticed this and felt offended by the original version of them, I do apologize. It was never an intent to offend anyone, and thus why they are being corrected now.

Much thanks, love, and respect to Grudir off of Reddit, who pointed out all of this in some very helpful feedback. Thank you sir. That kind of feedback is hard to come by in the Wasteland. Thanks for being the voice of reason and the voice of Three Dog. Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts.