

Fallout **EQUESTRIA**

By Kkat

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Art presented in this book provided by:
Josh Master
Olav Midttun
Ken Stone
Kathryn Shaw

CONTENTS

Chapter Thirty: Hunters and Prey9

Chapter Thirty-One: Life Interrupted57

Chapter Thirty-Two: Conversations in the Calm Before.....101

Chapter Thirty-Three: Crusaders.....147

Chapter Thirty-Four: Edge of Night.....181

Chapter Thirty-Five: Cold Dawn Light239

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Very Strange Tale of Midnight Shower267

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Shadow of the Ministries339

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Peace in Our Time505



VOLUME FOUR:
THE SHADOW OF THE MINISTRIES

CHAPTER THIRTY



HUNTERS AND PREY

“What are you on the lookout for?”

“Two very angry types of movements. Slow, lumbering, powerful movements and jerky, erratic, excitable movements. Both coming for the kill.”

Virtues.

My first real advice, out of the Stable, was to find my virtue. Well, no, it was to find a weapon, armor and friends. And as daunting a task as that seemed, I believed I had succeeded admirably. It was the advice that followed -- to find that defining positive characteristic that would get me through the darkest horrors that the Equestrian Wasteland could throw at me without losing myself -- that still eluded me. Instead, I substituted other goals, other quests. I was driven to make this blasted world a better place, a brighter place, for the ponies trapped within it.

I felt all my efforts had just hit a wall.

Red Eye was just too smart, too devious and too well-organized. I underestimated him at every turn, and he used it against me with skill

approaching panache. Even his seemingly insane claim to approaching godhood was backed by a crafty and altogether horrifying plan. The sheer cruelty, the coldly calculated butchering of unicorns in an act that would surpass murder, struck a blow to my very soul. And yet, I could already envision his argument: what is the suffering death of a few dozen or possibly even hundred unicorns today for generations of safety and peace for millions in the future?

I tasted bile.

The Goddess was... insane. And yet, she was effectively untouchable. Immensely powerful. And her army of minions, while considerably smaller in number than Red Eye's, were amongst the most formidable opponents in the entire wasteland. And they were completely devoted, if not directly controlled, by her whims. And her whims amounted to our extinction.

And she was such a potent telepath that even if I could come up with a plan, she would rip it from my mind before I could get close enough to her to implement it.

We were racing apotheosis. And we were losing.

I felt the darkness closing in oppressively. If ever I needed a virtue to hold to, it was now.

But even virtues could turn on you. They could go astray, become warped or perverted. Watcher had told me of the six greatest virtues of ponykind -- kindness, laughter, generosity, honesty, loyalty and magic - - although he made it clear that there were many others, and that my own was likely not on that sacred list. I had quipped that I could possibly collect broken, wrecked versions of each of these; I was doing far better at that, it seemed, than finding ponies of true virtue. Still, I had been joking.

Now I had met the Goddess, the thing that was Trixie, and I knew I had witnessed the epitome of the corrupted virtue of magic. All I needed to do was find corrupted kindness and I'd have a set.

*{{OH, BUT YOU HAVE MET CORRUPTED KINDNESS,
LITTLEPIP!}}*

The cruel, sweet voice of the Goddess blasted through my head, swarmed with a chorus of whispers, mostly agreeing. The weight of her thoughts on my mind was heavy, almost suffocating.

{{IT'S YOU.}}

No! No that was not right. She couldn't be right.

I was better than that. I had to be better than that.

But even as I fiercely denied the Goddess' sadistic suggestion, my mind conjured up doubts and demons as if seeking to prove her right.

I had saved the slaves from Old Appleloosa only to abandon them to the care of a town that traded with slavers. I had slaughtered the raiders who raped and hunted that blue pony in Manehattan, only to walk away and leave her to her fate once the immediate threat had passed. How many more? How many other times had I inserted myself into a situation, tried to help, then left? Should I count all of Fillydelphia as a victim of my kindness? I remembered my image in the mirror, reflecting my soul. Was twisted kindness what I had seen there? Was it a monster?

No... no this was sick and poisoned thinking. It was the Goddess mercilessly tormenting me where I was weak. I had a virtue. A good and true one just waiting for me to discover it.

I had to.



We stepped out of Maripony's most intact structure and into the angry daylight, four of the Goddess' alicorns guiding us back to where the *Sky Bandit* had landed.

My PipBuck began click at me. The balefire bomb had been detonated underground here; the radiation bleeding off of the Splendid Valley

sinkhole was nowhere close to the horror of the Fillydelphia Crater. At least, not above ground.

A nearby wall held what appeared to be a map of the building above a pair of water fountains. My PipBuck's click-clicking sped up ominously as I brought it close to them, but I was more interested in scanning in the map for future reference. I suspected I might need it.

All around us, alicorns watched silently from behind crumbled walls or stood amongst broken pillars and collapsed rubble. Their silent presence was eerie and sinister.

"Thriving?" Velvet Remedy asked in a hushed voice, dipping her head. "It feels more like they haunt this place."

I nodded, lowering my voice to reply almost instinctually, as if the alicorn's silence demanded we speak softly. "And have you noticed that they haven't said anything?" Not one of them had telepathically spoken a word since we encountered them in Splendid Valley. In previous encounters, they had been boastfully chatty. "I think the proximity to the Goddess is overwhelming them; their individual minds are being drowned out by hers. This close, they become little more than drones."

"Not that Ah cared much fer their 'individual' personalities," Calamity chimed in, whispering, "Seein' as they were all variations o' *Goddess-is-great, rah-rah-us, y'all-are-insects*. Silence ain't entirely un-golden."

After a moment of thought, he continued, "Ah reckon it's the Taint. Splendid Valley's ripe with it." He pointed out, "She seems t' be able t' communicate with 'er so-called children outside, but nothin' like this, and not with normal folk 'cept in very special cases like Red Eye. But here, she's in our heads like it weren't nothin'. Ah'm bettin' this whole valley is a massive amplifier t' her."

Wonderful. "Well, then don't anypony think anything about what we do now until we're out of this Goddesses-forsaken place."

Calamity barked a laugh at my choice of phrasing.

The alicorns, of course, said nothing. They wove us through the rubble to the flat of asphalt which had once been a landing zone for sky chariots. The *Sky Bandit* sat waiting for us. On the roof, Pyrelight danced and hooted at our return.

Velvet Remedy stopped.

Calamity hesitated, his ears perking as he watched the bird. "Hold up there," he whispered, putting a foreleg out to block me. The four alicorns kept walking towards the *Sky Bandit* either unaware or unconcerned that their charges had stopped following. "That sounds like a warnin'."

Another alicorn dropped out of the sky behind us and raised her shield.

"It is," Velvet Remedy breathed.

The four alicorns trotted up to the *Sky Bandit*, the lead one beginning to turn towards us expectantly, when the asphalt around them erupted in blasts of magical energy. All four alicorns were killed, three instantly with two of them melting into goo, the fourth collapsing several yards away, missing multiple limbs and bleeding to death with a pitiful whinny. Velvet Remedy's horn flared as her anesthetic spell allowed the creature to spend her last seconds without pain.

The alicorns in the ruins around us stumbled in unison. Two more fell as shafts of colored light sliced through the air.

Velvet Remedy muttered something, closing her eyes as her horn flared and five small, flickering orbs of energy shot from the tip. One of the orbs drifted swiftly over my head and floated there. One stayed above Velvet. The others sought out Calamity, Xenith and Pyrelight and hovered over them like tiny guardians.

"New spell?"

Velvet Remedy nodded, saying "I'll explain later" as she looked for a way to run. The alicorns in the ruins were bringing up their shields.

The air was filling with magical energy blasts.

A pack of hellhounds was charging across the tops of the rubble, moving with terrifying speed to engage the alicorns under the covering fire of more hellhounds in the valley.

They'd mined the landing pad! My mind conjured images of hellhounds digging up from beneath until less than half an inch of asphalt separated their holes from the world above, then wondergluing the mines to that thin barrier and filling in the holes behind them.

"Back inside!" I shouted. Regroup first. Get out of the line of fire.

I turned, only to find we were blocked by the shielded alicorn standing behind us. Beyond her, the doorway back into Maripony stood dark and empty. The concrete steps leading up to it tore apart explosively as a hellhound burst out of the ground behind us. Massive claws ripped through the alicorn's shield and tore huge chunks of meat from her side as she turned to fight it. The alicorn almost got a spell off before the hellhound ripped his claws through her face, felling her.

{{INSOLENT CURS!}}

A high-pitched whistle blasted through the air and through my head, the Goddess projecting both mentally and magically through the ruins of Maripony's air raid sirens. I pressed my hooves to my ears, but it didn't help. I was unable to think, unable to move under the assault. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and Xenith all did the same, only the zebra seeming to get any respite from the effort.

The hellhound immediately fell, clutching his ears, howling in pain.

The others cringed in pain then turned, fleeing blindly back into the valley. The one in front of us did not fare as well; three alicorns descended upon him, dropping their shields as they skewered the ambushing creature, driving glowing horns through his thick hide.

One of the three was hit by a lancing beam of light blue energy and dissolved. A hellhound sniper who was either far enough away not to be debilitated by the Goddess' sonic/telepathic attack, or who had protection from it. Clearly, not all these creatures were poor shots.

An orange beam of light hit Calamity, striking him in the wing. For a brief moment, his whole body glowed orange, becoming a Calamity-shaped lamp. The little orb over his head popped, and the glow receded back to his wing before evaporating, leaving a hole in his wing that I could put my hoof through. Velvet Remedy's spell had saved him from being turned to ash. My pegasus friend collapsed in shock, his scream drowned out by the Goddess' attack.

The siren stopped.

The attack continued, but now the flurry of poorly-aimed beams of magical energy were replaced with a small number of expertly aimed ones. The attacks flashed uselessly against the alicorn's shields. In the wake of the sonic attack, the hellhounds didn't charge the base again.



"Really shoulda worn muh old armor," Calamity grunted as Velvet Remedy knelt over him, her horn glowing as she tried not to cry. "Hey, 'least Ah ain't bleedin' out, right?" The magical energy had warped the flesh of his wing around the wound and incinerated the feathers.

"Hush now," she ordered. "Quiet now. Save your strength and let your medical pony do her work." From her pained expression, I could tell it was bad.

Another bolt of energy struck the rubble we had taken refuge behind. The alicorns had flown out to strike down the snipers, but every time they got close, the hellhounds disappeared into the ground. All they were managing to do is get drawn further from the base and increasingly separated. The Goddess had begun recalling several, either suspecting or experiencing a trap.

"Did you see how all of the creatures reacted when the first four were killed?" Xenith asked as she hunted through her pouch of bottles and ingredients. "If the Trixie-monster experiences each alicorn's death, perhaps the death of many at once is painful or disorienting to her."

I nodded, filing that away for examination when we were safely outside the Goddess's range. I looked to Velvet and asked, "Will he be okay? And will he be able to fly again?"

Velvet took longer to answer than I would have preferred. "I can repair the structural damage to his wing with my mending spell, but I can't heal the wound. He'll need at least one extra-strength restoration potion to begin to heal properly, more if he wants to fly again anytime this week. And right now, we do not even possess a healing potion." She looked at me sadly, "If you'll remember, I used up all of our medical supplies patching you lot up inside Stable Two."

I felt a pang of guilt.

"Quite a spell ya got there," Calamity praised, resolutely ignoring his doctor's orders. "Ya saved muh life."

Only the slightest smile touched Velvet Remedy's frowning expression. "Yes, I had hoped to barter for more medical supplies from Doctor Helpinghoof. But with Tenpony Tower surrounded by Red Eye's forces, he wasn't willing to part with anything more than a few healing bandages. So I spent part of my time there learning a couple new spells. A disintegration ward seemed prudent."

Xenith pulled out a vial and offered it to Velvet. She took it and wrapped it in a telekinetic sheath, keeping it floating nearby. She scowled as she added, "Unfortunately, this wing needs more than my spells and some bandages to heal."

"I'm going to need to cut the warped flesh away before I can start rebuilding and mending the bones of your wing," Velvet Remedy insisted remorsefully, addressing Calamity. "This is magical damage; if I don't remove all the affected flesh, your wing will never heal properly. You're going to bleed a lot when I do so, but Xenith has given me something that should reduce the blood loss." She frowned, "This would be excruciating, so I'm going to have to use my anesthetic spell. You're not going to be able to move for the better part of an hour."

A beam of pink light struck above the doorway into Maripony. A cinderblock's worth of the wall glowed and dissolved.

Xenith turned to me. "You made the wagon fly before. Can you fly us all away from here?"

I shook my head. I'd been asking myself the same thing. "I can, but floating myself is incredibly draining. I don't think I'd be able to get us very far. And even if I could, I can't move us very fast. And all those hellhound snipers would need is one good shot to blow us up."

"Then we are trapped here until we find medical supplies for the winged one."

"Dang, girl, have ya just not learned our names yet? Ah'm Calamity."

"My apologies... Calamity. I am... not used to thinking in names or to being..." The ex-slave zebra was clearly having difficulty putting her feelings into words. "...on a level of familiarity where names are appropriate for me to utter."

I could have sworn I'd heard her refer to at least one of us by name before, but now that I thought about it, I couldn't place an instance. The closest I could come was her questioning how Calamity got his name. Only the largest figures in her life had been given names, Red Eye and Stern who ruled those who had enslaved her, or figures of legend like Doombunny and Nightmare Moon.

She'd kept her silence for how many years? I knew how impossible it had seemed to form friendships with my peers in Stable Two, having been the awkward blank-flank with the alcoholic mother. Being a zebra in the Fillydelphia slave pits would have been even worse. I wondered if she ever bothered to learn the names of most of her tormentors. Is this the way she had come to identify ponies in her mind?

"Do you believe there may be medical supplies inside here?" Xenith asked, looking towards Maripony.

I checked my PipBuck's automapping feature as well as the scan of the wall map. To my chagrin, Maripony's medical clinic was in the section that had collapsed into the crater. Anything that had been in there

would be crushed, scattered and probably tainted. There were bathrooms that might have medical boxes, but would they be stocked with the sort of supplies Calamity needed? I felt it was doubtful, and I wasn't eager to try. The horror of what lurked in there, and what she had done, curdled my blood. I knew the Goddess needed us, but what if she changed her mind? I didn't want us to suffer the same fate as Twilight Sparkle.

"There's a hospital a few miles from here," Calamity announced, surprising all of us. "Part of the gem minin' town that served this place. When they shut down the mines, the town was abandoned; but they opened parts o' it back up to house the ponies who worked at Maripony an' their families."

I didn't ask how he knew any of this. Calamity had been surviving in the Equestrian Wasteland for many years before we had met. Who knew what rumors and scraps of information he had learned? I was content just to be thankful for this change in our luck.

Another shot struck the wall I was hiding behind, causing it to glow and melt. I scooted my tail to another bit of cover. We weren't going anywhere until they stopped taking so many potshots in our direction.

"And there should be plenty o' rooftops t' hide out on while Ah heal," Calamity assured us. "Ain't perfect, but probably the safest place from the hellhounds... if we c'n get there." We all knew we were talking about several miles' travel over hellhound-infested, irradiated and taint-soaked landscape.

"Just point the way, Calamity," I said, sounding more sure than I felt. "I have a plan."

"Ya always do," Calamity grinned. "Jus' get us t' Old Olneigh, an' we'll be fine."



The hellhounds seemed to lose interest after about an hour. It made me wonder if there was a larger purpose behind the attack or if this had just been sport.

I stood on the railing ringing Maripony's short water tower, my binoculars floating in front of my face. From here, I could just make out the shapes of Old Olneigh in the distance, resting peacefully. An elevated highway passed nearby, going nowhere. The highway had collapsed less than half a mile beyond the off-ramp to the town, leaving a line of rubble and crushed wagons that time and the valley had mostly succeeded in erasing.

Turning my gaze towards the horizon, I glimpsed a shadow that may have been Ponyville. Beyond that, the sky turned hazy and thick from the smoke of the Everfree fires. Walking around the rim, I realized I could spot three of those needle-like towers rising into the cloudy heavens above. I was fairly sure that one of them was the same one I had spotted from the outskirts of Cloudsdale, but I hadn't seen the others before.

Coming full circle, I looked back again at Old Olneigh, then traced the path we would have to travel to get there: a set of train tracks that stretched from Old Olneigh to Maripony, crossing rocky flatland with only minor undulations save for a gulch filled with hints of scraggly vegetation and sick, stagnant water. I couldn't make out any details, but the plants beneath the bridge moved as if there was a much stronger wind blowing down the gulch than the faint breeze that stirred my mane.

My view turned black as an alicorn flew across my narrow scope of vision, obscuring the landscape. I put away the binoculars, hurrying back down.

More alicorns were beginning to return. The ones already here had returned to their silent lurking, seeming to pay us no attention. I was expecting either the Goddess or her alicorns to attempt another escort, but it was almost as if they had forgotten we were here. Yet that was impossible; they kept looking right at us. Maybe the Goddess was

gauging what we would do next? Or maybe she was recovering? She had lost quite a few of her children over the space of an hour.

I wasn't the only one who found this behavior bizarre.

"Howdy!" Calamity said, trotting shakily up to one of the dark purple alicorns and waving a hoof in her face. "Remember us? The ponies y'all want t' find yer stuff for ya? Got a hurt wing here. If one o' y'all would care t' hitch yerself up, we c'n all be outta yer mane that much faster."

He turned to me, wobbling a little from the last fading effects of the anesthetic spell. "This is weird, right?"

"Maybe the Goddess is taking a great and powerful nap?" Xenith suggested. Calamity snorted a laugh that ended in a wince.

"Hey, Xenith," Calamity suddenly announced, "Ah never said it, but Ah wanted y'all t' know Ah'm glad yer free an' all."

Merciful Celestia, Calamity. Awkward much?

Xenith looked at him quietly. Then said simply, "Thank you."

Calamity chewed on that, then tried again, "So... those potions ya brew? Any o' them good for strengthenin' armor or helpin' w' equipment maintenance?"

"No," Xenith answered. Seeming to understand his intention, she offered politely, "I do know many poisonous brews should you be looking to make your bullets more lethal."

I felt for him. He was trying to connect with the new member of our group. He had been the most welcoming of her, trusting my judgment. But since then, they hadn't really bonded the quiet way Xenith and Velvet Remedy had, or even established the sort of relationship (would rivalry be the best word? grudging respect?) that Xenith and SteelHooves shared. They were friendly acquaintances; and I suspected Calamity was trying to find a way to turn that into true friendship.

Calamity trotted around the alicorn. She turned lethargically, keeping him in her sight. "Ah'm tempted to start shootin' 'em. Take out as many as we can." Velvet shot him a look of alarm and he backed down with a grin. "Ah didn't say I was gonna. Ah just said it was temptin'."

Xenith shook her head. "We should make the most of this respite to implement the little one's plan without interference."

I floated Calamity's Enclave armor out of the Sky Bandit, as well as Spitfire's Thunder and our other vital equipment. I didn't want anyone trotting up to it when the area around the passenger wagon could still be mined.

As I placed our equipment in the center of a large hunk of capsized wall, Velvet called us to gather close. Pyrelight landed on her back, puffing herself up and looking important.

As a precaution, Velvet was going to cast another ward against disintegration upon us. I had been watching Calamity when his orb burst, but I hadn't realized the ones over the rest of us had disappeared simultaneously.

"I can cast this spell over multiple friends," Velvet explained as she recast her spell, "But it collapses after any of you are hit. So please be dears and try not to get shot."

She turned towards me. "Especially you. I really hate this idea. You're too vulnerable. Why is it that you are always the one in the most danger, Littlepip?"

But she knew the answer. We'd been over this before.

All my friends gathered on the slab of concrete as I wrapped them and it in a field of levitation.

Velvet turned to help Calamity into the Enclave Armor, being extremely careful with his partially-mended wing. She was wearing the zebra-armor again, insisting we minimize the risks as much as possible. "Particularly since Littlepip seems insistent on taking more than her fair share."

I floated the chunk of Maripony's wall upward, not stopping until it was at least four stories above me. I was counting on the concrete to shield them from the hellhound's magical energy weapons.

I understood Velvet Remedy's concern, but this time it couldn't be helped. My telekinetic magic had grown powerful enough that I could float this large section of wall and all of them on it easily, but adding myself to the mix would create such a strain that I would be lucky to make it halfway without suffering burnout. I agreed to lighten myself enough to prevent my hoofsteps from triggering mines or announcing my presence to any hellhounds who might be lurking just beneath the surface, but that was all. In the end Velvet Remedy had to accept it.

It had to be me.

I started forward, moving around the ruins of Maripony. The slab of wall with my friends on it floated along high above me.

While I would not say as much, I was grateful to be able to take the risk in their place.

Was this something Corrupted Kindness would do? As soon as I had that thought, I pushed it out of my mind. I couldn't afford self-doubts right now.

As I reached the cracked edge of the Maripony base, I hesitated. My PipBuck was click-clicking, warning me of the radiation. But there was no sound, no special display on my E.F.S., designed to warn me of taint.

Old Olneigh suddenly felt a very long way away.



Plotches of red on my E.F.S. compass alerted me to more threats.

I floated the zebra rifle close and slipped into S.A.T.S. even as I trotted. I was pacing myself, advice from a book (*The Egghead's Guide to Running*) that I perused in Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum during one of the hours where Homage was playing DJ Pon3 and giving me a chance to catch my breath. I had several miles to go, and I wanted to

make the distance as quickly as possible -- which surprisingly meant *not* pushing myself as fast as I could.

A spiny dart hit my side, bouncing harmlessly off my armored utility barding. My targeting spell latched onto the first bloatsprite, then the second. I fired off a three-round burst at each, and the taint-swollen bugs erupted in flame as they fell to the ground.

I continued to trot along the tracks, quickening my pace just a little to make up for seconds lost while shooting. The wall holding my friends floating high above me, keeping pace. We were nearing the gulch.

My skin was beginning to itch in strange places. I fretted, wondering if it was nerves or an allergic reaction. Or, worse, the first symptoms of Taint.

My E.F.S. compass filled with red. Dozens of little lights appeared. Then more. The gulch was swarming with hostile life.

I trotted onto the tracks and prepared to break into a gallop, hoping that the rather rickety wooden bridge would offer me protection.

Something bobbed up over the edge of the gulch. I shuddered, staring at the taint-mutated thing. It looked like a plant, its huge head covered in gas sacs that allowed it to float, the stalk drooping down and dragging behind it. A sphincter in the center of its head tightened and then spit foul goop at me. The spore-laden effluent splattered the ground near my hooves, sending up a choking stink.

The Equestrian Wasteland never seemed to run out of new vileness. Several nearly identical floating spitter-plants were moving up out of the gorge towards me.

I slipped into S.A.T.S. again, locking targets on the closest two, sending two three-round bursts into the sphincter-heads of each monster as a third sprayed its filth at me. I felt the crud splash against my armor and coat, burning where it touched and causing me to drop my targeting spell as I gagged on the stench.

The two floaters I had hit ignited spectacularly, the gas pods that gave them mobility rupturing in flame like miniature versions of Pinkie Pie Balloons.

Three more of the floating spitter-plants rushed up from the gulch, one hitting the burning form of the first one and igniting explosively itself. The second spit its spore-sewage at me while the third charged towards me as if intending to latch on and devour. I cantered to the side, dodging the spit and bucked S.A.T.S. back up, targeting the charging one first and then the one which had successfully hit me.

Bullets burst from the silenced muzzle of the zebra rifle. The two targeted plants became flailing columns of fire. But the floaters kept coming. I dropped the targeting spell and brought it back up immediately, targeting two more.

One of the burning plants spit at me, its spore-sewage now on fire. Mercifully, the burning crud splashed across the tracks behind me, missing by a yard.

My skin was beginning to really hurt where I had been hit. I dropped out of S.A.T.S. again and shook, flinging the goop away from me. Then lifted the rifle and brought up the targeting spell, firing again at the advancing, half-burning herd of plants.

One of the burning floater plants tumbled back into the gulch. I could hear more gas-bladders catching fire and bursting as a rapid chain-reaction quickly set several hundred yards of the gulch ablaze.

I sprinted, galloping across the wooden bridge as flames from the gulch began to lick at it. Fierce heat and a choking reek buffeted me as I forced myself across, my eyes stinging. Several of the plants in the conflagration below spit burning spore-sewage at me. Most hit the bridge, setting it properly ablaze. Burning effluent struck my left flank, my hindleg and saddle bags catching fire!

I bit down, knowing that a scream could bring hellhounds. I pushed, running as hard as I could, my leg in searing pain. I was pouring concentration into levitating the wall now, the physical agony

threatening to break my spell. The fire was spreading up my side. It hurt to breathe.

Flames licked at my hooves, burning them. I did scream.

I was almost across the burning bridge, the gulch below a writhing river of fire, when the hellhound tore out of the ground, alerted by my scream. But he was far enough ahead of me that Calamity could target him from the platform above. Four blasts of magical energy knifed down from above, melting the hellhound into colored sludge.

I began to lower the wall, choking on the smoke and the stench of my own burning coat, knowing I wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. It was three yards above the ground when the pain overwhelmed me and I dropped it.

I made it to the end of the bridge in a stumbling gallop and collapsed, rolling on the ground, squirming as I put out the fire on my left side, screaming.



"Just get to Old Olneigh and everything will be fine," Xenith chimed, her exotic voice taking a mocking tone as she peered at the town below through my binoculars.

We had made it to the top of the overpass and were looking down at Old Olneigh from above. From here, we could see dozens of hellhounds lurking about the town. A couple were even on rooftops.

"Galdangit, why do ya ponies ever listen t' me?" Calamity asked. "Ah ain't Li'lpip. Y'all know all my plans ain't worth shit."

I flopped over, telekinetically floating the binoculars to my eyes. I still couldn't feel anything -- Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell doing its work -- but that didn't prevent me from using my levitation spell. In fact, it almost made it easier. I had spent the second half making myself light enough for Pyrelight to carry while I floated the others and the wall behind us.

The older unicorn had wasted no time in wrapping me with the rest of our medical bandages as she scolded me on taking on yet another gruesome attack for the team. But with the pain gone, and out of the choking smoke, I felt assured that I had done the right thing. There was something wrong with me, I could feel it where the spit had hit me. Something crawling beneath my skin that even Velvet's spell couldn't cover. I had floated my own forehoof so I could check my PipBuck's medical diagnostic spell. It confirmed that I was suffering from *something*, but it couldn't determine what that something was. It wasn't poison, and I checked clean for spore infestation. No, the spore-sewage of those floating plants had been laced with Taint.

I had never believed I could make the distance without exposure to Taint; I had never been that lucky. Rather, it would be a matter of *how much* exposure, and how quickly Taint took its toll. I knew that the society keeping Tenpony Tower's secrets possessed a spell that could purge Taint itself, although I didn't know if it could reverse the damage caused by it. That would be my hope.

The ruins of Old Olneigh included several nearly-intact buildings, one of which was the hospital. Sitting on the roof was a contraption I had never seen before, colored like a pink-and-yellow candy cane with periwinkle propeller blades affixed to the top.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing it out.

"Ah believe... that's an earth-pony sky wagon," Calamity said. "Trust it t' an earth pony t' find a way t' fly."

I could use that! No more running on the ground as I levitated the others in safety. "Do you think it still works?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope," Calamity said, deflating my daydream of floating everyone behind me while keeping safely off the ground in the earth pony contraption. But then he added, "But Ah'll bet Ah c'n fix 'er up so she will."

Hope resurrected. "Perfect! Because that's our Plan B."

I looked over the rest of the town, noting a strange glowing antenna array amongst multiple crates and barricades on a roof across the street from the hospital, and a scattering of old military vehicles on the road. There was a capsized wagon with metal boxes scattered around it, and a heavy tank half-sunken into the ground. Instead of a normal earth tone or camouflage coloration, the tank had been painted in bright, multicolored stripes. The paint job was old and faded, but still added a surprising splash of color to the town.

I laughed. “That tank looks like a rainbow.” I could think of no logical reason for it to be colored that way.

“Really? Is that what they look like?” Xenith asked. At my questioning expression, she explained, “I have never seen a rainbow.”

I first found the zebra’s assertion impossible, then tragically sad, then curious. I looked up at the clouds that sealed off the sky. I’d seen it rain here. I’d seen it rain a lot, in fact. But I had never seen a rainbow Outside, except in posters and illustrations. In fact, the only real rainbows I had ever seen were in Stable Two, when the Apple Orchard sprayers were on. The Overmare’s artificial sunlight would stream through the mist, creating shimmering arcs of beautiful color. I used to beg my mother to let me play in them when I was younger. She even let me once.

“Ayep,” Calamity said in answer to my thoughts. “T’ get a real rainbow, ya need either magic or direct sunlight. Ain’t been a proper rainbow in the Equestrian Wastelands probably ever.”

He thought a moment, then added, “Cept maybe in the Everfree Forest, since the cloud cover gets mighty fragmented there.”

I exchanged looks with Velvet Remedy as a knife slipped into my heart. I had never thought to miss them until I realized we were living in a world without rainbows.



“Ah’m gonna shoot ‘em,” Calamity announced before picking up Spitfire’s Thunder in his teeth and aiming it over the concrete railing of the overpass, taking aim for one of the hellhounds in the town below.

“No!” hissed Xenith, pushing Spitfire’s Thunder with her hoof. “If you shoot them, then you will let them know we are here.”

“Wait,” Velvet Remedy started to suggest, but my focus was on Calamity and Xenith, and their focus was on each other.

Calamity started to say something through the gunbit, then put the weapon down to properly argue. “Ayep. Ah figure Ah c’n pick a couple off before they realize where the shots are comin’ from, then more as they come outta those buildin’s t’ investigate. Let ‘em come runnin’ towards us. We got plenty o’ space ‘tween here an’ there t’ snipe them off in.”

I was already pulling out my own sniper rifle, levitating my anesthetized body into an optimal sniping position.

“Littlepip, wait!” Velvet said, but her next words were cut off by our zebra companion.

“Are you fools?” Xenith trotted in place. “This is not how you behave in enemy territory. Our enemy outnumber us. And these are not stupid raiders, but clever opponents. You do not engage them wantonly.”

Calamity cocked his head. “An’ what would ya have us do? Hide an’ sneak?”

“Yes,” Xenith nodded firmly. “Be alert, move fast, keep downwind and to the shadows. Avoid them whenever possible. Kill only those we cannot avoid, and do so swiftly and silently.”

Calamity looked to me, “Ah say we take out what we c’n while we c’n do so from a distance. Less o’ them means less t’ worry ‘bout fightin’ up close.”

Xenith sighed, stepping between Calamity and me, facing him. “Listen to me. I have watched you. You are a hunter. You know how to hunt. But do you know how to be prey?”

Calamity took a step back, lifting the bug-eyed visor of his Enclave armor to stare back at her directly. “Ah ain’t got no interest in bein’ prey.”

“Well, I have spent most of my life as prey. And I know how to survive when you are outnumbered and chased,” Xenith informed him. “Perhaps you should listen.”

Calamity again looked past her to me. “Li’lpip? Yer call.” Xenith turned towards me too.

I weighed the options. But ultimately, the tactics I knew won out. “I agree with Calamity. We pick off what we can now before heading in.”

I floated up the sniper rifle, loading armor-piercing rounds and taking aim. From this distance, I couldn’t use my targeting spell to help me. But I had no trouble lining up a headshot just through the scope.

Xenith nickered, shaking her head. Calamity picked Spitfire’s Thunder off the asphalt of the overpass and took position twenty yards away from me.

“Damn it, wait!” I heard Velvet Remedy shout, but I had already pulled the trigger.

BLAM!!

BLAM!!

The air filled with the sound of ear-splitting thunder as we began to fire down on Old Olneigh. I watched as the head of the hellhound in my sights burst in a bloody spray. I moved to acquire my next target. The hellhounds were all looking up now, turning, beginning to move. I found a second and fired, but the creature moved too fast. I aimed ahead of him, firing a second shot and then a third. I was no longer able to aim for a specific part of the body; I was just hoping to hit him

at all. My second shot did, but it only slowed him down. The third missed entirely.

I kept trying.

Several shot back, beams of magical energy cutting the air, but we were too far away and too well protected by the overpass to be in danger from anything other than a dedicated sniper.

Calamity was having far better luck. Every shot hit its target, crippling or killing. He started picking off the ones in the street as I turned my focus to those just coming out of doorways. That worked better. I felled a second. And a third.

“Aw crap,” Calamity hissed as the hellhound he had turned his aim on dove into the ground, digging through the street like it was wet toilet paper. Calamity fired, blowing the creature’s tail off as it disappeared.

They weren’t coming out of the doors anymore. And as I looked up, I saw the last of the hellhounds on the street disappear into a hole.

We had killed ten of them.

“Well brilliant,” Velvet Remedy facehoofed. “Both of you. Now they know we’re here *and* we’ve attacked them first.” She looked cross.

Calamity wiggled his wounded wing. “Muh wing disagrees.” Velvet Remedy’s ears drooped.

“Now,” Xenith told Calamity, “You are prey. We are all prey.”



They came for us on the overpass while I was still paralyzed by the anesthetic spell. The hellhounds weren’t foolish enough to come running up the on ramp like we had hoped. Instead, they dug their powerful claws into the pier beneath us and began to climb.

The first one clawed its way over the railing almost on top of us. Pyrelight was the fastest to react, filling it with a face-full of radioactive green flame. Calamity recovered quickly, firing two of the novasurge rifles in his Enclave armor directly into the hellhound’s torso

as it lashed out with its claws, barely missing the balefire phoenix. The monster tilted back, dissolving.

"They're coming up from beneath us," Xenith warned before turning to dig in her satchel.

Velvet Remedy cooed to Pyrelight, "Would you be so kind as to burn them off the pier?" Pyrelight hooted happily and leapt over the edge. I could hear the roar of flames beneath.

Pyrelight was able to take out two of them before more on the ground abandoned climbing and started shooting at her. She appeared, dodging and weaving between shots as the magical energy attacks drove her away from the overpass and the ponies she was protecting.

Xenith produced a bottle and passed it to Velvet Remedy. "Dip your slugs in this before you load them," she instructed. "The poison will cripple the creatures if your shot isn't enough to kill them."

Velvet Remedy opened her combat shotgun, floating out the slugs and dipping them as instructed, a grim look on her face.

Two more crawled over the railing. I was ready this time, floating up Little Macintosh as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired into their heads. The hellhound's brains splashed out of the exit wounds.

Three more replaced the two I had just killed. And the sound of rending concrete warned me that more were digging directly up through the overpass from the top of the pier.

Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell hit one of the hellhounds, causing the creature to fall. She lifted her shotgun towards another. And hesitated.

The hellhound lashed out at her, his claws slashing shallow lines of red across her breast and throat as I telekinetically shoved her back.

"Surrender," she offered to the creature. "Don't make me hurt you."

"Galdangit!" Calamity shouted, firing a bevy of magical energy bolts into the hellhound. The creature collapsed into a steaming puddle, leaving Velvet Remedy and Calamity staring at each other through the rising smoke. "Don't reason wi' 'em! They ain't interested!"

"They're people!" She shouted back. "They have a right to live."

"Y'all heard the zebra!" Calamity shouted, turning to fire at another hellhound as he dug up through the overpass asphalt. "They're huntin' us."

"And whose fault is that?" she quipped back loudly, throwing a protective shield around Xenith. The hellhound's claws tore through Velvet's shield like it was made of colored air. The zebra stepped inside the attack, rising on her hindlegs and throwing up one hoof to stop the monster's swinging arm while driving another hoof against the thick hide of his throat. The hellhound collapsed, choking.

"Has anypony even *tried* just talking to them?" Velvet cried out in exasperation.

I reloaded Little Macintosh as quickly as I could. They were coming faster now. It was getting harder to put them down as quickly as they surfaced. And one good swipe from their claws would kill any one of us.

There were bloody hellhound corpses and piles of sludge all around us. We'd managed to kill nearly ten more, miraculously without getting crippled or killed. Even if Velvet Remedy had a point, it was far too late now. I told her so as I fired point blank at a hellhound and somehow missed. The creature bore down on me with its claws.

Velvet Remedy sang. A single, high-pitched note. The hellhound immediately fell back, its clawed paws covering its ears. It turned and fled back down the hole it had come out of so fast that I didn't have time to bring up my targeting spell and shoot it in the back.

Velvet continued to hold the note, clear and strong. I looked around, and the other hellhounds were disappearing, fleeing the overpass.

Once they were all gone, Velvet's voice finally broke. Panting she fixed all of us with a glower. "Savage animals and monsters are one thing; but with people, there's usually a way that doesn't require killing each other!"



We moved cautiously into Old Olneigh. The sun was beginning to set, and I wanted to get into the hospital and out again before the coming darkness put us at an even greater disadvantage.

We were taking Xenith's advice now. Not engaging. Moving swiftly and quietly. Of the group of us, only Velvet Remedy was unskilled at stealth, so I was floating her along with us. The faint glow coming from my horn and shining around her worried me. It was like I was painting her as a target. But from our experiences, it seemed the hellhounds hunted by sound more than sight (possibly by scent as well) so it felt more important to keep her hooves off the ground.

As we pushed through the remains of a building, I spotted several pony-shaped figures laying on a floor above us through a collapsed section of ceiling. I waved a hoof at the others. "Hold up. I want to take a look."

I floated myself upwards, sweating with the effort, my horn glowing brighter. But there were no red marks on my E.F.S. compass, no sign of life on the floor above at all, so I felt momentarily safe in pushing myself.

As I levitated through the hole, I could see the bodies were of Steel Rangers, three of them clad in metal armor and a fourth who was not. The fourth sparked my curiosity: a yellow unicorn mare wearing thickly armored red robes with the sparks-and-gears symbol of the Steel Rangers embroidered into it. I had not seen a Ranger wearing anything other than Steel Ranger armor, save for Elder Blueberry Sabre. All four of them had died from terrible wounds inflicted by hellhound claws. The bodies were desiccated; they had been here quite some time.

The hellhounds had mined the floor around the bodies. One by one, I disarmed them.

I began scavenging the bodies, searching for any clues as to what brought these four to Old Olneigh as well as any supplies or ammo that might benefit us. I was in luck. The robed pony had two StealthBucks

and a memory orb. One of the other rangers had magically-enchanted ammunition that was of the same caliber as Calamity's normal battle saddle.

I brought my treasures back to the others.

"Ya ain't plannin' on lookin' inta that there orb while we're in Old Olneigh, right?" Calamity said with a gentle warning. "Y'all remember our little talk, don'tcha?"

I nodded solemnly. "I Pinkie Pie Swear."

"Ya what now?"

"Nevermind. Tell you later. And yes, I promise."

As we moved to the edge of the street, my E.F.S. warned me that there were at least four hellhounds around the corner. I halted everyone.

We might be able to take them. We had surprise. But it would only take one good swipe for them to behead one of us. And the fight would draw others. No. We would continue to follow Xenith's advice. I motioned everyone back the other way.

"Ah hate this," Calamity muttered in a whisper. "Ah want t' hunt the hunters, not play these scurryin' games. Ah ain't a rabbit."

Xenith gave a wry smile. "Humility does not come easy to you, does it?"

Calamity turned to her. "What's that s'posed t' mean? Are ya sayin' Ah'm a show-off?"

"She wouldn't be entirely wrong, would she?" Velvet Remedy purred with just the right tone to sooth and embarrass the pegasus.



The partially collapsed firehouse tilted at an insane angle, making the entire world seem alien and threatening. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and I scrambled across the maze of broken floors and leaning columns. Pyrelight swooped between floors, occasionally diving down

to the bright red firehouse wagons that lay crushed and partially buried under swaths of flooring.

A hellhound lurched into the doorway behind us... only to find Xenith waiting for it. A swift blow beneath the ribs froze the creature in place, paralyzing it. As it fell, a bolt of magical energy shot through the doorway, striking the zebra in the throat. She glowed brightly and the orbs over our heads burst. Xenith fell, bleeding from a wound in her throat the size of a memory orb.

Velvet Remedy struck the monster with an anesthetic spell, then rushed to Xenith, floating out her dress and using it to apply pressure to the wound. The dress was quickly ruined as it soaked with blood.

“C’n Ah please kill ‘em?” Calamity huffed. Velvet frowned, not saying anything. Xenith rasped, “Yes... silently... and cut them open... the blood... smell...”

The hellhounds were hunting us, tracking us now clearly by scent. I understood what Xenith intended, as did Calamity. Velvet Remedy turned away, unwilling or unable to watch as we slew the two hellhounds. We made it quick, merciful. It was the least we could do, considering that we were about to defile their bodies.

“This ends *any* chance of diplomacy,” Velvet moaned.

I hesitated, floating a jagged piece of sheet metal out of the debris and positioning it over the hellhound’s body. I had to disembowel him. Spread his stink. Cover our path with the stench of his death. It was vile.

Slowly, I lowered the jagged metal, slashing at the hellhound’s armored hide. Slowly sawing into him. It was incredibly hard, and the reek was unbearable. I took what little comfort I could in knowing that at least he had died quickly and without pain.

Corrupted Kindness, the little pony in my head whispered in the voices of the Goddess.

Please no.

By the time I was done, I felt sick to my stomach. I'd killed plenty, but this made me feel like a raider. My mind conjured up the image of myself, bleeding, wearing raider armor -- the image from the magical mirror.



There were bathrooms on the floor above, and medical boxes in each of them. Cracked mirrors and shattered toilets leaned at crazy angles. The whole tilt of the building was making me nauseous. Even more than I already was from the grisly work before.

My PipBuck complained as I got close enough to the sink for it to scan the contents of what little plumbing remained functional. The levels of radiation in the water here rivaled and usually exceeded the levels in Fillydelphia.

I sat, braced against the wall and picked the lock on the medical box in the little mare's room. The lock clicked open with ease. I opened it, emptying the box of its meager medical supplies and adding them to the supplies from the medical box in the little buck's room. Nothing that would help Calamity's wing, but the small healing poultice would close and heal Xenith's wound. The wasteland sometimes gave small favors.

I pushed myself up, feeling unsteady on the canted floor, and hurried back to the others. They were gathered in what had been the firehouse kitchen.

Velvet Remedy took the poultice and applied it, then borrowed a needle and thread from Calamity's clothing repair kit. A cabinet two buildings back had offered up an old bottle of apple whiskey, half empty. I whimpered inside as the drink went to sterilizing the needle. I could use a sip. I contented myself with a draught from my last canteen. It was nearly empty.

I itched in ways I shouldn't itch.

The poultice had stopped the bleeding and partially closed the gaping wound in Xenith's neck. Velvet began to sew the wound closed completely. Even with Velvet's expert attentions, the wound was going to remain an ugly scar for the rest of her life. I realized not for the first time that the zebra would be dead if the magical bolt had stuck her just an inch differently.

"Now you wait here and rest," Velvet ordered the zebra mare. "And Littlepip, you watch her. I'm taking Calamity to find something to use as rags to clean you butchers off." Velvet stuck her nose in the air and trotted out.

Calamity scowled but followed, pausing next to me long enough to remind me, "No orbs."

I watched him walk out after her. Rags? Sounded more like an excuse to talk to Calamity alone.

I let out a long sigh. "Worst. Day. Ever." It wasn't. But ever since we entered Splendid Valley, the day had been working very hard at becoming so, reaching a Luna-Tier rating of badness.

Xenith lay still for almost a full minute before getting up and moving about the kitchen. She had to brace herself on sloping counters as she rifled through the cabinets.

"Well, at least you're as good at following doctor's orders as the rest of us," I chuckled as the zebra started pulling pots out and setting them on the table. One of them slid down the incline; I caught it magically before it hit the floor.

"Xenith," I asked as a worry from the days before flooded back, "Do you trust me?"

Without turning from her task, she replied by asking, "Trust you about what?"

It was a dodge, but still a fair question. "Do you trust me as a... person?"

"No," she said simply. "Should I?"

I was taken back by the cool, honest answer. “Why not?”

“You are impulsive and have difficulty controlling your urges,” she said as she opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a hunk of something covered in grotesquely mutated mold. She set it on the table and I caught it as it tried to slide away, recoiling from the sight of it.

“You are a very quick thinker and equally swift to act,” Xenith continued, crouching to check lower drawers. “This makes you adaptable, perhaps more than any pony or zebra I have ever known. It allows you to improvise where others would be paralyzed. But it also leads you to rash actions from hasty decisions and gets you into trouble as often as it gets you out of it.”

She finally pulled a knife from one of the drawers. She set it on the counter. I caught it too as she turned to look at me. “Although those are just my observations, and I have not known you very long.” She looked me over. “Why do you ask?”

I wasn’t sure what to feel. I wanted to argue with her, but a large part of me suspected she was right and cursed her for being so observant. “Do you think I’m evil?”

Xenith stopped, looking at me oddly. Then laughed. “No, little one. You are one of the most caring souls I have ever met, pony or otherwise.”

Again, the little pony in my head whispered *Corrupted Kindness* in the voices of the Goddess.

“Do you think I’m cursed then?” At her odd expression, I clarified, “I have been touched by Homage.”

The zebra turned back to scouring the kitchen, pulling pans out of a lower drawer to get at a spark battery-powered hot plate. “Of that I am *quite* aware.”

I felt myself flush nervously. “Wh-what do you mean by that?”

“There are lovers who are quiet and there are ones who are not,” Xenith stated. “You are not one of the quiet ones.”

Oh no, dear sweet Celestia.

“You are what my tribe called a ‘whinnier’.”

I felt myself blushing hotly. I wanted to throw myself in the Splendid Valley sinkhole out of sheer embarrassment. “You mean... all those... each...” I squeaked.

“Yes,” Xenith confirmed. “Each.”

It took me several minutes and an old sack that the zebra had given me before I stopped hyperventilating.

“Can you breathe now?” Xenith asked gently.

I nodded. “I think so.”

“The medical pony is right,” Xenith said with a soft smile. “You are cute when you are that color.”

I felt faint, my breathing threatening to quicken again.

I took a moment and composed myself as best I could. “So... am I cursed? Because I love Homage?”

She paused. Then turned away. I waited for her to answer. The answer I received was not what I had expected.

“The zebras may have been wrong about Nightmare Moon,” she admitted. “You ponies may have been right. The wielders of the Elements of Harmony may have broken whatever hold the stars had over Nightmare Moon. Luna may have been... different.”

She turned to me, “But that does not mean that the touch of the stars was still not upon her. That it did not influence her in more subtle ways.” She looked to me. “I am open to your beliefs, but I ask that you be open to mine. Perhaps there is truth in both.”

I frowned. I didn’t want there to be any truth in her beliefs. But I had seen things that suggested otherwise. Things that suggested maybe there was something dark and terrible up there in the vast emptiness that stretched behind the moon.

"But Homage is not evil, she is not twisted, she is no Nightmare Moon," I insisted. "In fact, she saved our lives. She saved yours."

Xenith nodded with a sad smile. "And would you not say it was quite an amazing shot?"

"Absolutely. It was an... what?"

"The weapon from the stars wants to kill," Xenith said. "It yearns to kill."

Okay, now that was just creepy.

"I will accept that Homage is a good, kind pony. And that she is not cursed. Because you ask me to," Xenith conceded. "Even though I do not trust your judgment, I believe you speak truthfully in this. And I suspect you are better experienced at matters of the heart than I am"

I smiled, feeling a touch of relief. "Thank you, Xenith..."

The zebra shook her head. "But I ask in return that you keep an open mind to the things I believe, and a watchful eye for warning signs. The stars take the greatest delight in giving us the means to destroy ourselves and each other. Do you truly think that your relationship has not changed now that she has taken a life for you?"

I felt a chill. I had not considered that before. Or, if I had, I had seen the consequences as being entirely beneficial. She had saved my life. How would that not bring us closer? But had I not, that very night, wept in front of her for having killed a Steel Ranger?

Regardless of whether Xenith's superstitious fears were justified, she had led me to re-examine what had happened in a less self-centered way.

I looked up into the zebra's eyes. "Thank you."



I floated the whole array of pots and pans. Xenith had quickly discovered that no surface in the room was flat enough to safely cook on after a mishap with the hot plate.

Not far outside, Calamity and Velvet Remedy had started arguing. We could hear it from inside the kitchen, but could not make out the words. Not that I wanted to. Xenith fretted, worried that their discussion would attract more hellhounds, but so far they were keeping their voices low enough. Still, it added an unpleasantness to the air.

I distracted myself by returning to an earlier part of my conversation with Xenith. “Do you trust me to tell you the truth?”

“Yes, little one. Unless you believe it is in my best interest to lie.”

Crap. I hated to think she might be right about that. I would have preferred to be more like Homage. But if it came to telling the truth or protecting my friends, I had a track record of choosing the latter. And while I regretted the necessity, it was rare for me to reconsider the choice. Did this mean that I was playing SteelHooves to Homage’s Applejack?

“Well, would you trust me with your life?” I asked as Xenith took the knife and started scraping chunks of mold into one of the pots. She finished then put the knife down. I caught it again.

“It is not a matter of trust. You saved my life. You are responsible for it.” Ugh. More insane zebra logic. All the worse since it was insane, understandable zebra logic. “I have not chosen to release you from that.”

Frustrated, I asked, “Why not? Look where following me has got you? You nearly died! I’ve taken you from one hellhole straight into another.”

The zebra looked at me, a touch of sadness in her eyes. Then turned away. She filled a pot with horribly irradiated water, then began to mix the mold into it, not answering me. I sat and watched. In the very least, maybe I would learn something.

One by one, she added more ingredients, none of which looked healthy. I hoped this wasn’t anything we were intended to consume.

“Don’t talk,” she said, although I wasn’t talking at all anymore. “Be quiet. Run. Hide.” Her voice was low, heavy. “Get your food and

hide, or a pony will take it from you. Don't talk. When they come for you, relax. Let them do what they will do. Don't fight. Don't scream. Don't talk."

She looked up at the canted ceiling. "When they hurt you, grunt. Whimper. Don't talk. Always the same. Until they get bored. Then hide. Heal. Prepare for the next time."

She looked to me. "If they move to kill you, kill them. Then hide the body. Hide it well. Find another place to be. Don't let them suspect you. Be meek. Don't talk. Hide."

A cold shiver passed through me as I stared at the scarred zebra mare.

"It was only after a truly exceptional horror that I dared join the fights. I did not wish them to see that I could fight, but I could no longer bear it." She lowered her head, looking to me with tears in her eyes. "Before you, the slavers. Before the slavers, my husband. Before him, my parents. I have never owned myself. I am not comfortable with the idea. I know this role. I can survive it."

I shook my mane. "I may be responsible for you, as you say. But I am not a slaver. I do not *own* you."

"And for that, you are better than all the others," Xenith admitted. "But still the fact remains that I do not know how to live being responsible for myself."

"I think," I told her, "You'd do fine."



The hallway tilted at such a nauseating angle that I was walking as much on the wall as the floor. I followed close to Calamity, keeping an eye on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle for hellhounds. We were hunters again at Xenith's request.

"Another one on our six," I whispered to him as the light appeared on my compass. "Supply room, I think."

“Ah see it,” Calamity nodded, reminding me that the bug-eye styled visor in his armor had an E.F.S. of its own. Crouching low, the pegasus moved stealthily forward until he was in position directly in front of the door, his four magical energy rifles pulsing eagerly. I telekinetically pushed open the door, holding it so gravity wouldn’t swing it back shut.

A skewering dart shot out of the supply room, bouncing harmlessly off the forehead of Calamity’s black carapace armor. “Humph,” he chuckled, raising on his haunches and striking at the bloatsprite with the stinger of his armor’s segmented scorpion-tail. The impaled creature squealed as it died.

“Heh,” he said, still chuckling. “Ever wish these things could detect threat level instead o’ just threats? Ah almost wasted a lot o’ ammo on a bug.”

I smirked. “Often.” I turned back to our other friends, motioning them forward. Velvet nodded and nudged Xenith, who was crouched and facing the other way, guarding our flank.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle tracked a friendly spot of light as Pyrelight swooped in and out of rooms, searching for enemies to burn... or rodents to eat. The balefire phoenix return to drop the charred corpse of a small animal at Velvet Remedy’s hooves.

“Oooh. Thank you,” Velvet sang lusciously, stroking the bird’s plumage with a gentle hoof. Pyrelight hooted happily and stretched her wings fluttering off again. It boggled my mind.

“Y’know, yer just encouragin’ her t’ keep doin’ that.”

“And why wouldn’t I?” Velvet said sweetly. “My little Pyrelight is a wonderful hunter. Just like she should be.”

Calamity gave a grumpy look in Xenith’s direction. At least, I assumed it was a grumpy look. With my friend hidden inside that armor, I really couldn’t tell. But his posture struck me as grumpy.

I decided I preferred my friend out of that armor. It made him look mysterious and rather evil, and it put up a barrier between us that I

didn't care for. I'd gotten used to it with SteelHooves, but not being able to see Calamity's face just felt wrong.

"She is a bird of prey, after all," Velvet reminded us. Xenith eyed the charred corpse and shook her head, then cantered towards us, moving with surprising ease down the off-kilter hallway.

Calamity flexed his injured wing, and I thought I heard him mutter, "So was Ah not s'long ago."

"So Calamity," I piped up, pulling his attention away. "I had a question that needs a pegasus' expertise."

"Shoot, Li'lpip," he said, seeming to cheer up.

"If I wanted to clear away a large area of clouds, say the area over Manehattan..." Say, just as a totally random example, the area above a megaspell chamber which requires sunlight to function. "How could I do so without having the Enclave all over me?"

Calamity nickered, "Oh no. Whatcha plannin' now, Li'lpip?"

"Just theoretical."

"Ayep. Sure it is," he said, clearly not buying a word of it.

Xenith moved up to the body of the bloatsprite. "Perfect," she intoned, opening her satchel. Leaning down, she tore off its wings and spat them into the satchel. "Now I must find a room to complete the brew"

Xenith moved ahead, taking the lead again.

"Do Ah even want t' know?" Calamity said.

"From what I've seen go into it, I prefer not to."

Returning to my question, Calamity informed me, "Well, there's only one way t' clear an area that big that fast. An' that's with a sonic rainboom."

The gears in my head started turning.

"O' course, the Enclave's response would be swift an' deadly, but ya might have clear skies fer over an hour." He chuckled

ruefully. “Which, sad t’ say, requires a pegasus capable o’ performin’ one. O’ which the Equestrian Wasteland has exactly zero.”

The gears ground to a stop. Damn.

“Sorry, Li’lpip. Show-off or not, that’s one trick Ah ain’t never been able t’ do. Very, very few pegasi can, an’ the Enclave keeps ‘em *real* close.”



When the firehouse had started to topple, the building came to rest against the Maripony Mining Administration Building. A canted firehouse window hung open about five feet from the opening of a shattered window on the opposite building.

“Just a hop, a skip and a jump,” I told Calamity with a smile. I remembered wearing Enclave armor from riding Rainbow Dash’s memory -- it might look fearsomely heavy, but it was amazingly light. There was no reason Calamity couldn’t do this easily.

Calamity braced against the sloping floor. “Easy ‘t say fer y’all who ain’t never had t’ do somethin’ like this without yer wings.” He looked at me. “If Ah fall, y’all are ready t’ catch me, right?”

“Just float him across,” Xenith suggested from the opposite window where she and Velvet Remedy were waiting.

“Yeah,” Calamity agreed. “Ah like that plan better.”

I rolled my eyes then whispered to him, “But which do you think will impress Velvet more?”

Calamity straightened up, shook his fears off, galloped and leapt. He made it with five feet to spare. Show-off.

My turn. I looked down the sloping floor and across the gap to the opposite window sill. It wasn’t even with this window, maybe two feet higher. I swallowed. In Calamity’s defense, the tilted floor was throwing me too.

I galloped forward, lightening myself at the last moment, after I had all the momentum I needed. I sailed across, smacking into Calamity's armored tail.

"See," he joked. "Ah told ya. Nothin' t' it."

I snickered and shook my head.

The room was an open office space filled with desks and terminals, none of which had survived well. I checked my E.F.S. and found red lights moving around us, probably on the floors below. I motioned the others to be quiet, and once again I levitated Velvet Remedy as we moved.

As we passed the last of the desks, I noticed an orange and yellow book laying in an open waste bin. I floated it out, looking the book over. *The Big Book of Boom!* announced the cover, adding beneath: *The Dynamite Guide to Handling Explosives*. Below that was a picture of the author Red "Three-Hooves" Runner with a cartoon balloon saying "Ya better handle 'er right the first time, cuz she won't explode twice!" The book was crammed full of notes and papers. I tucked it away to look over later.

Underneath it was an audio recording. I downloaded it into my PipBuck and slipped my earbloom into an ear. (Surely Calamity wouldn't mind this; listening to the recording wouldn't remove me from my surroundings.)

"Mining Officer Torchwood to all concerned personnel:

"First order of business: We will be having a surprise inspection in two days. Everypony needs to be well rested and at the top of their game. Maripony operations Overmare Sunny Days has authorized a half day tomorrow so that everypony can get plenty of rest and have their uniforms cleaned and starched. Anypony who uses this time to go to Ponyville and get drunk will not be allowed back into the Maripony facility or any operations building within Old Olneigh, and will be docked one week's pay. Baskets, make

sure you have proper headgear this time or you will find yourself no longer employed by Maripony Mining Co.

"Second order of business: Maripony Mining Co. has increased demand for productivity. This means you can expect an increase in work hours of twenty percent with a corresponding fifteen percent increase in your paychecks. Officers whose teams exceed the new quotas will receive a bonus. I cannot say what the bonus is, but I can let you know that the bonus will include ice cream. Likewise, we will be opening up several previously restricted tunnels to mining operations. The Maripony Mining Co. assures you that these tunnels meet and exceed our minimum safety standards.

"Third order of business: There have been increased reports of trespass by relocated Diamond Dogs. Now I don't know if this is a territorial pack-mind thing or if they're just stupid, but if you find a Diamond Dog on Maripony property, you are to instruct the Dog to leave. If the Diamond Dog refuses, use of sonic deterrents are permitted. Ask your team Officers for the newest line in D4 (Diamond Dog Deterrent Device) whistles, now with convenient neck-wrapping loops.

"Fourth order of business: Thanks to Brickbane, we have had to reset our Days Without Serious Injury board back to zero. Thankfully, Brickbane will recover the use of most of her limbs. Remember, D4 neck wrapping loops should be kept short so that your whistle cannot dangle into mining machinery.

"Keep up the good work, everypony."

I turned off the earbloom. We had reached the stairwell and my E.F.S. had lit up with more hostiles. Two hellhounds lurked visibly at the bottom of the stairs down. They were wearing makeshift armor and one of them carried a magical-energy minigun. There were more around the corner.

One of them started sniffing.

I motioned the others back and looked to Xenith. In theory, the potion she had brewed was altering our scent, making us smell like mold and

bloatsprites. Still, going down to street-level was out unless Xenith thought now was the time to go on the offensive.

The zebra shook her head. She slipped forward and started up the stairs towards the roof. If I remembered correctly this would put us across the street from the hospital. I didn't think even Calamity could clear Old Olneigh's Mane Street with just a hop, skip and jump.



“What am I looking at?” It was not the first time those words had come out of my mouth.

A late evening wind moaned through Old Olneigh, pulling at our manes and tails. A yard from my hooves was the lumpy puddle of sludge which had once been the hellhound sniper positioned on the rooftop of the Maripony Mining and Administration Building. Calamity had fired on him the moment we burst out onto the roof, liquefying the creature before it could attack or howl.

A strange antenna sat in the center of the sagging rooftop, humming softly, surrounded by magical gemstones that radiated a soft blue light. Around the antenna were several tables, one of which was still intact and held a glowing terminal that faced away from us. The others had been clawed to shreds. Strange silvery boxes sat nearby, all but one of them similarly shredded. Hellhound claw marks sliced into the barricades that ringed the roof.

There were several dead ponies up here. All of them pegasi. All wearing the same black carapace armor.

“Enclave scouting party?” I asked Calamity.

Our pegasus walked amongst the corpses. They were old, just dried and rotting flesh hanging on bone. “No,” he said, looking up. “This was a science team.”

Calamity trotted round to the other side of the terminal. “Ah ‘ave no idea what they would be doin’ in Old Olneigh. Or down here at all, fer that matter.” His voice was grim. “But Ah aim t’ find out.”

I recalled what Homage had told me about the night she found the weapon from the stars. Jokeblue had suspected it was part of a Grand Pegasus Enclave experiment. Perhaps she had not been so wrong after all?

“Maybe I should try hacking in?” I blurted out, wanting to see what secrets the terminal held.

Calamity’s armored head looked up, and he lifted the armor’s visor. He chuckled. “Be muh guest,” he said, stepping away and welcoming me to the terminal with a swing of his scorpion-like tail. “But Ah don’t think ya will be able t’ hack this one.”

“Come on, Calamity,” I laughed good-naturedly. “I haven’t met a terminal yet that I can’t hack.” I puffed myself up, taking that as a challenge.

“Y’all ain’t never met an Enclave terminal,” Calamity said knowingly.

I stuck out my tongue as I trotted over. “Technology’s all the same. This is me, remember? The little mare with the PipBuck on her flank? Let me at it.”

I stopped as I caught sight of the terminal interface. It was made of a strange white substance that I couldn’t identify. I reached out to touch it and my hoof went right through it like there was nothing there.

It was made of... clouds? What the fuck?

Calamity laughed. I looked around. The Enclave supply boxes all had locks that were made of the same material, either white or a light shade of pink. I looked to him, demanding an explanation as the pony in my head ranted that this was not how things should be.

“Well, what did y’all expect pegasi built stuff out of? There are whole cities up there built almost entirely out o’ clouds.” I could feel him grinning behind that damn helmet. “What, didja believe only unicorn ponies had any magic o’ their own?”

I stopped, frustrated. The very idea of terminals and locks that I couldn't get into because they were made of *clouds* was just... just... *wrong and unfair!*

The words of the Goddess floated back to me: *with controls which can only be operated by a pegasus.*

Fuck. The Ministry of Awesome had built key control systems out of fucking clouds. Anypony other than a pegasus who attempted to operate the controls would find themselves clutching slightly damp air.

A thought occurred to me. "Is there anyone other than a pegasus who can operate a system with a cloud interface?"

"Nope," Calamity said proudly. Then swiftly took it back. "Ayep. Griffins can."

So that's how Red Eye was planning to get past that obstacle. And I knew how he was trying to get past the second. We were on a clock again.

I sighed, tossing up my hooves in exasperation, and trotted back to the others, letting Calamity work on hacking the terminal. Instead, I moved to the edge of the building. I floated out my binoculars and looked across the street at the hospital. It looked shaken; there were massive cracks running up the walls and one corner had collapsed. A sign, a yellow cross with a pink butterfly in the center, had started to pull free from the wall two stories up; the upper bolts had torn from the wall and the whole sign hung precariously over the street below. Most of the windows were shattered and the winds of Old Olneigh whipped at stained hospital curtains.

Even still, it was one of the most intact buildings in Old Olneigh, and it was our best hope for the medical supplies we needed to fix Calamity's wing.

I looked across to the rooftop. I could see the earth pony flying contraption clearly, with its candy-colored paint job lit up in the setting sun, the name *Griffinchaser II* emblazoned on the side. It looked in sore disrepair, but I trusted Calamity's expertise.

I looked down into the main road of Old Olneigh, a Mane Street with a set of train tracks running down the center. Hellhounds scampered about, moving from one building to another in packs. Hunting us.

And night was falling.



I was staring at the spikes that adorned the top of a wrought-iron gate. They were ugly things, painful looking. I nodded my horn towards one of them, and the metal glowed with beautiful blue magic, reshaping itself instantly into a happily prancing mare.

I sent up a prayer of thanks to Celestia and Luna. I was in a unicorn mare. It felt good and right.

Even better, I was in sunlight. Perhaps the brightest, cleanest sunlight yet. The air was dusty but clean, reminding me yet again of how odd the air in the real world was.

I turned my eyes to the next one and wove the magical spell over it. This one became a prancing unicorn stallion. I was struck by how much it resembled Prince Blueblood. Almost a perfect likeness. The next spike glowed and transformed into a unicorn mare, head bent as if she was mid-charge, her horn aimed dangerously close to Prince Blueblood's...

"Behave yourself, Rarity," I heard myself whisper in Rarity's lovely voice. The blue glow of magic surrounded the two figures again and they were transformed into entirely different, happy and generic pegasi.

I felt a strange thrill as I realized who I was. Followed by a flash of guilt.

"That old spell, huh?" came a voice from directly behind me.

I turned, the blue pegasus with the shockingly rainbow-colored mane moving into view. “It’s not polite to sneak up on ponies, Rainbow Dash.”

“I wasn’t sneaking,” the pegasus said defensively. “I was just flying. It’s not my fault flying is quiet.” Rainbow Dash was wearing the purple and black uniform I had seen her in before. “So, what have they got you all the way out in this dustbin for?”

Rarity looked around, and I was treated to the sight of Old Olneigh, intact and well maintained and bustling with ponies. I was able to see the shops and homes that I had only known as ruins.

And yet, as glorious as this look into the past was, I was clearly not seeing Old Olneigh in its heyday. Most of the shops were boarded up. There was a sense of disuse hanging over much of the town. And the bulk of the ponies were clearly either military or associated with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

“Apparently,” Rarity said ruefully, “They’re having trouble with the Diamond Dogs again. Fluttershy has tried to talk to them, but it didn’t work. So somepony thought they might pay more attention if I were to talk to them.”

“Gee,” Rainbow Dash snickered, “I wonder why.”

“Why indeed.”

“Did Fluttershy try to tell them that this wasn’t their home anymore?” Rainbow Dash asked, hovering in the air in front of me. “Or, you know, that it’s *dangerous*?”

“Of course she did,” Rarity said. “Fluttershy even tried to compromise...”

“Oh brother,” Rainbow dash facehoofed.

“But that was when they discovered that Twilight’s magical...” my host searched for the best word. “...byproducts, shall we say, have started eating through the barrels. Sunny lost a pony trying to move them when several tore open like they were made of nothing but the covering

paint.” I watched us look Rainbow Dash up and down. “You know, I still can’t believe you are wearing *that*.”

“Hey, we’re Luna’s elite aerial force. What else were we going to call ourselves?”

“How about anything other than the *Shadowbolts*?” Rarity suggested primly.

“Way I see it, why not play into the zebra’s crazy Nightmare Moon phobia. The original Shadowbolts were all just Nightmare Moon, right?” Rainbow Dash grinned conspiratorially. “Why not use that to our advantage. Every zebra who sees us coming and flees the battlefield is one less zebra we’ll have to kill. Or who might kill one of us.”

“Still, I can never get used to seeing you look like that.”

“Actually,” Rainbow Dash put a hoof behind her head, brushing her mane. “I had an idea about that. Do you think your old dressmaking skills are up to working with armor?” the pegasus ribbed.

“Rainbow Dash! You *wound* me!”

“Oh!” came a shout from somewhere on my host’s left. A moment later a dusty pony in a military uniform galloped to a stop and offered a salute to Rainbow Dash. Rarity stepped back.

“At ease, uh...” Dash looked at the pony’s uniform. “...tank commander...?”

“Torchwood, Ma’am. Big fan. Followed your career since the Wonderbolts.”

Rainbow Dash’s face brightened. “Oh really? Did you see me at the GALLoPS last year?...”

My host shook her head. “I see you’re going to be busy for a while, Dash. I’ll catch up with you later,” she said graciously, even though it was the pegasus who had sought her out. “Do you think you’ll be free by dinner?”

Rainbow Dash turned back. “Oh, yeah, no problem. I want to throw some ideas past you.”

I could feel Rarity smiling.

“Also,” Rainbow Dash added, swooping close and whispering, “I heard rumor that you’re working on a new spell with the Ministry of Peace? Something about keeping a pony alive and awake indefinitely?”

“Suspended animation, yes, although that’s a *very* poor description of it” Rarity replied, nodding. “And I’m working on it for them, not with them. Part of a... private line of research that has finally born some fruit. But it still needs some fine tuning.”

Dash grinned. “Great. Cuz that sounds like just what I’ve been looking for.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Dare I ask?”

“Oh, just part of the Single Pegasus Project.”

I could feel Rarity frown. “You mean that thing that has you putting those dreadful eyesores all over our lovely Equestria?” she snorted.

“They’ll look better once they’re done. I promise. Apple Bloom says they’ll be ‘elegant’. You like elegant, right?”

“Indeed I do. But I’ll wait until I’ve seen them.”

Rainbow Dash muzzle broke into a big grin. “Just wait until you see the main hub. Actually, you can glimpse its construction if you stand up on the roof of the hospital. Just face towards the water tower and look about a hundred miles up and out.” Rainbow Dash paused. “You, uh, might need binoculars.”

“Or a telescope,” Rarity retorted.

“Heh. Yeah. Anyway, it’s not named yet. They wouldn’t let me name it what I wanted to, even though it’s my damned project and my Ministry. So...”

“You wanted to name it Rainbow Dash’s Megacool Center of Awesomeness, didn’t you?” Rarity asked, ribbing back.

“Noooo!” Rainbow Dash hovered indignantly. Then admitted, “Not exactly.”

Rarity laughed a charming and happy laugh. “Go tend to your fan, Dash. I’ll meet with you later.”

Rainbow Dash grinned, waved and swooped back to Tank Commander Torchwood. In seconds, they were deep into gushing over the aerial acrobatics of Rainbow Dash. A pegasus who could apparently do sonic rainbooms in her sleep.

Rarity turned and trotted away, humming a joyful tune.



“What did you do?” Xenith was demanding of Calamity as I came out of the memory. The pegasus cantered nervously.

“Ah don’t know. It just started doin’ that.” My ears perked, picking up a high whine coming from the antenna array. I looked to Calamity who was staring at the terminal as if it had betrayed him.

With a sinking feeling, I asked, “Did you trigger a lockdown?”

Calamity shook his head. “Naw. Ah got in jus’ fine. Weren’t that hard.” He looked up at me, his eyes wide inside the bug-like nightmare helmet.

“And? What is this place? Was it what you thought?”

Calamity swallowed. “It’s an Enclave experiment all right. Under orders of Harbinger, one of the Enclave High Council. They were playin’ wi’ magic-laced sonics, hopin’ t’ control the hellhounds.”

“They were trying to make these creatures into slaves,” Xenith said in a low voice.

I looked around, drinking in the sight on the rooftop with new eyes. “I’m guessing it didn’t work.”

“What do you think the chances are that we’re really lucky and Calamity just triggered the Leave Us Alone signal?” Velvet Remedy quipped grimly, trotting to the roof’s edge and looking down into the street. She immediately backed up, eyes wide and frightened, her face going pale under her charcoal coat.

I dared a peek. *Celestia’s solar-heated libido!* The street was full of hellhounds. Scores of them. More were moving out of doorways or climbing over buildings. All moving towards us.

And they looked pissed.

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



LIFE INTERRUPTED

“We all go through periods of darkness. In such times, we can turn to the Goddesses, but it’s good to have friends.”

Memory.

All the thoughts we have, all the decisions we make, are rooted in layers upon layers of experiences. To understand ourselves, we must look to our own past. To our memories.

I believe that our pasts and our hearts make us who we are. Our memories define us. But what if we should lose them? Would we become untethered? Adrift? Would we even be the same ponies anymore?

If you could block out your most horrible and hurtful memories, would you do so to spare yourself the pain? And if you did, would you lose an important part of yourself in the process?

And what of higher thought? Reasoning and rationality? If I were to forget the discoveries that led to a realization, would I be able to grasp

that revelation anymore? Could I piece together the logic of an argument if I could not remember having the argument?

How important are memories to our ability to even think? Or, at least, think clearly?

And what about the reverse? What if you added memories which were not your own? How often could you live parts of other ponies' lives, making their decisions, seeing the events that brought them joy or sorrow, before the boundaries that separated you from them began to blur?

Were memory orbs nothing more evocative than particularly well-written books? I knew from experience that a memory orb only preserved sensations. When inside a memory orb, I saw and heard and felt, tasted and smelled, but I was not privy to the actual thoughts and emotions of the hosts whom I rode. Did the visions into others' lives, no matter how vivid, have any impact beyond knowledge or entertainment?

And what effect might there be on a pony who relived the same memory orb over and over?

And what if you could take it a step further? What if you could hear a pony's thoughts? Read their minds. Perhaps sense their memories?

What if you were the Goddess?

What manner of pony would you have to be just to keep any sense of yourself?



I stared in horror at the mob of hellhounds pouring into the streets. They came from the alleys and the shattered ruins. They climbed out of windows and emerged from darkened doorways in nearly every building I could see. Every one, that was, except for the one place we intended to go: the hospital.

The first had already reached the Maripony Mining and Administration Building. Some were dashing inside. Others sunk their claws into the brick façade and began to scale the walls.

Calamity turned to the Enclave crates, shoving the claw-torn containers away until he reached the single undamaged one. I could hear him whisper what sounded like a prayer, although I knew no higher being that Calamity would pray to. Then he furiously clopped at the lock's cloud keypad.

The crate opened with a hiss and a wash of cool air. Inside was... a bundle of fluffy white clouds.

I would have facehoofed if the noise Calamity made at the sight hadn't been one of triumph. The pegasus lowered his head and kicked off his helmet, his orange mane bursting free. His wide eyes and self-pleased smile gave me a boost of joy. He'd stayed hidden behind that black, insectoid mask too long, and I had missed him.

"How did you know the combination?" Xenith asked curiously.

"Oh-one-oh-four. Harbinger's birthday." Calamity grinned proudly. Then sheepishly admitted, "'Twas on the terminal."

"A cloud?"

"Ayep! Y'all are in this mess cuz o' me. Ah plan t' get y'all out o' it." He leaned his head into the Enclave crate, grabbing the cloud bundle in his teeth. (He bit the clouds and picked them up! The little pony in my head was having an aneurysm.)

"Obferf!" he boasted through the clouds in his mouth. He trotted to the roof's edge, facing the hospital. A hellhound clawed her way up onto the roof in front of him, raising a paw full of long, flesh-and-armor tearing claws. Calamity backed away, dropping the cloud bundle (which simply floated where he'd let it go).

BLAM! Velvet Remedy's shotgun went off, the slug hitting the hellhound in the center of her left breast. The flesh rippled, but did not give. The hellhound howled in pain, toppling backwards from the impact.

"Thank Celestia!" whimpered Velvet Remedy, letting out a sigh of relief. I winced as I realized she was thanking the Goddess that hellhound's had thick enough hides to stop a shotgun slug at close range. Until now, I had only used Little Macintosh and the sniper rifle against them. I'd been lucky in those choices. Nothing else I had would likely penetrate.

Another hellhound clawed his way onto the rooftop directly behind Xenith. The zebra danced, giving a well-placed buck to the creature's chest. I heard ribs break, and the hellhound fell, rasping, fighting for breath from what I knew was a punctured lung. A second buck sent the hellhound over the edge, catching another climber in the face and knocking them both to the alley below. One of them hit an open waste bin with a back-breaking clang.

I didn't know which had become scarier, hellhounds or Xenith who could take them down with her hooves.

"Thank ya kindly, Velvet!" Calamity stepped back up to the floating bundle and gave it a kick. The cloud unfurled, rolling outward like a carpet, stretching over the street below.

Three more hellhounds pulled themselves onto the rooftop. Velvet Remedy backed up and let out a song, hitting that perfect high note. All three hellhounds clutched at their ears. Two stopped, backing up to the edge of the wall. One climbed back over the side while the other backed up a step too far, her arms pirouetting comically as she fell backwards off the roof.

The third lurched forward, striking at Velvet Remedy in a half-blind swipe. Velvet jumped away. Her right foreleg did not, falling to the rooftop in a spreading puddle of blood. Velvet's note ended in a strangled whimper as she lifted her right foreleg, eyes locked on where the stump ended inches above where her right knee should have been.

The hellhound drew back her paw, one claw wet with Velvet Remedy's blood. Four bolts of magical energy struck her in the offending paw. The female hellhound glowed and liquefied.

"Velvet!"

I screamed in horror. Calamity dashed to the charcoal-coated unicorn's side, catching her as she wobbled and fell, her eyes still locked on where her right foreleg should be. "I... can fix this..." she whimpered. Velvet fainted in Calamity's forelegs.

Pyrelight pierced the air with a mournful cry.

NO!

Xenith moved fast, pulling potions from her satchel until she found the right one. She shattered it on the rooftop, commanding our pegasus, "Push her wound into that! Quickly!" It looked like the same pudding that Xenith had given Velvet to stop Calamity's wing from bleeding him dry.

Wrapping Velvet's sundered leg in my magic, I floated it to the pudding and pressed it into the glop as well. "We can fix this," I moaned with determination. "She can fix this. She said so!"

I could hear more hellhounds tearing their way up to the roof from inside and out.

Calamity held Velvet, looking stunned. His eyes glistened; his armor was slick with Velvet's blood. "Calamity, now!" Xenith shouted into his ears, breaking the pegasus from his trance. He shoved the bleeding stump into Xenith's medicinal goop hard enough to make the unconscious Velvet moan.

Turning to me, Calamity commanded, "Xenith, put Li'lpip on muh back. Li'lpip, levitate everypony but me an' yerself. An' don't forget Velvet's leg!" He let Velvet Remedy slide out of his arms and galloped to the cloud carpet, stepping onto it. The cloud held him like it was made of surest steel.

I felt a harsh tug at my mane as Xenith lifted me onto Calamity's back. I winced, but the tears blurring my vision were for Velvet. I floated her limp, maimed body into the air, wrapping her severed limb in my magic as well. And finally, Xenith.

Two hellhounds burst up through the roof hatch. A third dug her way up through the ceiling itself, one of the torn Enclave crates knocking her in the snout as it slid into the hole.

“Let ‘m chase us across this!” Calamity broke into a gallop, carrying me over the street on a bed of clouds, my mare friends swooping across the urban canyon, towed by my magic.

The two hellhounds from the hatch dropped to all fours and ran for us, leaping for Calamity and me. They would have landed right behind us, but they fell through the clouds (as was proper for creatures and clouds) and dashed themselves on the street below. One got up, dusting himself off, then took one look at the building we were heading onto and turned the other way. The second had broken her neck and never got up again.



“Ah figure y’all got ‘till that beacon shuts up t’ scavenge what we c’n get from the hospital,” Calamity barked, turning to look back over the walkway of clouds. The hellhounds continued to swarm the Maripony Mining and Administration Building, heedless of our escape. “Ah’ll stay here an’ get this here whirligig fixed.”

“And I... will stay... here,” Velvet breathed weakly. “And... protect... Calamity.”

“Y’all are gonna protect me?” Calamity gave her a politely disbelieving look.

She smiled back with a glare of her own. “If my voice cannot... soothe the savage beasts... it can... at least... send them running.”

I hated this plan.

Words could not describe how much I hated this plan. The only things making me agree to this plan were a severe lack of time, an inability to see a better way, and the spark of hope borne from that one hellhound’s reaction. A hope that, maybe, the hellhounds had an aversion to the hospital that would protect us.

Turning to Xenith, I motioned her to follow. We had no time to lose, and we now had two major injuries that demanded top tier medical supplies. I prayed to Luna that this place had not been stripped clean already. That somehow, for any reason, this hospital was still well stocked.

“Ah crap,” Calamity said, still staring across the cloud bridge. I turned in alarm, my stomach dropping. Oh Goddesses, please, not anything else! Please!

“Ah left muh helmet.”

I wanted to buck him so hard. “Leave it. You look better without it anyway!” A thought struck me. “Can you still shoot those rifles without the helmet’s interface?”

“Nope.”

That sinking feeling was reinforced. “How many shots do you have left for Spitfire’s Thunder?”

“Ah’ll swap t’ a fresh clip, but Ah’ve only got three. Plus the two shots left in the current one.”

More than he’d have time to fire if he was shooting alone. I looked to Velvet Remedy bleakly.

“Go, Pip. I’ll take care of him,” Velvet insisted. Pyrelight landed next to her, puffing out her breast and looking fierce.

I nodded before looking back to Calamity and then to the candy-colored heap that was the Griffinchaser II. “Can you fix her?”

“Ayep. Positive. Now go!”

Pyrelight gave me a heartbreaking look.

Xenith was already waiting for me at the rooftop access doors. I nodded one last time, praying to the Goddesses that this was not the last time I would see them alive, then galloped silently away.



Xenith and I made our way through crumbling grey hallways with peeling yellow wainscoting. Motes of dust floated in the air. Occasional debris rained from the ceiling.

I took the lead, moving quickly and stealthily, checking rooms. My E.F.S. insisted that there were numerous enemies inside the hospital, lurking somewhere ahead and behind us. From my experience in Stable Twenty-Four, I suspected they were all on the level below.

It hit me as unfair that even with the signal, there would still be hellhounds inside this place hunting us. But as I prepared to curse the heavens (wondering if perhaps I should be cursing the stars), I remembered Calamity and the bloatsprite in the closet. The curse died with a chuckle as I realized we were probably surrounded by hostile insects. Bloatsprites or radroaches... or whatever radroaches became in the presence of Taint.

As I turned down a hallway, my ears perked at the sound of a blessedly familiar “male” voice:

“Who says you can’t go home again? That tenacious mare from Stable Two sure did, and saved her whole damn home from a vicious and unprovoked attack from Steel Rangers who intended to slaughter the Stable’s entire population and set up shop. But this time, children, the Stable Dweller had help! That’s right! Our Bringer of Light in this dark and cruel world has stirred the hearts of other ponies. And not just ponies, but griffins too. Even ghouls put a hoof to the cause!

“I tell you, children: this is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in the Equestrian Wasteland. The people, ponies and non-ponies alike, have witnessed our Heroine selflessly helping those around her, and many of us have taken her example to heart. And when our Wasteland Savior needed us the most, we stepped up!

“Now I ask each and every one of you, and this is a question straight from DJ Pon3’s heart to yours: when the opportunity comes, will you step up too?”

I felt myself flush, but this time the embarrassment was buried under a heartburst of love for the grey unicorn behind that voice. Her words were like the beam from a lighthouse in my storm of darkness.

“Let me tell you of some of the ponies who did step up. Because you are not going to believe this! The Steel Rangers, a saddle-full of them at any rate, decided to buck their Elders and pledge themselves to helping out the suffering folk of this Equestrian Wasteland! You heard me right, children. Some of those metal-clad powerhouses are on our side now!

“That ain’t easy. And their Elders have ordered them hunted down. I have reports of Steel Rangers and Steel Ranger Outcasts fighting in the streets from Manehattan to Trottingham. But I’ve also got amazing reports of these Outcasts taking down raider hovels and galloping to the aid of caravans. So if you should happen to see one of those new Outcast Knights or Paladins, give them your thanks. And maybe a little ammo.”

I felt both thankful and hurt as I thought of SteelHooves and those who now followed him. Embattled in the streets, fighting for their lives because they chose not to follow ponies who were selfish and evil. The pony in my head wondered what would happen if the pegasi ever learned the truth about this world below them. Would they seek to help, only to have their leaders turn upon them?

I moved forward, following the voice, nudging open the door to the office where an old radio sat, dusty and neglected, the face above the dial still glowing as the speakers gave DJ Pon3’s voice a slightly tinny echo.

“One last thing, and this is to the Stable Dweller herself. Another message from my assistant... but don’t worry, children. I read it this time and it’s perfectly chaste...”

I froze, my mind conjuring everything from another devastatingly embarrassing promise to another warning as soul-breaking as the warning about Stable Two.

“She says: Wherever you are right now, I’m thinking of you. Look up at the darkness of the night sky, and know that I am looking up into the

same darkness with you. We are never apart, no matter how far your drive to help us all takes you from this place. For you are here in my heart, always.

“I love you, Littlepip.”

I felt my heart gush, bursting with joy.

“Aw... now ain’t that just romantic? Don’t that just tug at your heartstrings? When did my assistant get so cheesy? Oh, and there’s a P.S.: Thirty-one. Huh. What’s thirty-one mean?”

My mind simply went blank. I was drowning in embarrassment, burning alive from the heat that suddenly flushed through my body.

“Oh dear,” Xenith intoned behind me, her exotic voice holding not a trace of actual sympathy. She leaned forward and whispered into my ear, “I should tell Velvet Remedy so that she does not hear it first from strangers, no?”

I collapsed, dying of sheer humiliation. Homage had banished me to a world of embarrassment, and Xenith had imprisoned me in a dungeon of anticipated torment in that world I had been banished to.

It wasn’t until hours later that I realized Xenith’s words carried with them the implicit hope that Velvet Remedy would survive. By making me certain Velvet would soon be teasing me endlessly, Xenith dispelled my fear that I was about to lose her.



The medical cabinet opened with ease, the lock hardly a worthy challenge. Xenith began to collect the medicines and healing bandages inside. So far, the hospital had been a treasure trove of lesser supplies but had not yielded the more potent potions we were desperately searching for. I looked across the room filled with rotting beds, tattered partitions and toppled IV stands. A night wind blew through broken windows, making the curtains dance like ghosts. The foul scent of a hundred hellhounds drifted through the room. I glanced outside and

saw them crawling all over the building across from us like a swarm of bees.

I wondered why they didn't just destroy the array. But maybe they couldn't. Maybe there was something in the pulse that didn't allow them to. Still, with that many trying to clamber onto the roof, it was only a matter of time before they destroyed it just by accident.

I looked the other way, out the door. There was a nurses' station across the hall. No red lights on my E.F.S. I let Xenith know where I was headed and slipped out. Pressing an ear to the door, I thought I heard a snake-like hiss. I checked my E.F.S. again, but there were no threats.

The door was locked. Again, it was hardly a challenge. But when I tried to push the door open, it didn't want to budge. I shoved, throwing my weight against it, and heard a crash from inside as the door opened half a yard. Dust and old plaster blasted out of the opening. A fast clicking burst from my PipBuck.

I poked my head through, coughing, and saw that the ceiling had collapsed, filling most of the room. Broken terminals and office supplies littered the floor around large hunks of structural material. I could see partially into the room above where a bathtub teetered, hanging from the washroom above only by the plumbing. Water sprayed out of a crack in the pipes, soaking the rubble of the floor below and draining down into the level beneath us through a section of the nurses' station floor which had given way from decades of water damage.

There wasn't much room inside, but I saw that I could reach a locked metal cabinet with the word "CONFISCATED" written in large red letters. I removed my saddlebags and squeezed in through the opening.

The metal cabinet proved a tougher lock. Within my skills but still a worthy challenge. Enough that I felt a touch of pride as it opened. Inside were drugs. Buck, Dash, Mint-als and a variety of powerful painkillers, as well as other pills and powders which I did not recognize. There were other things too. A memory orb. A knife with a blade that shimmered with an unnatural purple sheen. A copy of Zebra

Infiltration Tactics. I floated my saddlebags to me. With a telekinetic push, I dumped the entire contents into one of them.

A tin of Party-Time Mint-als landed on the top. My heart skipped a beat.

I wrapped the tin with a magical sheath.

Do we really have time for this? the little pony in my head asked. Hurry. We can dump it later.

I knew she was lying.

I knew I needed to get rid of it now. If I carried it around with me, the temptation to take one when things got bad might be more than I could bear.

Oh come on. You're stronger than that, the pony insisted. And I was, wasn't I?

Or... what if Xenith could use it for a potion or something? It would be a shame to waste it.

Dammit, I was taking too much time! I closed the saddlebags, floating them out ahead of me. I slithered out of the nurses' station.

I'd been so distracted by my inner struggle that I didn't even notice the red light at the very edge of my E.F.S. compass.



There were no Goddesses! There couldn't be for what I was seeing to be allowed to exist.

The... thing that shuffled down the hall before me had clearly once been meant to be a pony. There was enough pony left in its face to tell that horrifying truth. There was no way to describe the vile, sickening body of the thing -- the best my brain could manage was the idea that a pony had started to melt, losing all her fur and keeping only sporadic tufts of her mane and tail, only for the flesh beneath to stop melting (arbitrarily and not all at once) and then begin to bloat and metastasize. Its eyes, sunken and huge and red, stared into mine. Its tongue had

swollen and stretched, bursting out of its muzzle and splitting into tendrils as they hung down from the wreckage that had once been its mouth. The tentacles writhed individually, as if in great pain.

I was petrified by the sight, rooted to the floor with no ability or will to move. I wanted to run screaming as that split tongue undulated and whipped out, stretching the length of the hall, each wrapping wetly around one of my hooves. I fell, dragged forward towards the squirming flesh-blob, my gaze locked onto its eyes. I tried again to scream, but somehow it had stolen my voice.

The tongues lifted me over the mass of writhing, furless tissue. As another tongue-tentacle pushed out of its muzzle, the tentacles twisted me over, my eyes turned to the ceiling, and my paralysis broke. I thrashed, letting out a scream of terror.

The tongues were impossibly strong. I could not pull my hooves free. It continued to rotate me until I faced away from it, the hallway behind me upside-down. I witnessed Xenith dash out of the room to save me... then stop, eyes wide and locked in place.

I felt that new tongue slither across me, and I realized with abject terror that the flesh-blob did not intend to kill me...

"NO!" I screamed in a mix of fury and primal panic. "NOnono" BLAM!! "nonono" BLAM!! "nononono!!!" BLAM!! My screams were punctuated by the fury of Little Macintosh as I made my weapon fire blindly into the mass of living flesh.

I was hit by a cloying reek. I felt the tongues go slack, dropping me. I hit the creature -- its body felt like a warm and slimy bean-bag chair with grotesque muscle and sinew hidden beneath -- and bounced onto the floor. I scrambled away. I felt sickened, loathing my body where I had touched it.

"Oh Littlepip, I'm so sorry," Xenith cried out, galloping up to me.

I got shakily to my hooves. Little Macintosh's bullets had torn gaping holes in the meat of the thing. "W-w-what is t-that?!"

"I do not know," Xenith said fearfully. "But we must be cautious. There may be more of them, and they possess a Stare."



We moved through the rows of the hospital pharmacy. Our hooves left tracks through the spilled powders that covered the floor. Many of the stacks had partially collapsed, spilling their contents onto the tiles below.

I waved the lamp of my PipBuck over the barely legible labels on a shelf which still held little jars of unsullied medical treasures. Xenith trotted up, a sack held in her teeth which she had found in the housekeeping section behind us. She scooped a seemingly random choice of the tiny jars into the sack with a hoof. I didn't know if any of these would help either Calamity or Velvet Remedy, but I had learned to trust in the value of Xenith's alchemy and brewing.

We both froze at the sick shuffling sound of another of the flesh blobs. Dropping the sack, Xenith moved towards the pharmacy counter as I moved to the pharmacy door.

Xenith pushed herself up, peering over the counter cautiously. And didn't move. Every muscle in her body was locked in place. I could hear the softest sound strangling in her throat as the slick tongues of the thing in the room beyond distended and stretched to start wrapping around her.

I darted out of the pharmacy and around the corner, getting the barest glimpse of the creature before squeezing my eyes furiously shut and firing several bursts from the zebra rifle into where the creature had just been. I heard an unearthly squeal and was assaulted by the acrid stench of the thing's bulbous flesh burning away. I opened my eyes to see Xenith wrench herself free from the limp appendages as the fire climbed up them towards her. She barely avoided being burned.

"Sorry," I said with a grimace as we both coughed and gagged, mentally noting that the zebra rifle was no longer to be used against these... or

for that matter any Tainted creature considering my run of luck when pairing the two.

Xenith tied off her bag and I helped tie it to her across from her satchel. Together, we moved to the nearby stairwell, not taking the time to peek in the garbage bins. This was already taking far longer than I was comfortable with. And that discomfort didn't even include the creepy itching that was starting to spread inside me.

According to the old paint, the next floor down was the emergency care and operating rooms. They were our best bet for extra-strength restoration potions.



You had to sneak up on them from behind, we quickly learned. To look the slithering flesh-mounds in the face was to be paralyzed, body and mind. We did not know if those things could affect more than one mare at a time, but neither Xenith nor I were foolish enough to risk it.

They were, however, the opposite of hellhounds in many ways. They were slow, stupid monstrosities, possessing no tactical skill, driven by only the basest urges. And their flesh was weak. Even a low-caliber bullet would cause great, stinking ruptures in their tuberous bodies.

We made it to the surgical level. Benches lined the wall of what had been a small waiting room, rotted periodicals stained the floor. There were a few pony skeletons here, two with cracked pelvic bones. An ill shudder racked me as it occurred to me that the poor mares had not been killed by the horror which had invaded them, but the horror that had come out.

Beyond the waiting room was a hallway which ended in a swinging pair of double doors. Midway down the hall were two heavy, vault-like doors, each with a wall-mounted terminal. One of these was the medical supply room for the floor. The sign above the other simply said "ISOLATION". The one bright point was that the hospital seemed entirely unscavenged. There was no sign of hellhound claws. It was no mystery anymore why they shunned this place.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” came a slightly tinny voice from the other side of the swinging operating room doors. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was picking up two entities, one of which was a non-hostile presence. The other glowed red on the compass. “Misses Tulip, I’m afraid you’ve come down with a serious case of death. I’m afraid this is beyond my meager skills, but I do recommend plenty of bed rest and I will alert the next available doctor to your condition.”

The two of us crept down the hall, stopping at the terminals. The one to the medical supply room was dead, leaving me to pick the lock telekinetically.

“Good afternoon Mister Tester,” said the oddly cheery voice. “I’m pleased to see some of your color has returned. Let me change your IV tubes for you. No, no, don’t fuss. You’ll only make this harder. The straps are for your own good.”

The tumblers moved, sliding reluctantly into place and the medical supply room opened. I pointed my PipBuck lamp into the dark space, hoping fervently for a spot of luck. Inside were racks of collapsed shelving. A metal cabinet had pulled free from the wall and fallen, catching on a counter edge. The doors had swung open, its contents spilling and shattering on the floor.

Xenith took a guarding position as I stepped inside. Moving like prey, with any luck we would be in and out before either of the entities in the other room noticed our passing.

There was one cabinet that looked fairly intact, but from the stains around the bottom of the door, the insides had not fared as well as the exterior.

My heart sank into my stomach and started to die.

Outside, the chipper voice said, “Miss Sunshower, dear, let me put that back on for you. You’ll never heal if you keep losing your head like that.”

My hooves felt terribly heavy as I approached the cabinet. It was locked, and the lock was a tricky one. It took a few tries to open, but that was due in part to the numb dread that was creeping through me.

“Really, is the cleaning staff completely lazy? Just look at the state of this room. Hardly sanitary. If a Ministry of Peace inspector were to show up, somepony would be out of a job.”

I wanted to gallop out, find the source of the voice and buck it to death. Instead, I opened the cabinet door.

Jackpot.



Xenith was carefully putting each of the healing poultices and extra-strength restoration potions we had found into my saddle bags. We had found less than I had hoped for, but hopefully more than enough. In addition, there was a smaller lockbox which had proven far trickier to open. Inside was an advanced medical spell matrix.

I floated the arcano-tech device, a peripheral with intricately enchanted gemstone in the center, out of its box and carried it with me. “I’ll be right back,” I told Xenith, scanning my E.F.S. once again to make sure no other hostiles were in the area.

Xenith kept watch, ready to pull me back as I crept forward towards the operating room doors. I moved as stealthily as possible, Little Macintosh floating close to me. If the red light on my E.F.S. was another of those horrors, I didn’t want it to have the time to turn my way. I hoped it wasn’t already facing the door.

I nudged open the door and looked around. The operating room was full of gurneys, most of which bore the skeleton of a pony. A few were empty. And one held the bloated, fleshy body of one of the horrors. It was strapped down with an IV needle jabbed into it. The IV tube was less than a yard long and dangled off the creatures’ bulbous mass, the other end attached to nothing.

A bright yellow, multi-limbed medical bot hovered from gurney to gurney, “helping” its patients.

The blob of flesh wiggled. I unloaded four shots into it, Little Macintosh echoing throughout the floor. The horror seemed to deflate, filling the air with an awful, fetid stench like bile and sewage.

I had to turn away, covering my muzzle with my hoof, my eyes watering. I galloped back down the hall, stopping in the waiting room and vomiting violently. The acidic taste of bile in my mouth was actually preferable to the smell of the horror’s innards.

I swallowed and wiped my muzzle, feeling faint. I turned back, trotting to the door again, bracing myself for the suffocating reek. I pushed in, holding my breath as long as I could, and snuck towards the malfunctioning medical bot.

I could reprogram it, I believed, routing around the corrupted sectors of its programming. And with the advanced medical spell matrix, it would not only have the medical expertise to help, but be able to utilize a small number of medical spells. Perhaps even ones that Velvet Remedy could learn from it. In the very least, it would be an asset to Junction R-7. At best, it could help Velvet Remedy re-attach her severed foreleg.

But all that was for later, the trip back.

Right now, I just needed to shut it off.



I walked out of the operating room, my robotic prize wrapped in a magical field and floating next to me. I stopped as I met up with Xenith, and I stared at the vault door beneath the darkened sign reading ISOLATION. The terminal next to this sealed door was glowing softly. The little pony in my head pranced with eager curiosity.

It would only take a minute.

I hooked my hacking tool into it and went to work.

The door clanged internally and slid open. Inside was a small room with filing cabinets, a desk, a glowing terminal... and a huge, reinforced window which looked into a slightly larger chamber. The chamber had a single operating table positioned below a ceiling-mounted robotic medical array. A spider-like mass of arms holding scalpels, bonesaws and torturous-looking medical tools protruded down towards the form still strapped to the table.

It was one of the flesh-horrors. Only this one was dead already, the flesh putrescent. Its tongues had been severed, its body sliced open and partially dissected.

There was one other difference. Stretched and distorted over the rear of this aberration's mutated flesh was the deformed remnants of a cutie mark.

I heard somepony gasp in horror. I think it was me.

The observation room was virtually untouched by the centuries. The quake from the megaspell had cracked the window, but it had held. The paint on the walls was peeling. The ceiling sagged a little, covered in spider-web cracks. The room beyond however, was missing a corner. The ragged edges suggested massive water damage. I wondered if this was caused by the split in the pipes above the nurse's station, but there was similar damage in many parts of the building.

I approached the room's terminal and hacked into it. There was one audio file still remaining. The others had been corrupted or purged. I asked it to play, and a mare's voice, a ghost from the past, came from an overhead speaker.

"This is Sunny Days, Maripony consultant to the Ministry of Arcane Science. It is now two days since the accident that ended Peachy Pie's life as we knew it. Eighteen hours since I had to order the brain stem of... this thing severed. Previous attempts to put the creature down through lethal injection proved futile. Even now, we are still reading life signs; this thing just does not want to die. But there is no brain function anymore and hopefully the rest of the body will get the hint. I've ordered the autopsy halted until then.

"I take comfort in knowing that my childhood friend died two days ago, and that there was nothing of her in this... abomination.

"I finally managed to get an audience with Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle. I have learned that the Ministry of Arcane Science is using my old facility to craft something called the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. According to Twilight Sparkle, this IMP will likely become the deciding factor in the war. It is clearly her hope that through magical augmentation, we can bring the war to a swift conclusion. The zebras have been engaging in mystical and alchemical augmentations for years now, and it sounds to me like the Ministry of Arcane Science is determined to beat them at their own game.

"I questioned Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle about the contents of the barrels now being stored in the caverns underneath Splendid Valley. She revealed that these barrels contain effectively the very same transformative magical brew that the Ministry of Arcane Science is testing for use on pony volunteers.

"According to the Ministry Mare, the process for creating IMP is extremely delicate and demanding. And apparently, her standards are even more so. Any batch that is flawed in any way, any batch that is not absolutely optimal, is sealed up and discarded. In Twilight Sparkle's own words, if she is going to ask ponies to trust their bodies to IMP-induced transformation, how could she dare give them anything but the most perfect version of the potion possible?

"The Ministry Mare was absolutely horrified to hear of the accident, and appalled as I told her what had happened to Peachy Pie. She put a strict moratorium on any further attempts to move the barrels. It looks like Ministry Mare Fluttershy is going to have to find a different avenue of negotiation with the Diamond Dogs.

"Personally, at this point, I'm tempted to just start shooting them. I know that's horrible of me, but I've just spent two days seeing the best friend I ever knew reduced to... something worse than any nightmare. And all because we're trying to appease a bunch of Dogs.

"The worst part is that part of me blames Peachy Pie. She shouldn't have been down there. She'd come to work sick the last four mornings. I told her to take sick leave.

Practically ordered her to. But she never could stand to be doing nothing. Part of me wonders if she slipped, or if her judgment was slightly impaired. And I hate myself for asking that. She deserves better.

"Peachy Pie was the best friend anypony could ever have.

"Her husband is outside. He wants to see the body. I have no idea what to tell him. All I know is that I can't, absolutely can't, let him see this."



I stumbled out of the isolation room and collapsed against the wall, breathing heavily.

"Littlepip?" Xenith asked, her voice deep with concern. She had heard Sunny Day's recording too, and I could see the sadness in her eyes and hear it in her voice. But she didn't know what I knew, didn't realize what I did. She could tell the recording was affecting me far more than it did her even if she could not sense the revelation behind it.

Taint on the other hoof, Homage had said as DJ Pon3, is a zebra of very different stripes. Nopony knows exactly what the taint is or where it comes from, but we know its mutative effects on monsters and the fatally malignant repercussions on ponies.

I knew what Taint was. I knew where it came from.

I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi, Spike had warned me painfully.

Taint was IMP: Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. This was Twilight Sparkle's other legacy.

But that wasn't being fair. Twilight Sparkle had been a good pony with a good heart. Of course the M.A.S. hub in Manehattan had been working on a spell to clean Taint, and it was no longer a surprise that they had been successful when everypony since (like that insane ghoul doctor) had failed. Twilight Sparkle knew exactly what Taint was, after all. She knew every component that went into it. And after what

happened to Peachy Pie, she was not going to be content to just leave that kind of dangerous magical toxin in barrels underground. She was working to clean it up. Of course the Gardens of Equestria would include the spell to purge Taint from the land. I suspected that Twilight Sparkle would have created a Taint-purging megaspell and set it off over Splendid Valley... just as soon as pony testing of IMP had proven successful.

The only variable is, well, dosage.

Twilight Sparkle's words floated back to me. The IMP experiment at Maripony required a very tightly controlled dosage. Who knew what the effects of too little would be? The deep itch that had now spread through my entire torso told me I would likely soon learn.

But that was when they discovered that Twilight's magical... byproducts, shall we say, have started eating through the barrels, Rarity had told Rainbow Dash. Sunny lost a pony trying to move them when several tore open like they were made of nothing but the covering paint.

That horror, on the other side of that window, was what became of anypony who suffered massive exposure. If that creature had been created from a few barrels, I was thankful that I had never seen Trixie herself inside that vat.

And if you got it just right? That was how Trixie was creating the alicorns. I wondered how long had it taken her to find the correct amount, and how many failed experiments had she cannibalized before she struck on the perfect dose?

My eyes went to the hole in the corner of the far chamber. Peachy Pie had been sick each morning for days. The medical equipment was still picking up anomalous life signs after the creature should have been dead.

I knew where the other horrors had come from.



Xenith and I galloped all the way back to the roof. I slammed through the door, stumbling and panting. "We've got... what we... came for!"

Velvet Remedy was looking decidedly bad, but I thanked the Goddesses that she was conscious. Calamity stood at the edge of the building, looking down. I noticed his helmet in his mouth. He had run across and gotten it!

That meant...

I looked to the building across from us. All the hellhounds were gone. The antenna array was smashed to pieces. I crept to the edge, casting a glance first to the Griffinchaser II. It still looked like a mess, but I could see the work Calamity had done.

Calamity set down his helmet. "In case y'all missed it, they're tellin' us t' surrender."

Looking down, I saw the hellhounds surrounding the building, some carrying energy weapons. A few dozen carrying torches. Most were armed only with their claws. Standing on a dilapidated wagon was one particularly large female hellhound holding a megaphone.

"You come down now!" she barked, her voice carrying, "Final chance!"

I had really hoped we could treat Calamity's wing and Velvet Remedy's leg here. But that was no longer an option. "Come on, Calamity. Let's go."

"Ah don't get why they ain't swarmed us yet."

Grimly, I answered, "I do. And trust me, you are much happier not knowing."

He turned from the edge, picking up his helmet again and walking towards Velvet Remedy. His eyes looked older than they had the day before.

"Not... your... fault," Velvet Remedy insisted to the pegasus as he laid down next to her.

He set down the helmet and nuzzled the charcoal unicorn. “Yes it is. Ah’m the one who got ‘is wing shot. An’ Ah’m the one who wanted t’ snipe the hellhounds. Y’all faced alla this shit t’ help me. An’ Ah ain’t gonna forget that. Not ever.”

Suddenly the whole building shook. A thunderous rending boiled up from beneath us. A massive fissure tore across the roof a few yards back from the south side edge, and the entire southern wall of the hospital collapsed with a monstrous roar.

Luna-eclipsing orgasms! The Goddess-damned hellhounds were taking out the fucking foundation!

“Out of time, everypony!” I shouted as I climbed onto the Griffinchaser II and tried to figure out how to operate the earth pony contraption. Thankfully, it seemed rather simple. While the mechanics used a spark battery-augmented assist, the whole thing was basically pedal-powered.

“And zebra!” I added. “Gather together. We’re leaving!”

More of the building began to collapse. The roof canted, and the Griffinchaser II began to slide towards the ragged edge.

I wrapped everyone else in a field of magic, making sure to include the medical bot, Velvet Remedy’s leg, Calamity’s helmet and Xenith’s sack of medicines; I started to peddle as hard as I could.

The gears and belts and chains of the Griffinchaser II squealed in protest. The blades began to spin.

With a horrendous rumble, the hospital roof fell away beneath us, the hospital collapsing into billowing clouds of smoke and debris.

We didn’t fall with it. The clouds of dust puffed up at us. Slowly, getting a feel for the flying contraption, I turned us towards Maripony and the Sky Bandit.



After everything that had come before, there was nothing I could do.

Xenith was brewing a potion, using a mix of her own supplies and the chemicals we had just gathered. I could smell the odd scents coming from the pot she held over the cookfire. Xenith told us this would augment Velvet Remedy's own healing, allowing her leg to heal fully and properly once it was reattached. It would also permanently alter her, much like previous brews had altered me. Somehow, while such enhancements should be viewed as a gift, this felt like a sacrifice. A final step in severing Velvet Remedy from who she was before. After this, she really wouldn't be the same pony anymore.

Calamity had refused to leave Velvet Remedy's side the entire time I had spent reprogramming the medical bot. (While I was at it, I'll admit that I changed the robot's name. Considering what its next operation would be, I didn't feel "Sawbones" was particularly appropriate.)

Now it was up to the medical bot and Velvet Remedy to treat both her and Calamity. I could only sit back and watch. And I didn't think I could bear to do that.

We were, for the moment, safe. The alicorns were creating a perimeter around Maripony, and the hellhounds seemed to be taking the rest of the night off. I pulled up my PipBuck's inventory sorting spell, looking for the memory orb I had found in the hospital. I was shocked to find a tin of Party-Time Mint-als amongst my supplies. For a moment, I couldn't remember how it had gotten there. I ordered the inventory sorter to bury it at the bottom of the saddlebags. The little pony in my head, once an advocate of keeping them, now nickered at me in disappointment. Stupid, inconsistent little pony.

I floated out the orb, laying it on a chunk of rubble in front of me. Then quickly captured it again as it started to roll. Finding a better place to set it, I focused directly on the orb with my magic.

The world melted away.



The world smelled of scented lotions and effervescent fragrances. The floor beneath me was comfortable; my flanks lounged into plush carpeting. I felt warmth and weight pressed against me from the mare wrapped in my forelegs. Her tears soaked into my coat over my breast.

I could hear the pony crying. And behind that, soft, tinkling music from somewhere up above. And in the other room a familiar mare's voice was saying, "I mean, that's wonderful news, right? Why don't you sound happy?"

The pony in my forelegs had the gentlest yellow coat, a flowing pink mane, and was Fluttershy.

"...but I do deserve it," Fluttershy mumbled against my breast, her body hitching with sobs. "I..."

The legs holding Fluttershy had an elegant white coat that was getting mussed, and I was Rarity.

Rarity felt weak from barely contained sadness, an exhaustion I knew all too well. Her eyes burned on the edge of tears, but she was holding them back, remaining strong for the yellow pegasus in her embrace.

Fluttershy wailed meekly, "I am a traitor!"

"I don't believe that," I heard my host say gently. "Rainbow Dash was..."

Fluttershy turned her face up to me, her eyes overflowing with tears. "Rarity. I gave megaspells to the zebras."

I felt my host tense, her eyes growing wide. But still she didn't let Fluttershy go. She held her, her voice shocked but her tone non-judgmental as she asked, "Why would you do that?"

Fluttershy gave a wretched squeak as she felt Rarity tense. Her expression told me she expected to be rejected. Pushed away. Maybe worse. But there was a tone of resolve in her voice when she answered.

"To stop the war."

Rarity shook her head. "How?"

"You remember the test. I have healing spells that megaspells will let heal almost anything. Zebras have potions that allow them to regenerate wounds, and a megaspell will make their whole army like that. Have you seen Twilight's new shield spell? A megaspell shield could protect a whole city."

Fluttershy looked at her unicorn friend, fierce determination shining behind those large eyes that were swimming in tears. "If both sides had megaspells, we wouldn't be able to kill each other anymore. They'd have to stop fighting."

I felt Rarity shudder, a knot forming in her throat. The tears she had been holding back began to flow. She knew, I could tell, that such was not the way either side would use this gift. "Oh Fluttershy..." As the first tear raced down her right cheek, Rarity leaned forward, brushing aside the flowing pink mane that obscured most of Fluttershy's face, and planted a kiss on the pegasus pony's forehead. "...You always were the best of us."

She hugged the pegasus tighter. "Never, ever regret what you've done, darling." She held Fluttershy's head against her breast so the pegasus could not see her weeping.

In the background, I could hear the other voice saying, "What? Oh, oh no. My sister is fine. We're..." I recognized the voice of Sweetie Belle now. "We're at that spa on Leaf Fall Lane. Rarity's been here all afternoon trying to get Fluttershy to stop crying."

Fluttershy shuddered, whimpering, "Rarity? I... I can't breathe." Her meek, hesitant tone suggested that she'd accept it if Rarity just kept squeezing her.

Rarity let go quickly. "Oh... Fluttershy, I'm so sorry." She got up, quickly turning away before the pegasus could see her tears. "I need to freshen up a bit. Will you be okay until I get back?"

Fluttershy squeaked but nodded.

My host trotted quickly for the little mare's room. On the way, she passed an anxious-looking spa pony. Stopping, Rarity whispered,

“Remember, you’re closed. I’m very sorry, and the Ministry of Image will pay you triple your lost earnings, but we really can’t be disturbed right now.”

Before the spa pony could respond, Rarity nearly galloped the rest of the way, pushing through the door to the ladies restroom. As the door swung shut behind her, I could hear Sweetie Belle saying, “Fluttershy says that Rainbow Dash called her a traitor!”

Rarity’s nerves felt fried. She was shedding tears, and it was making it difficult to see, but the sight of her in the mirror looked sad and terrified. Her horn was glowing, and something floated out of her side-purse. She wiped her eyes with a forehoof to better see the framed picture.

It was the Ministry Mares. All together, looking much younger... maybe my age. They were looking disheveled but happy, wearing once-elegant dresses that appeared to have been worn through a wrestling match. There was Spike too, but not Spike as I had ever known or imagined him. Baby Spike! They were all gathered around a round table covered in what looked like donut crumbs.

“I... I don’t think I can take this anymore. I was n-nothing before you. You’re th-the best friends a p-pony could h-have. The best ponies ever...” Rarity choked up. “A-and it feels like I’m l-losing all of you!”

Rarity’s whole body shuddered. She looked up at the mirror and was shocked by what she saw. Turning on the sink, she splashed water onto her face and tried to wash away any trace of her sadness. Looking back up, she drew herself up tall. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Rarity! Fluttershy needs you!”

Her horn glowed again, opening her purse and lifting up the picture.

The door pushed open. Rarity turned, a natural-looking smile already forced onto her muzzle. Her eyes widened upon seeing Sweetie Belle looking mournful.

“Sis, I’m sorry to interrupt but...”

“Yes?” Rarity said with hopeful cheer I know she didn’t feel.

“Applejack’s been in an... accident.”

I could feel Rarity’s body tense. “An accident? Is she all right?”

“She’s in a coma, but the doctors say she’ll recover,” Sweetie Belle told her sister regretfully.

At the word coma, Rarity’s magic imploded, the framed picture dropping to the floor with a clatter.

“Apple Bloom says Twilight Sparkle’s on her way to see them. She wants to know if you and Fluttershy can come see Applejack too.”

Rarity swayed. Forcing her voice to not waver, she informed her little sister, “Of course we will! Fluttershy and I will head to Manehattan right away.” She gave her sister a smile, “And will you be coming too?”

Sweetie Belle nodded. “I’ve already made arrangements. There’s a train leaving in an hour.” The younger unicorn slipped back out, closing the door behind her. “I’ll see you there.”

The moment Rarity was alone again, the usually elegant unicorn swayed on the verge of fainting. As she braced herself against the sink, her eyes fell to the picture on the floor. A slight crack now ran down the glass, separating Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy from Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle.

The unicorn mare whimpered softly. Her magic wrapped around the picture and tucked it back into her purse, then drew out a familiar headset. She touched her hoof to the earbloom.

Rarity turned to the mirror, looking at herself. A look of sad determination crossed her face.

A voice crackled over the earbloom. “Hello? Ministry of Image, Mistress Rarity’s office.

“This is Rarity. Contact the Ministry’s top magician. Tell him I’ve changed my mind and I will need his services on that special project after all.”



The trip back was a long and occasionally eventful one, but it was only in trying to look back on it afterwards that things became strange.

Calamity's wing had mended beautifully, but at our insistence he made regular stops to rest. Velvet Remedy fared both better and worse. Her foreleg was encased in a thick, rigid cast that prevented her from walking; she was extremely weak and in dire need of rest and recovery.

"Velvet, go to sleep," Xenith intoned, carefully using our unicorn companion's name. "Breath of the Phoenix takes time to do its work."

"Goddesses, Velvet," I chimed in, "You're worse than... well, all of us when you give us medical pony's orders."

Velvet Remedy ignored us, instead cooing at Pyrelight and nuzzling her wing softly. "Hear that, Pyrelight darling? Xenith's little brew has made me part phoenix. Isn't that wonderful?"

"It is just a name," Xenith sighed.

Velvet Remedy continued to play with Pyrelight who fluttered about my beautiful friend with unconcealed joy at her survival. The balefire phoenix kept perching on Velvet's cast, which I couldn't imagine was really helping.

I itched. And I really didn't like that. I swore to myself that the very first thing I would do upon returning to Tenpony Tower was find Homage and promise whatever I had to in order to get that Taint-purging spell cast on me. I feared it might already be too late.

Well, second thing. First thing would be to set my friends up in a luxury suite where Velvet could get some damn rest. "If you don't go right to bed when we get to Tenpony, I swear I'm going to tie you to the bed."

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened. Then narrowed as she gave me a sultry look. "Oh Littlepip, you tease. But really, that's your kink, not mine."

I sputtered. It was most definitely not my kink.

Thankfully, Velvet Remedy turned her spotlight on Xenith. "Yesterday when that siren went off, were you hearing it just in your ears?" Velvet Remedy asked.

The zebra gave her an odd look. I didn't blame her, finding the question equally strange until I heard Xenith's answer: "How else would I be hearing that dreadful noise?" She seemed to consider, "I have felt sounds before, low vibrating rumbles, but this was no such sound."

Velvet Remedy nodded and looked to the rest of us. It took me a moment, but when the realization hit me, it seemed so obvious that...



...I was looking down the scope of Little Macintosh as the zombie-pony came into view. A slight squeeze of the trigger and Little Macintosh roared. The creature's head exploded.

I turned, checking for any more of the flesh-eating zombies, but my E.F.S. compass was clean of red. I floated my weapon away, feeling a pang. It was tragic and terrible that these zombies were once living ponies who had become trapped, imprisoned in decaying bodies and minds, slowly tortured by the rotting insanity that turned them into mindless monsters bent on devouring other ponies. Yet part of me remembered all too horrifically that there were even worse fates.

I turned back to eating my soup. The others were settling back down to dinner as well. Twilight was fading. The ruins of the old power substation loomed about us. We had chosen it because the crumbling walls would shield the light of our cookfire. Calamity had wanted to push the rest of the way to Manehattan, but yielded to our persuasions.

Xenith stirred the pot again, offering Velvet another helping. Pyrelight had flown off hunting the moment the Sky Bandit touched down, and

Velvet had been anxious about her since the first zombie-pony appeared.

I heard hoofsteps and a clattering sound approaching, followed by heavy, ragged breathing that didn't sound like any pony. Waving to the others, I floated out the zebra rifle and brought up my E.F.S. again, scanning the area for hostile life. No red, but there were several approaching non-hostile entities. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Several minutes later, the traveling merchant moved into the light of our campfire. Upon seeing us, she froze, eyes darting to each of my (very heavily armed, I suddenly realized) party. The two-headed cattle carrying her wares mooed plaintively behind her.

Calamity flew over, causing the merchant to take a step back. But he was all smiles and a hearty hoofshake. "Howdy there! Been ages since ah've seen any sort o' caravan. Ah'd be much obliged if y'all would join us for soup. Ah promise, it's mighty tasty!"

He leaned forward and whispered loudly, "Ah didn't cook it."

The merchant smiled, the tension in her body melting away. "Thank ya kindly." She hitched her cattle to a trash bin and trotted over to join us. I gasped as a large beast pushed past the cattle and lumbered in after her, growling softly.

"W-what is t-that?" Velvet Remedy stammered, wide eyed.

The merchant laughed. "Oh, don'tcha mind Cuddles. He really is a friendly bear. Unless y'all are raiders." The pony smiled, "A lady can't be wanderin' the wasteland without a friend, y'know. There's some bad folk out there."

"Yao guai," our zebra whispered strangely to Velvet.

"I've... never met such a beast before," Velvet Remedy said, still wide-eyed.

"Well, truth be told, Ah never met neither a pegasus nor a zebra b'fore," the merchant replied good-naturedly as Xenith offered her a bowl of soup. "Thank ya, miss."

“What brings ya out this way?” Calamity asked curiously.

“Doin’ the new run ‘tween Shattered Hoof an’ Manehattan,” the merchant pony said with a smile. “Figure Ah outta get in on the new action b’fore everypony does.”

Suddenly, Calamity took to the air, darting back to where the Sky Bandit was parked. We all watched as he returned with his saddlebags and started pulling out seemingly random junk. Everything from old boxes of instant mashed potatoes to small-caliber firearms that were, quite frankly, beneath us.

Wait... when exactly did any lethal ranged weapon become beneath us?

“Where did you find those?” Velvet Remedy asked. “When did you find them? I thought we had sold everything non-essential at Tenpony Tower?”

“Scavengin’ Ol Olneigh,” Calamity replied as he started to pick the best things to barter with while Velvet Remedy just shook her head. She got up and hobbled over, nudging him aside and rearranging his selection.

“I will now tell you a secret,” said Xenith as she leaned close to the pegasus. “It is both possible and permissible to pass by a filing cabinet or garbage barrel without looking inside.”

I facehoofed as Calamity turned to her with wide, mock-amazed eyes. “Really? How? Ah ain’t learned that trick.”

“Obviously.”

I found myself smiling at that. A thought struck me. “Hey, Calamity, could we take a swing by Shattered Hoof on our way? I want to talk to Gawd...”



...I frowned as Velvet Remedy once more submersed herself in the original Fluttershy Orb.

I knew now that SteelHooves hadn’t quite been right about the yellow pegasus. But he’d still been close enough for me to worry for my friend.

Especially with the strain, physically and mentally, that this week had put Velvet Remedy under.

She'd come chillingly close to dying. Twice. And even if there were no visible scars or lasting physical damage from the loss of her leg, the psychological impact would not heal with magical ease. Her alteration under Xenith's brew showed no outward signs, but I could not imagine that it was not weighing on her as well. All this, on top of the horrors of the Stable Two massacre...

I looked away, tracing my right forehoof over the metal floor of the Sky Bandit. We were nearing Shattered Hoof. I could see the lights of it in the darkness.

I pushed my thoughts in other directions, purposefully distracting myself. I thought of the orbs I had seen yesterday. For the life of me, I couldn't imagine how or why the Leaf Fall Lane spa memory had ended up locked in that cabinet. Most of the time, the locations of the memory orbs I found struck me as completely logical. This one did not.

The other orb did, although it took me a while to puzzle it out. The Steel Rangers had likely been trying to make their way to the hospital roof, led by the robed unicorn mare in their party. With the information in that orb, they could have gotten a fix on the location of the central hub of the Single Pegasus Project, whatever that happened to be.

As for Rarity's reason to make a recording of the memory, I chose to believe that the moment Rainbow Dash asked her to design the Enclave armor was a happy moment for her. She was, at heart, a dressmaker. And finally her job and her beloved hobby had united... after a fashion. No pun intended. I could imagine the graceful, elderly unicorn wanting to relive that moment again and again. Especially as things began to fall apart for her friends.

Not unlike Velvet Remedy.

"Okay, Li'l pip," Calamity called out. "We're headin' in."

The pegasus was in a good mood. He was flying again. Velvet was going to be okay. And he'd even gotten to chat with a caravan merchant and barter (or, more precisely, watch Velvet Remedy barter). I had been surprised how many little items he had managed to scavenge from Old Olneigh while the rest of us were focused on just moving through.

I wasn't the only one with a vice.

"Incomin' griffins," Calamity called out. I brought up my E.F.S. and verified that they were friendly. A moment later, Blackwing and her Talons flew into view, circling and pulling up along side us.

"Littlepip and friends," she said. I felt my cheeks redden. Why was it never Calamity and friends or Velvet Remedy and friends I wondered for what seemed like the millionth-billionth time. Of course, by now I knew the answer. I had Homage and my companions to thank for it. Yay.

"Blackwing!" I said, brushing off my embarrassment to talk to the griffin. "I was hoping to see you. I have something I need to ask you for, and I hoped we could come to an arrangement."

"Oh?" The griffin merc raised an eyebrow. "This should be good..."



...I woke up, finding myself staring at the familiar ceiling of Doctor Helpinghoof's clinic. Only this time, at least, I wasn't bound.

I knew better than to get up too fast. Instead, I cleared my throat loudly. The voices beyond the partition stopped and a shadow approached. Doctor Helpinghoof pushed aside the partition and eyed me curiously.

"When I said that I could make a tidy profit off of you, I did not mean that as an encouragement."

Velvet Remedy pushed past him, wobbling as she tried to walk with just three legs. Her eyes were narrowed and her voice was cross. I was completely expecting this.

"I can't believe you!" she nearly shouted. "After everything we've been through! You used them again!?"

"I had to," I said evenly. "It was the only way." The only way to make sure Red Eye listened. "But it was just a one-time thing, and I sought treatment immediately." I leveled a gaze at her. "On my own, I could point out."

"One time? Of course. Until the next time you decide you need them," Velvet seethed. "Littlepip, haven't you learned anything!? You can't do just one time!"

I winced. She was right. I was playing with fire even though I knew I was soaked in whiskey. "Please... I know this is bad. But it was really important. I know this will make it harder for me. So I'm going to need you..."

"Let me see!" she demanded. Doctor Helpinghoof had politely backed away.

"See?"

"Your Goddess-damned inventory sorter, Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy barked. "I want to see for myself that you didn't keep any."

A shot of fear went through me. I lifted my PipBuck for her to see, praying that I actually had tossed the damned tin of Party-Time Mints into a burning trash barrel the moment I trotted out of the encampment. I prayed that my addiction and the little pony in my head hadn't somehow played tricks with my memory. I was going to be doing too much of that on my own.

"Okay, fine," Velvet said as she looked through my inventory and, thankfully, found no sign of PTMs. "And you better believe I will be going through your things back in the room. And quite regularly from now on."

I nodded. "Thank you, Velvet. I..."

"You've proven you can't be trusted," she snapped, her words wounding me. Even more so because I deserved it.

Doctor Helpinghoof's assistant trotted forward, smiling indulgently. Velvet Remedy looked to the white unicorn buck with the candy-red and scarlet striped mane. "Will it hurt?" Velvet asked, sounding worried. Shooting me a dark look, she added, "Not that she doesn't deserve it a little."

Turning back to the white unicorn, Velvet admitted, "She's been through so much. I don't want her to have to suffer any more."

"Don't worry," the unicorn said. "She won't remember any pain." Turning to me, she asked, "Are you ready to do this?"

I nodded. "Let's get it over with." I slowly pulled myself out of bed and followed him.

As we walked away, I heard Velvet Remedy moan, "You're going to destroy yourself trying to save the entire wasteland, Littlepip..."



...A piercing white light above me died, and I found myself in darkness, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling inlaid with strangely patterned mirrors. I was laying back in a chair, a bizarre and uncomfortable position. And I had absolutely no idea how I had gotten here.

The last thing I remembered was being in Helpinghoof's clinic. I seemed to recall that I had been treated for PTM use, and voluntarily at that. I cringed, my mind filling with shame as I remember taking that tin from the nurse's station. I was humiliated and disgusted with myself for the weakness I gave into every time I could have thrown it away. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember actually taking one.

Or, for that matter, I didn't remember volunteering for treatment, although I could remember acting as if I had once it was over.

A deep, alien terror started to envelop me as I tried to retrace my actions, only to find my memories of even the flight back to be piecemeal at best. Ever since leaving Maripony, my sense of time had

become swiss cheese. But the scattered moments I did remember didn't leave me with the impression that I had been losing time.

A familiar white unicorn buck appeared, leaning over me, his scarlet and candy red mane draping so that it almost touched my face. His mane reminded me of Pinkie Pie's at the party, after it had seemed to deflate. "Don't panic."

"Where am I? How did I get here? Who are you?" The questions tumbled out as fast as I could form them. The unicorn raised a silencing hoof, but I didn't want to be silenced. "What happened to me!?"

I felt another hoof touch my shoulder as Homage stepped around the chair. "Relax, love."

My eyes darted between them, my emotions in turmoil.

"Littlepip," Homage asked, "Do you trust me?"

The answer shot through all my dismay and confusion. "Yes."

Homage whispered, "Then still your thoughts, love. Relax." She helped guide me off the chair into her embrace. I pressed myself against her, breathing hard, trying to find a way to peace in the storm of panic that threatened to overwhelm me.

Her scent became a life preserver tossed into my ocean of distress. And a rope with which to pull myself to safety. Slowly, I relaxed.

"Littlepip, this is Life Bloom," Homage said finally, introducing me formally to the white unicorn with the red and scarlet mane and tail.

"I'm pleased to meet you again," Life Bloom said. "Velvet Remedy and Homage have told me so much about you."

I nodded slowly, piecing a little together. "You are Doctor Helpinghoof's assistant, right? The one that Velvet Remedy has been buying spells from?"

"Indeed I am."

Homage stroked my mane gently as if she could brush out the little shakes I was feeling. "You remember what I told you about the ponies who really run Tenpony Tower? Life Bloom is one of them."

The unicorn buck bowed with a smile. "And you are the Stable Dweller whom DJ Pon3 and Homage have woven into the Bringer of Light."

I flushed with embarrassment, looking away.

"And humble," the buck said with a smile. "That is a good sign."

Turning back to him, I asked again, this time more slowly, "Where am I? And what happened to me?"

The unicorn's horn glowed a brilliant crimson. A small box floated into view. I recognized the kind of box. It was the kind which held memory orbs. "These, Littlepip, are yours."

"Mine?" It took me a breath to grasp what he was saying. "They're my memories?"

"Of the last couple days," Homage said in agreement.

I reeled. I'd lost days? "Wh...? Why did you remove them?"

"Because you asked me to," Life Bloom said. "And because Homage persuaded me it was for a good cause."

"Life Bloom is a bit of a magical protégé. Takes to new spells like nopony I've ever seen. He's the only unicorn in Tenpony Tower to have mastered the old memory spells once used by the Ministry of Morale," Homage informed me. "He's also the one who can cast the Taint Purge."

Looking at me knowingly, Homage followed that little revelation up with, "So, how are you feeling?"

I stopped. Assessed myself. I felt tired. Strained. The burns on my flank and side had been healed but were still tender.

The deep, unsettling itch was gone.

“There may be minor mutations,” Life Bloom announced. “But nothing life-threatening or even, I suspect, life-changing. I’m pretty certain that we purged you in time.”

I felt my knees give out as a sudden rush of gratefulness weakened me. “Oh thank you!”



The box of memory orbs came with a note in my own tooth-writing.

Littlepip,

The memory orbs inside this box are in order. The first is pretty much a table of contents, and the others are most of my/your memories from the last few days. The three important ones that I think I will want to relive are orbs four, six and eight. Everything else is just long, dull flights and routine stuff. I don't think I/you really need to spend hours trapped in a memory orb just so we can relive our bowel movements or hours of feeling itchy.

Don't watch any of these until after you/I get the Black Book and take it to Maripony. Please. I know that's going to be really hard for me/you, but it's important.

**Yours yourselfly,
Littlepip.**

I read it again and again, but it still made no sense. I looked at the orbs. I wanted my memories back! I wanted to know what I did over the last two days. I needed to know why I had taken Party-Time Mint-als again. What could possibly have been so dire as to make me do that?

A bluish sheath of magic closed the lid, removing the memory orbs from my sight, and floated the box out of my hooves. Homage magically lifted it, placing it into her safe and locking it. The huge painting of Splendid Valley floated back into its place.

She turned towards me, smiling. “Now, how soon do you have to go?”

I shook my head, completely at a loss. I felt untethered. Adrift. I didn't know what my plans were. What I was supposed to be doing next.

All I did know was that Velvet Remedy needed time to recuperate. In reality, so did Calamity. Maybe all of us did. I hated the idea of spending another day on myself when there were ponies in the Equestrian Wasteland suffering and dying because I wasn't there to help them. But this wasn't time spent for me. This was for my friends. And I couldn't do anything without them. I needed them, now more than ever.

"I think we can take a day or two," I said hesitantly. "But no more than that."

Homage smiled. "Perfect! I'll start dinner."

I remembered something. "Thirty-one!? How could you do that to me!"

"Because I know your body like the beautiful instrument it is!" she called back as she made her way into her kitchen. "And I can coax the most beautiful music from it."

I felt myself go weak. "Not... what... I meant..."

I looked around, wondering suddenly where Xenith was.



"Hello, me! Welcome to my memories!"

I was looking at myself in a full length mirror. I could see Life Bloom and Homage moving about in the background. The room was dark and strangely shaped with an odd chair in the center beneath a shining spotlight. Mirrored inlays on the ceiling caught the light as it bounced back off the chair, making the lines of mirror seem to glisten.

This is just the table of contents, I told myself. It's okay to watch just this one. I felt utterly confused and I needed at least a little context.

"If you are not me, then these memories are not for you," I felt myself say with what was actually my own mouth. This was supremely weird; I

was riding me. "Please do not watch any more of them, and return them immediately to DJ Pon3 or his assistant at Tenpony Tower."

That deep itching was gone. I had stood in front of this mirror, saying these things, after Life Bloom had used the Taint Purge spell on me.

"Now, assuming I am me... and this is supremely weird. And I thought writing the note felt bizarre..." I paused, apparently re-gathering my train of thought. Did I usually ramble like this?

"Okay, the first big thing you need to know..." I stopped again. I felt my body deflate with a sigh.

"Dammit, Littlepip!" I said, stomping. "I'm watching this before I told me to, aren't I?"

I felt a rush of embarrassment as I realized I had caught me.

"Celestia rape your cunt with the burning sun if I can't even take simple instruction from myself! Do I have no fucking self control?"

I felt myself stomp again. Felt myself huffing. The entire memory was too surreal. "Dammit! Okay... sorry for that if I'm watching this when I should be. If so, I owe myself an apology."

Taking a deep breath, I started again. "I'm going to make this short, just in case I'm the kind of idiot I'm afraid I am." I gave myself a dark look, then continued. "First, by now you've already figured out that there are two kinds of memory spells. The first records a memory, like the spell enchanted into a recollector. The second extracts a memory completely. That's the kind that the Ministry of Morale used when they weren't being gentle."

I felt myself frowning, and the Littlepip in the mirror frowned back.

"Second, I've got a plan for dealing with the Goddess. I've told everypony their parts, and just their parts. I'm the only pony who knows all of it. Unfortunately, we can't do anything about the Goddess if we can't even reach Maripony. And if I go in knowing the plan, Trixie can read it right out of my head. Game over. So..." I felt myself

lift a foreleg and make a sweeping motion as the Littlepip in the mirror did exactly that.

Crap. I knew I was right. Other me, that is. Arrugh.

“So for the love of Celestia and Luna, for the love of Homage, don’t watch any more of the damn memory orbs until after you take the Black Book to Maripony.”

I stomped with a huff. “Seriously, I am so disappointed in me.” Then, sheepishly, I added, “That is, assuming I should be. If I really held out like I told me too, I really have egg on my face right now, don’t I?”

I felt utterly guilty and pissed at myself.

“Now, the fourth memory orb is my conversation with Blackwing. I’m sure I’ll need to know the deal we struck. The sixth one I’ll need to know for entirely different reasons. That’s the one where I took a Party-Time Mint-al. I’m beginning to question if that was the right call. But I really, really needed to be at my most persuasive. You’ll see.

“The eighth memory orb was being greeted by Homage as we returned to the Tower. And that one I know I’ll want to relive again and again.”

I gave myself a wink.



Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (1) - Exposure to Taint has altered your physiology. When under the effects of Advanced Radiation Poisoning (400+ Rads) any crippled limbs will automatically regenerate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



CONVERSATIONS IN THE CALM BEFORE

“We could form our own secret society.”

“Well?”

I had just barely floated the painting of Splendid Valley back into place when Homage came in. “Well what?” I asked, hoping I didn’t sound as guilty as I felt.

“Did you sneak around behind my back and break into my safe to look at your memories, even after both I and you told you not to?”

Oh Goddesses. It was bad enough that I disappointed myself. But just how deplorable was it that I broke into Homage’s private safe to do so?

I hated my curiosity, and I hated myself for being so weak. I looked to Homage, wondering what to say. Should I admit it? Would it hurt her? Did she already know?

“Littlepip,” Homage said with a sad yet stern voice, “I don’t know what upsets me more. That you broke into my safe and tried to undo everything you’d worked so hard for, or that you actually considered lying to me about it.”

“But I...” My heart broke.

"You paused to think," Homage frowned. "It doesn't take that long to think of how to say yes."

My gaze fell to the floor.

"I think you'd best sleep elsewhere tonight."

I felt my blood freeze. I looked up into Homage's eyes, pleading. The beautiful little grey unicorn gave me a soft, sad smile. "I was there when you made your little speech to yourself. I knew you were probably going to do this... and so did you. I hoped you could be better than that..."

Her words hit me like a buck to the gut.

"...but I'm not angry at you for failing. Just disappointed."

I would rather she be angry. Disappointed hurt so much more. I could handle being yelled at, but the idea that I had failed and saddened Homage...

Homage looked at me tenderly. "Before your worries take you to dark places, I'll tell you up front: this doesn't change my feelings for you at all. And my disappointment will be short lived. I'm not sending you away because I don't want to see you; I'm sending you away because you've been bad and I'm punishing you."

She gave me a little smile, "And I think we both know you need that as much as deserve it." The smile faded. "I'll see you tomorrow, Littlepip."



It took me most of the ride down the elevator to figure out why I needed punishment as much as I deserved it. There was no question of the latter. The pit in my stomach and the self-loathing in my heart told me that I had done wrong. I had wronged myself. And far worse, I had wronged her. My voice in the darkness.

And with that, even if she forgave, I would never be able to accept forgiveness until she had punished me for it too. I couldn't move on

while my tail was twitching. I needed something to fall on my head, or I'd always be looking for it.

I wasn't entirely sure how I'd come up with that analogy ("Awareness! It was under 'E!'"), but I knew that it was appropriate.

I walked slowly down the hall towards the door to our suite, casually unlocking it with my telekinesis. What was once unimaginable had become a feat of such ease I barely focused on it. My mind was largely elsewhere. I was determined to remain at Tenpony Tower for a little while longer, not for myself but for my companions. Each of them had nearly died in the last few days. Xenith and Calamity would both have been turned to ash by the hellhounds' attacks if it had not been for the spell Velvet Remedy learned from Life Bloom last time we were here. Each had suffered fearsome wounds, Velvet's injury still left her in a cast despite the most powerful healing magic and best care the wasteland could provide. Nor was I untouched, but I feared for them more than myself. Deep down, I somehow knew that I was expendable but they were not.

I had a lot of repairing to do. I wondered if I should try to get them counseling. Or should we work through this alone? I wasn't sure where best to begin, or even how much I may have already done. Was I doomed to spend the next days repeating discussions we'd already had but that I didn't remember? Seeing my friends look at me awkwardly as I initiated difficult conversations for a second time?

Couldn't I have at least left myself some notes? Of course, as they say, hindsight is... well, no, even that didn't really apply. My hindsight was perforated. Even worse, I was smart enough to realize that I shouldn't be trying to put the pieces back together. If I thought about things too much, I might be able to reconstruct lines of logic that I didn't want to have in the forefront of my brain when I next confronted the Goddess. I suspected that Trixie's telepathy didn't extend much beyond reading my surface thoughts -- if it had, I think things would have gone a lot differently in Maripony. (Or perhaps she could, but it just required a level of focus the Goddess couldn't commit to while maintaining connection to all her alicorns. The fact that Calamity had been able to

surprise her about something he had been looking at told me she wasn't nearly as on top of current thoughts as she wanted us to believe.) Still, if I knew the plan or even suspected what I was up to, there was no way I could avoid thinking about it while I enacted it.

These thoughts so preoccupied my head that I did not even notice the sounds as I entered the room. But the sight stopped me dead.

Calamity. And Velvet Remedy.

Together. In bed. Intertwined. Moving...

...doing...

I shouldn't be here. Leavingnowbye!

I had become rather exceptional at stealth. I was able to slip out fast and smooth, without making the slightest peep, without being seen.

The click as I closed the door behind me sounded louder than Little Macintosh.

I froze. My whole body was tense, my nerves covered in ice. My mind was reeling. I couldn't begin to formulate feelings of my own about what I had just walked in on; I was still panicking.

On the other side of the door, I heard voices. My heart was pounding.

"Did... somepony just open the door?" she asked cautiously.

"Ah locked it," he responded.

And then, in almost perfect unison:

"Li'l pip!"

"Littlepip!"

I ran. As fast and as silently as I could. As I raced down the hall, I could swear I heard Xenith's voice float out of nowhere, proclaiming: "Dooooooooomed."



I clopped my hoof on the door to Twilight's Athenaeum. Part of me knew I was supposed to be banished from Homage's company for the day, but I wasn't looking to get away with anything, just to get away. I needed a place to hide, and a place to stay the night, and Homage came to the forefront of my thoughts.

Nopony answered. The door was locked, and I wasn't about to unlock another anything without permission. I dashed up the stairs to the balcony and lifted my hoof towards the door to the emergency broadcast station. Was she busy? Would the beat of my hoof interrupt a recording? Did I have the right to take that risk?

And what would she have to say to me? How could I ask her to make an exception for me because I had managed invade the privacy of even more of my friends?

Doomed indeed. And I deserved it. I put down my hoof. I'd just spend the day wandering aimlessly around Tenpony Tower, avoiding everypony, and waiting until the final hour of my exile was over.

Not a problem. I could go half a day without getting myself in trouble.

I heard a chime in the atrium below. The elevator doors slid open. I crouched flat on the balcony as I saw Velvet Remedy and Calamity step out into the atrium, Calamity helping support Velvet with one of his wings. Oh Goddesses! I couldn't face them right now. I backed up against the M.A.S.E.B.S. door, hiding.

"Ya think she's upset?" Calamity's voice sounded below.

I could hear the odd thump of Velvet's foreleg cast as she moved awkwardly into the atrium.

"Well, I wish that she'd just see this as an opportunity to get back at me for some of my teasing," Velvet Remedy's voice floated up to me. Her chocolaty-smooth voice had a slightly harried timbre. "But I doubt that she will. The poor girl had a crush on me for ages, and while I've been under the impression that she is over it, I worry she might still feel hurt."

Did I? I wasn't sure. I was still too wrapped up in the fear of being caught. And now, I worried that I might feel like that. It would be unfair. And selfish. I had a relationship with Homage that left me... exhausted, to be honest. What right did I have to begrudge anyone else a relationship of their own? Especially my two closest friends. I should be happier than ever for them.

"Ah honestly don't think ya give Li'lpip enough credit. She's got too much heart t' let jealousy eat away at her. Or us. Ah reckon Ah got more t' worry 'bout in that regard from yer bird."

It dawned on me that I wasn't feeling happy for them. I didn't think I felt jealous. I wanted to be a much better pony than that. If I was jealous, I didn't deserve the friendship of either of them. But no, I didn't think it was jealousy either that I was feeling.

It was concern. An aching pessimistic worry.

Calamity's voice rose up from below again. "Do ya think she's here? Seems awfully..."

"Quiet? Yes, now that you mention it. If she was in Homage's company, I would expect we'd be able to hear her. At least, that is what Xenith would have me believe."

I buried my face in my forehooves, suddenly blushing. There was absolutely no way this could get more awkward and humiliating.

"I mean... thirty-one? Celestia's mercy!"

Okay, I was wrong. Now it couldn't get worse.

"That's... a lot, right?" Calamity asked in buckish ignorance.

"Yes, that's a lot," Remedy said. I could almost hear the rolling of her eyes.

"Did... you...?" Oh no. Did Calamity really ask that? I heard the soft smack of Velvet Remedy's hoof. Good for her.

"You do not ask a lady that, Calamity!" she scolded. Then, in a smaller voice, she admitted, "Yes. Twice."

“Twice?” Oh the big idiot. “And we were... then she was...” I felt my ears burning as I realized my pegasus friend was trying to do the math. “How the hell did she ‘av time t’ come t’ Splendid Valley?”

“Indeed,” Velvet said with a slight trace of bitterness. “Clearly, Homage’s cutie mark should be Littlepip. Obviously, that’s what she’s best at doing.”

I wanted to melt into the wall and disappear into some void beyond. I wanted the moon itself to come crashing down through the ceiling and crush me. I didn’t want them to find me, and I didn’t want to be hearing this private conversation... and the mere thought that they might discover I had been unintentionally eavesdropping made me die inside.

I heard a splash. One of them had stepped into the fountain’s pool.

“After Maripony, I finally understand the alicorn in this room,” Velvet’s voice mused, changing the subject. “I had been wondering how and why Twilight Sparkle would have chosen such a decoration.”

“When we do find ‘er,” Calamity stated slowly, “Ah think ya oughta do the talkin’.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Well... y’all are just better at it than me. Li’lpip will want t’ know ‘bout... what we are now, an’ all. Ah’d jus’ mess it up.”

“And just what are we now?” Velvet said silkily.

“Dammit,” Calamity sighed in frustration and confusion. “Tha’s jus’ the question Ah was tryin’ t’ avoid.” Slowly, he admitted, “Ah don’ know.”

Velvet’s voice was gentle and kind. “You’re Calamity, and I’m Velvet Remedy. Just like we were before, only more intimate.” I heard another splash. “I’m not going to push for us to be anything more than you want us to be. I’m never going to tie you down, or demand a commitment that you aren’t looking for...”

I couldn't help but feel this conversation was built upon a great many that I hadn't been privy to before, and that I had no excuse to be listening to this one. My mind began to scramble for ways to escape.

"Ya don't even need t' ask, girl."

"I know," Velvet purred. "But I need you to know that I'm not looking to change anything about you... well, except maybe for your grammar... I just want to be with you."

If I opened the door behind me, closed it and stood up quickly, surely they would think I had just stepped out of the station behind me? It seemed like a good plan.

The door was locked. Of course it was.

Well, surely I couldn't get myself into any more trouble...

"Aw dangit. Ah don't know nothin' what t' say. Ah ain't any good at this sorta thing."

"You don't know anything to say," Velvet tried pointlessly.

"Ayep. Wish Ah did. Maybe Ah... should jus' hold ya?"

The lock clicked. I slid the door open, then stood as I closed it again.

"Littlepip."

"Li'lpip."

I looked down at them, both standing in the fountain's pool, Calamity's forehoof sliding away from an interrupted embrace. My heart raced, and I blurted out the first thing I thought of. "Oh. Hello. I was just in there with Homage in the place doing the thing."

They were giving me odd looks. I wanted to facehoof myself into unconsciousness. Instead, I gave them a forced and probably awkward smile. They looked at each other, then back to me, their expressions melting into ones of compassion and concern. I realized that my awkwardness would be taken as discomfort over what they knew I had seen and not what they didn't know I had heard. Velvet Remedy started to call up to me...

The door behind me opened and Homage peeked out. “Littlepip, did you just try to come in?” Her eyes narrowed at me. “That’s not how punishment works.”

Calamity and Velvet Remedy exchanged looks of quick realization.

Doomed. I am not a clever pony.



After twenty minutes of explaining and confessing and apologizing (with a hint of blubbling), I found myself sitting across from Velvet and Calamity at Homage’s table, feeling small and guilty, as Homage made everyone tea.

At last, however, I had been able to put solid thoughts to my feelings. The problem now was how or even if I should voice them. What if my worries were correct? What damage would I do by shining a light on them. Or worse, what if I was wrong, but my questions led to doubts in their own minds?

The silence stretched awkwardly between the three of us. Velvet looked patient but strained. Calamity fidgeted.

If I said anything, it would have to be now, while they were together and could draw support from each other as they answered. But what if...?

Calamity rubbed a hoof on the table, absently asking Velvet, “Hey, ya figure they did it on here?”

I changed the subject quickly, and not just because the answer was yes, and I didn’t want them thinking about that when Homage put tea and a plate of cakes on the table. “I guess I’m just concerned. I mean, you two are my closest friends. We travel everywhere together. And with hardly anypony else...”

“And you’re worried we’ve grown intimate out of convenience?” Velvet Remedy finished for me tactfully.

“uh... pretty much, yeah.”

Calamity snorted. "Now Ah know how y'all might think that way, comin' from a Stable. But Ah've been down here for awhile now. Ah've had plenty o' other options. Jus' never cared for 'em." He nodded upwards. "Had options up there too. But none o' the mares in the service shared muh feelin's 'bout helpin' the ponyfolk down here. A right turnoff, if'n y'ask me."

I had to admit, I'd never even considered the idea of Calamity having relationships available to him with anypony other than us. He just seemed like such a lone defender that I thought of him as being just as much a stranger to the rest of the world as we were. But hadn't Railright claimed that Calamity had been offered a home and place in New Appleloosa?

Homage came in with the tea and cakes. She smiled and gave me a little kiss on my horn, which suddenly felt pleasantly warm, as she floated a cup of tea onto the table in front of me.

"I'll admit," Velvet Remedy began, "that I was worried about the same thing at first. The first thing that attracted me to Calamity was his wings."

"Ah swear, y'all got a feather fetish," Calamity nipped playfully.

Velvet giggled primly. "No. I had just abandoned my home and risked whatever I would find out here for freedom, and there you were. More free than I ever imagined any pony could be. Not even the ground could hold you."

"Aah shucks, Ah ain't no differ'nt than any other pegasi."

"Oh, but you are," Velvet cooed maturely. "I didn't know it at the time, but you are so much more. I always wanted to be a medical pony, and I embraced the first chance I got to. But I left my home behind for selfish reasons. You cut your shackles because they were preventing you from helping other ponies. You freed yourself out of compassion and kinship."

Calamity was blushing now. I realized I liked seeing him like that. It brought out a beauty in him.

“You truly care about ponies,” she continued, her eyes roaming over Calamity. “And I’ve seen how you are with us, especially with Littlepip,” she said, turning back to me. “He’ll stand by you, never leave you. Protect you even from yourself...”

“Always there to catch me,” I found myself saying softly.

Velvet Remedy smiled and nodded. “I feel safe with him around because I know he will protect us. Especially you, since you seem to need it the most. But he has always been right there for me when I needed him too.”

I was suddenly feeling guilty again, this time for monopolizing Calamity’s time. I lowered my head, breathing in the calming scent of the zebra chai tea wafting up from my cup.

Scowling a little, Velvet Remedy couldn’t help but add, “I’m not saying we’re a match made in the clouds. He does tend to jump to violence as a solution far too readily for my tastes... and he’s not the only one.” She fixed me with a look. For a few moments, her gaze held me like steel, making me squirm. Then her expression relaxed. “But I realize that, in the Equestrian Wasteland, violence is often the most appropriate response. Although not as often as you two take to it. And at least both of you are motivated to shed the blood you do out of justice, compassion and a sense of responsibility for your fellow pony. All of which seem sorely lacking in far too many ponies out here.”

She turned to Calamity with a look that clearly said “your turn”.

Homage trotted around and sat behind me, watching unobtrusively. I felt a gentle support radiating off of her despite her recent disappointment. I was supposed to be being punished, but there was no hint of that.

I found myself fervently wishing at Calamity to not blow it. I wasn’t happy for them because I was worried they were going to get hurt. But I wanted them to be together, I realized. I hoped for them. And Velvet’s words were like a ray of real, untainted sunshine. For the first time, I really thought maybe they could last together. So long as Calamity didn’t say anything stupid in the next few minutes, that was.

Calamity shuffled, looking uncomfortable. "Ah take it Ah can't jus' say 'ditto'?"

I took a long sip from my cup, the slightly bitter liquid washing over my tongue. I felt the warmth of the tea spread soothingly through me.

Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a shake of her head. The pegasus reached back to brush at his mane, accidentally tipping his desperado hat into his eyes.

"Well... she's beautiful," he started. "Not jus' outside. Behind her outer beauty an' occasionally abrasive personality, she's really beautiful inside."

I winced. He was going to be paying for that for a bit.

"Ah mean..." From Calamity's shuffle, I guessed he knew it too. But he was being honest. I hoped Velvet took that into account. "Look, when we first rescued her, Ah didn't know what t' think. She was helpin' slavers. An' she was... well... Ah was expectin' her t' be fancy an' prissy an' high falootin' like the folks in this Tower here. But she weren't like that at all. She's beautiful, but she's... I dunno... down t' earth?"

He paused, looking for a word, then smiled as he settled on, "Practical. She's practical. An' more importantly, she's devoted. She weren't helpin' slavers cuz she sympathizes for any o' what they were doin', but because she's dedicated t' helpin' folk. And she don't let unpleasantness or discomfort get in the way."

Calamity wrapped his tail around Velvet Remedy, who was holding him with rapt attention. "She's faithful. She's stuck by our side even as we walked into hell. Her wantin' t' play diplomatic-like wi' aggressive or evil types does wear thin, but Ah reckon maybe there's somethin' t' it sometimes... an' she does that cuz she really does care about folk and is committed t' helpin' them. Even if a mess o' them don't deserve it. Ain't like her t' ask if they do."

He shrugged. "How could Ah not absolutely love 'er for that?"

Looking into Velvet's eyes, Calamity finished by saying, "It's like... yer jus' what the doctor ordered, y'know?" Velvet rolled her eyes at the

corniness, but smiled. “The Equestrian Wasteland ain’t a pretty place. It’s rough an’ it’s grim an’ it’s bloody. An’ some days it c’n be hard t’ remember whats worth fightin’ for out here. But Ah don’t have t’ look any further than at this here charcoal unicorn mare next t’ me t’ be reminded jus’ how good ponies c’n be, and jus’ how worth it all the struggle is.”

Part of me wanted to jump up and hug them. Part of me wanted to tell them to get a room... but then, I was kinda to blame for them not being there.

“Okay... I’m convinced,” I said with a smile. Homage wrapped her forelegs around me from behind. Our couple-ness made me feel less awkward in front of theirs.

“Yes,” Velvet Remedy said suddenly to Calamity while giving the cakes a declining look. “I think they did things on this table.”

Homage bit one of my suddenly-burning ears playfully. Far too late, I changed the subject, “So... how long have you two been... together?”

Calamity laughed. “Y’mean physically? Since, what?” He looked at Velvet, who was trying to keep a lady-like distance from the question. “Yesterday?”

I blinked.

“Aw come on, Li’lpip. We didn’t even kiss b’fore last week.”

Velvet Remedy sighed, then said smoothly, “Really, Littlepip, we have you to thank that we have a relationship at all.”

Wait, what?

“Ayep. Iffin it weren’t fer ya actin’ like we was already a couple back at that Stable, Ah don’t think we woulda started lookin’ at each other that way.”

I blushed so hard I should have caught on fire.



Calamity rolled two memory orbs across the table to me. "Ya said it was okay t' see these again."

I caught them in a telekinetic blanket, careful not to focus directly on either of them. "Are they... mine?"

"Naw. Traded for 'em. The caravan pony claimed they were gen-u-ine memories o' Rainbow Dash." He gave me a wry smirk as my heart gave a little leap. I was actually thrilled to learn anything more I could about those ponies. When had it become such a passion?

"Are they?" I asked hopefully.

"From whatcha said last time," Calamity responded with a voice suggesting he felt snookered, "not 'xactly."

I floated them into my saddlebags for safe keeping and finished my tea. It was now barely lukewarm. The conversation had lasted a while.

After Velvet and Calamity had taken their leave, I felt Homage's forelegs slip away from me. The cups, saucers and plate of cakes lit up with the glow of Homage's horn and began to float themselves back to the kitchen sink.

I felt like a warm blanket had been pulled from me on a chilly winter night. "I... guess I should go now. I'm still being punished, right?" I got up and began moving, but not in any particular direction.

"Yes," Homage said a touch reluctantly.

I wished punishment didn't mean having to be apart from her. The thought of being alone tonight hurt more now than it did before. I stopped next to a desk littered with Homage's personal things. She had a triptych of pictures framed on the desk. Pictures of me in the wasteland, my friends nearby. The pictures were taken from someplace high above and far away, zoomed in until I nearly filled the frame, but washed out with the odd tint of all the air between the camera and its subject. I suspected that the pictures were taken by the cameras on those spires. And I suspected the willing separation tonight hurt Homage as much as me. "Couldn't you just spank me instead or something?" I asked, hoping for a faster punishment.

Homage laughed. “Nooo. But tomorrow night, I might. As a reward.”

I looked at her in confusion, one ear dipping. How would a spanking be a reward? oh... OH! Ohmygosh! I lost balance, my head crashing to the desktop. I backed up, stumbling, seeing stars.

Homage was chuckling even as she trotted up to make sure I was okay. “I think I better go now,” I told her. “Before I hurt myself. Again.”



I ambled through the market sector of Tenpony Tower, paying little attention to the ponies around me. The smells from the restaurants and snack shops teased my nostrils with promises that were probably too wonderful for the centuries-old packaged foods to deliver. But I let my nose drag me towards one of them anyway.

Looking at the wall-mounted menu, my eyes widened at the prices, each of which was now written in pencil with the tell-tale signs of several previous erasings. I lifted my PipBuck, checking how many caps I had on hoof. Velvet Remedy was the queen of barter, and so we'd been letting her keep most of our caps. I barely had enough for a Sparkle-Cola or a box of stuffed apple cakes. (Filled with a sweet, candy-apple filling and five thousand times the daily recommended amount of preservatives. Yay.)

I plopped down my bottle caps and ordered the cola. I watched as a pony slid the caps off the counter with a hoof, then picked up a crowbar in his mouth and trotted back to a still-functional Sparkle-Cola machine, prying it open and fetching my drink. A chain and padlock on the ground told me how they kept their supply secure at night.

I took my cola, floating it to my muzzle and tasting the lukewarm, deliciously carrotty flatness. I was an hour into my exile and already hating it.

I spotted Calamity leaving the constabulary, looking disgruntled.

“Highway robbery,” he grouched. “Anywhere else, Ah could buy an armor-piercin’ round fer what they’re askin’ fer a rubber one.” He added, “Well, if anywhere else sold ‘em.”

I scampered over to trot at his side. “How’s your wing?”

Calamity smiled, judging my intentions. “Velvet an’ Ah are both doin’ fine. Well... not fine. She’s hurtin’ inside. What happened t’ both o’ us in Ol’ Olneigh scares ‘er badly. But we’re workin’ through it t’gether. So don’t go tryin’ t’ set us all up wi’ a shrink again.”

I blinked. “I did that?” I had considered it earlier.

“Ayep. Not one o’ yer better plans,” Calamity noted. “But well intentioned.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to see that memory. Ever.

We walked in silence a while. I drank from my cola, then offered some to my friend. Calamity accepted, biting down on the bottle’s rim and tilting it back for a swig. Then he passed it back. We walked on in silence some more.

“Ah’m worried, Li’lpip.”

I nodded. There were about a hundred things for us to be worried about. Plus several extra ones for Calamity as he plunged into this newly deeper relationship with Velvet Remedy.

“The Enclave... that experiment in Ol’ Olneigh. That was new. Post-Calamity new. Ah don’t know why they would be there, why they would be doin’ that, or what they all are up to,” he looked at me. “An’ Ah’m worried.”

Of all the possible worries he might have, this was the one I expected the least. But I knew that I shouldn’t have. These were his ponyfolk. His old home. They had to be weighing on him as much as concerns for Stable Two weighed on me.

“The pegasi are good ponyfolk,” Calamity said. “Whatever happens, remember that. Cuz the Enclave... they ain’t. Not so much.”



I was in a large foyer marbled in grey. Large vertical windows let in the grey light of a rainy day. Outside, a dozen ponies were protesting, chanting and waving signs in the rain. Inside, ponies trotted about on personal business, or stood conversing in clumps. Many wore long raincoats still slick with a wet sheen. A few were hauling small wagons filled with boxes.

My host was an earth pony mare sitting behind a long counter, gazing languidly at the text on a terminal. From the stirring warmth in certain parts of her body, the story she was fixated on was of a cloppy nature and probably not safe for work.

A familiar voice echoed from somewhere above and safely distant enough that my host was able to change the screen (to a memo on Wartime Stress Disorder) without rushing suspiciously. She looked back and up, her eyes moving to a spiraling set of wrought-iron stairs that descended from a mezzanine level above. The whole lobby gave me the impression of Ministry architecture.

A flash of light erupted about four yards from my host's counter, wrenching her attention away from the stairwell before she could spot who she was looking for. Rarity stood in the lobby, wobbling slightly. Her dress, mane and the large satchel on her side all hissed up wisps of smoke. She blinked, wide-eyed, seeming disoriented. But in an eye-blink, she had gathered herself together and was trotting up to my host with an urgent expression.

"Hello. Welcome to..." my host began politely. But Rarity was in too much of a hurry for niceties.

"Yes, yes. I know where I am, and I know who you are," she said, waving a hoof. "I need to know if Rainbow Dash is still here. Please tell me I haven't missed her."

Before my host could answer, that familiar voice answered for her. Hovering about halfway down the spiral staircase, Rainbow Dash exclaimed loudly, "Whoa! Rarity, did you just teleport here?"

Standing on the steps behind Rainbow Dash, Applejack was looking equally impressed. Her orange coat and blonde mane made for a welcome splash of warm colors in the stark, cool room.

Rarity paused, seeing the two of them, then smiled with a soft whinny. "Yes, well, I have been trading spells with Twilight for years now... and let me tell you, it is not as easy as she makes it look." With a wince, she added, "How's my mane?"

Rainbow Dash swooped down to greet her. "It's fine." Descending the stairs, Applejack added, "It's gorgeous." It looked like she'd run a few laps around a burning house.

"So what's up?" Rainbow Dash asked cheerfully.

Rarity glanced behind her and up towards Applejack, a brief look of unease passing over her face, and then turned to Rainbow Dash. "I had some... things to talk to you about. But it can wait. Until you're alone."

Rainbow Dash blinked. Then her eyes opened wide. She whispered, "Oh... about the new..." then glanced back towards Applejack too. "...armor?"

Rarity nodded. "That and the other thing. I've been having a lot of trouble trying to perfect that spell, and I wanted to see the device you want it embedded into."

"Oh!" Rainbow Dash reached back and scratched at her rainbow mane with a forehoof. "Well, Apple Bloom's all set to procure a life support capsule from the Ministry of Peace. We should have it by next week, but... well, she's going to be modifying it a lot. Do you need to wait until it's finished?"

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Apple Bloom's part of this too?"

"Yeah. Why... is that a problem?"

“Well,” Rarity said, brushing her left forehoof in circles against the marble floor. “I really don’t want my little sister anywhere near this research of mine. And she and Apple Bloom are best of friends...”

“Did Ah hear muh little sister’s name?” Applejack said, trotting up from the bottom of the stairs.

Rainbow Dash turned and smiled. “Yeah. She’s helping me on a project.”

“Ah thought the Ministry of Awesome didn’t actually do anything?”

Dash snorted and puffed herself up, “They don’t do anything that isn’t awesome, you mean.”

Rarity and Applejack exchanged looks of doubt.

“Anyway,” Rarity said a little too hastily. “I really should be going...”

“Wait,” Applejack said. “Y’mean ya teleported all the way over here jus’ t’ go?” She frowned. “How come Ah get the feelin’ Ah’m undesired company?”

“Unwanted?” Rarity gasped. “Oh heavens no! If anything, I want more Applejack.” I snickered inwardly and was glad my eavesdropping host didn’t do the same. “We don’t see nearly enough of each other anymore. It feels like it’s been ages since...” She paused, then chimed up, “I-deee-ah! We’re together right now. Let’s do lunch.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Applejack chimed in, “Well, Ah’ve got ‘bout an hour b’fore Ah gotta be at a meeting fer alla the governors of the Ministry o’ Technology. And there is a new apple fritter place that Caramel Apple’s kids ‘ave just opened up which Ah’ve been meanin’ t’ try...”

“Sounds perfect.” Rarity clapped her forehooves with a demure squeal. “Wait... aren’t those the same brutes who tried to kill you with an elevator?”

Applejack’s eyes narrowed. “That ain’t never been proven.”

“Still, the idea of you spending time in a room with that lot...”

“Yeah,” Rainbow Dash jumped in. “Want me to come with you? If they’re planning anything funny, I’ll make them think twice.”

“Ah c’n handle muhself ju’ fine, Dash. But Ah do thank y’all kindly for the offer.” Seeing her two friends still frowning, unconvinced, she sighed and added, “Besides, Sergeant SteelHooves has already offered t’ be muh personal escort.”

“Have I met this guy?” Rainbow Dash asked suspiciously. “Are you sure you can trust him?”

Applejack sighed. “Ah don’t think ya have, but he served wi’ muh brother. He trusted him, an’ so do Ah.” A smirk scrawled across her muzzle. “Sides, Ah don’t plan on bein’ there too long. Just ‘nuf t’ give muh speech. Ah’ve been practicin’ it all day. Wanna hear it?”

Rarity’s eyes widened at the thought of listening through an entire speech by Applejack, or perhaps just alarmed at having to do so in a public lobby while her mane was frizzy. “Maybe... over lunch?” she suggested.

“Sure,” Rainbow Dash encouraged Applejack with considerably more volume. “Let’s hear it.”

“Okay...” Applejack paused. Stood straight and tall. Cleared her throat. Closed her eyes.

“Y’all are fired.”

Rarity and Rainbow Dash stared. Applejack opened one eye and blushed. “Well, how was it?”

“That’s... it?”

“Ayep.” She blushed some more, looking a bit proud of herself and yet a touch worried.

“Awesome! You tell them, AJ!” Rainbow Dash grinned wildly as Rarity stomped on the floor with applause. “Dang, now I want to go just to see their faces.”

“Hey, Rainbow Dash!” a voice called out from the doorway, causing her head to whip around. Three elderly pegasi trotted into the lobby. One of them, a light grey buck with a short-cropped age-greied mane that fell over his eyes, hadn’t been wearing a rain slicker and shook himself, spraying water everywhere to the shouts and grumbles of the ponies in the lobby around him.

“Hello! Welcome...” my host began to say, but her words trailed off as the three pegasus pushed their way up to Rainbow Dash, ignoring everypony else including her friends.

“Hey, Rainbow, remember me?” a mustard-colored buck asked, stepping forward in front of the others. He was an unusually large buck, his rainslicker covering only half of his flank, revealing most of a large orange basketball for a cutie mark. I wondered idly if he had one ball or two... then immediately wanted to jab my hoof in my eye to kill the mental image that followed.

Rainbow looked them over then narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “Sorry. No. I’m rather busy and only have time to remember important ponies.”

The three all scowled. The mustard one growled, shoving a hoof into Rainbow’s breast. “Well then, maybe you remember my little brother. He was one of the pegasi you got killed fighting that dragon over Hoofington.”

Rainbow Dash’s eyes went wide. Her demeanor changed immediately. “Oh... I’m so sorry. Several brave ponies died valiantly that day...”

“Yeah,” said the third, a pegasus the color of dark dust with piercing blue eyes and a few remaining strands of a sandy mane on his bald-coated head. “Seems like an awful lot of pegasi die valiantly these days. In fact, seems like we do the bulk of the dying. I don’t know anypony in Cloudsdayle who ain’t lost family.”

Rainbow Dash nodded sadly. “The war...”

“The war,” the dark-dust pony scoffed. “The war is on the ground. Against zebras...”

“And dragons,” Rainbow Dash reminded him. “They’re using dragons now, in case you somehow forgot. Not to mention griffin mercs.”

“And some of them have magic fetishes that can allow them to fly,” Rarity chimed in knowingly. “If you think it’s impossible for an earth-bound mare to fly her way into Cloudsdale with the right magic, you have tragically short memories.”

The mustard-colored one spat, “Well, they wouldn’t be bringing in dragons if the pegasi had just stayed out of the war. Now I hear you’re pushing Luna’s new initiative to put even more pegasi on the front lines? You won’t be satisfied until every one of us is facing down zebra guns.”

“If the... had just...” Rainbow Dash sputtered. “What!?”

“And we ain’t the only ones who think that neither,” the balding one informed Rainbow Dash coldly. “And while we might not be important, my sister is the mayor of Cloudsdale, and she...”

“Now jus’ one apple-buckin’ minute,” Applejack interrupted loudly. “Now Ah know y’all have lost kin, an’ Ah know how much that hurts.” She strode up to the mustard-colored buck. “Ah lost muh own brother in this war. His name was Big Macintosh. Y’all may ‘ave heard o’ him!”

The mustard-colored pony had the dignity to look abashed.

I heard a click and a whirr from above. My host turned away from the argument as the text on her screen disappeared, replaced by a flashing warning.

>>LIVE GRENADE DETECTED<<

At seemingly the same instant, Rarity gasped. “Grenade!”

Ponies began to scatter, running into each other, not knowing where to go.

Rarity’s magic flared around her satchel, opening it.

Beams of colored light shot out from the twin magical energy turrets which had descended from the ceiling. They struck a pony in the

crowd, turning her into a burning pink silhouette of whomever she had been.

My host looked down, scanning the floor, her actions seeming unbearably slow. I mentally shouted for her to duck for cover, but she seemed transfixed. Her eyes fell on the metal apple not two yards from her desk. The dark bulk of a large, open book fell down over it, and four white hooves jumped on top.

The Book!

In an instant:

A flash of fire and swirling magical energy underneath the book,

A cracking sound that left a buzzing silence in its wake,

A rippling of explosive force that threw Rarity back.

My host stumbled, disoriented, a ringing in her ears. Everypony was shouting, but their voices seemed muffled and far away.

I spotted The Black Book. It had landed next to Rarity, smoking but undamaged.

I felt conflicting waves of horror and relief. How could any book survive smothering a magical energy grenade? What kind of book was this? And yet... thank the stars that it wasn't hurt. That book was dangerous, but it was valuable! Just looking at it, I knew how useful it must be...

Rainbow Dash was fast. She flew up to my host, breaking her out of her fear-induced paralysis with a clop of her forehooves. "Lock this place down!" she shouted over the ringing in my ears. "Gather the witnesses and call the Ministry of Morale. Somepony saw something, even if they don't know it."

Applejack was trotting around, calling out, "Is everypony okay? Anypony hurt?" She turned to my host and lifted a hoof as she shouted, her voice sounding like it was coming to me through yards of thick cotton, but at least the buzzing was quickly fading. "Call up the Ministry of Peace. Have 'em send counselors." My host nodded.

Rarity groaned, getting shakily to her hooves and rubbing her ears. "Quick thinkin', Rarity," Applejack said, dashing over to help her up. "Ah reckon ya just saved a mess o' lives with..."

Applejack froze, staring at The Black Book. "Is that... what Ah think it is?"

Turning to Rarity, a dark scowl crossing her face, Applejack said, "Ya said ya were gonna get rid o' that cursed thing!"

Dusting herself off, Rarity stared back. "I said I would burn It," Rarity said calmly. "And I tried. But as you can see, It doesn't burn." Lowering her voice, she whispered something to Applejack that made the earth pony's ears shoot up in alarm. Then, raising her voice again, she added, "I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia."

I winced. Even my host winced, realizing that couldn't have led to pleasant conversations.

Applejack frowned, clearly wanting to believe her friend, but having doubts all the same. Rarity's guilty look wasn't helping. "Well... ya still shoulda gotten rid o' it!"

"How?" Rarity retorted stubbornly. "I doubt anything short of a megaspell could destroy It. And I certainly don't want to dispose of The Book where It could find Its way into the wrong hooves."

"Dammit!" Rainbow Dash piped up, unknowingly interrupting her friends before their fierce discussion could grow into an argument. Dash had flown over to the pile of ash which had once been a pony. "Whose idea was it to use magical energy defenses in here? A pile of ash isn't going to conveniently tell you who it was or offer up its former possessions for an investigation."

"Zebra sympathizers, I would suspect," intoned Rarity dourly, turning towards the very upset blue-coated pegasus.

"Shouldn't jump t' that conclusion, Rarity," Applejack warned. "Ah don't like this blamin' zebras fer everything that goes wrong."

“It certainly wouldn’t be the first time they’ve taken a shot at me,” Rarity bristled. She looked at Applejack with surprise. “After Zecora’s betrayal, I’m surprised you still defend them.”

“Jus’ cuz Zecora turned out t’ be a bad apple don’t mean alla them are,” Applejack insisted.

Even though my host was paying more attention to the earth pony and the unicorn, I was able to catch a brief guilty look cross Rainbow Dash’s face. I realized suddenly that Rarity and Applejack didn’t know the truth about their zebra friend. The reality behind Zecora’s defection was a carefully guarded secret held by only two Mares and probably only the tiniest fraction of ponies within their respective Ministries.

“Ain’t like there ain’t other ponyfolk who might want t’ take a shot at one o’ us.”

Rarity met Applejack’s statement with wide eyes. “Oh dear... You’re right.”

“Well, if it was them who was behind it, they sure as sugar ain’t stopped me from gettin’ t’ that meetin’.”

“Hell,” Rainbow Dash blurted out, flying up. “For all we know, the target may have been that lot.” She pointed a hindhoof towards the three pegasi cowering in a corner. “What they were speakin’ amounts pretty much t’ sedition.” Her expression was cross and grim. “I’m beginning to think Cloudsdayle needs a Ministry of Morale hub.”

Rarity looked around desperately. “Oh dear, oh dear. Lunch is off, I’m afraid. I need to get back to Image. We don’t have much time to figure out what to tell the newsponies to say about this. Three Ministry Mares... oh, this is bad. We have to move on this now.”

As Rarity magically scooped up the Black Book and vanished in another flash, my host finally began actually doing her job.





When I returned from the memory orb, I was no longer on the secluded bench outside some restrooms where I had laid down to view it. I was someplace else. Dark and cold.

The Black Book floated in the darkness before me. Just an afterimage that was already fading.

A spotlight flared to life above me, its beam pinning me to the ornate purple and pink marbled floor as it destroyed any adjustments my eyes were making to the dark. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, detecting at least half a dozen figures in the shadows around me. According to my E.F.S. compass, they were not hostile. That only relaxed me slightly, considering I had apparently been abducted.

“Hello?” I asked, not trying to keep the annoyance from my voice. “Who are you? And what do you want?”

I immediately suspected they wanted me to do something. Some task to perform, some new distraction that would further divert me from my date with the Canterlot Ruins. If so, they were in for disappointment. I chose when and if I strayed off task, and I’d done too much of that already. There was a clock ticking. There was a bomb poised to destroy this very tower and everypony in it. And I didn’t have time for games.

A pony trotted forward, concealed in a full robe. Under his hood, his face was cast into black shadow by the light from above. But the folds of the hood made it clear that he was a unicorn. And enough light bounced up from the marbled floor to recognize a mottled brown coat.

“Greetings, Littlepip,” said a familiar voice that I couldn’t quite place. The voice had the tones of a refined gentlestallion but shied away from sounding too haughty. “We apologize for the rude awakening.”

“We who?” I asked, but I already knew.

“We call ourselves the Twilight Society,” the gentlestallion proclaimed. I forced myself not to ask if he was kidding.

“Very enigmatic. And who are you really?” I said, biting back deeper sarcasm. “And what do you want?”

The unicorn under the hood restrained a chortle. He whinnied, “Why that is exactly correct. You too have enigmatic titles, do you not, Stable Dweller? Wasteland Heroine? We have been told that you are the Savior of the Wasteland and the Bringer of Light.”

I cringed. They weren’t titles I had ever wanted. Nor ones I had ever thought myself worthy of. And now I was under a spotlight, being judged for a reputation I couldn’t control and couldn’t live up to.

“What we want,” The gentlestallion continued, “Is to know who are you, really?”

I snorted. “And you kidnapped me to find out? You could have just asked.”

“These conversations are not for prying ears,” another voice said from the darkness to my left.

“You have already been places you were not meant to be. Shown things no pony was allowed to reveal,” a third voice said, this time to my right. Suddenly, I was worried for Homage. She’d clearly broken the rules of this overly-dramatic group of ponies to help me. What might they do in response? Murmurs rippled through the darkness around me. “You have used for your own goals the very secrets that we hold guardianship over.”

Oh. “I know too much, right? Is that what this is?”

“That is but half of what this is,” the gentlestallion said, addressing me. “We have been counseled to make available to you the full might and mystery of this place. We have not yet made our decision, yet you have availed yourself of our secrets anyway.”

“You are a risk,” claimed the voice from my right. “Not only to us but to all that could one day be accomplished with what we guard here.”

I stomped. “Bullshit. I’ve heard that crap before. Two hundred years, and you’ve done nothing with what you have.” I turned, advancing

towards the source of the voice on my right. A cloaked pony, hiding under a hood as he hid in the shadows. He backed up, bristling nervously.

"You're hiding your secrets away because they're special," I spat. "And they make you feel special and important. Not because you're ever going to put them to use to make a difference."

"Tenpony Tower is a bastion of civilization in the wilderness," the gentlestallion commented serenely. "I would suggest we have done quite a lot."

"Yeah it is. But that isn't you, is it?" I rounded on him. "The only damn one of you doing any good at all is..." I paused before I said her name. "...Is DJ Pon3."

"At least she can keep a secret," nickered yet a fourth voice from somewhere behind me.

"We are only the most recent inheritors of these secrets. You are unwise to judge us by the failures of those in generations past," the gentlestallion said. I frowned, biting my tongue. He had a point.

"And perhaps you are right," the gentlestallion said earnestly. "Perhaps it is time for us to make a greater use of what is hidden here. But to do so carries great risk, not only from the greedy and wicked outside our gates, but from within. Who can we trust to guide the use of this power and these resources? Who can we know will not become corrupted by it?"

I sighed heavily. "What do you want from me?" I asked. "How can I persuade you that I'm not going to become the next Red Eye if I'm given a little help?"

"Your memories."

I jolted with shock. "W-what?"

"You had several days of memories extracted earlier today, from within our secluded chambers. We require access to those memories."

They wanted... my memories? A chunk of my life? One that even I didn't know the contents of? "No," I stomped. "Those are my memories. They're private!"

"We could ask you who you are, but you would only tell us what you want us to hear. The perceptions of others are fragments and heavily colored by their own perceptions. How better could we possibly learn who you really are?"

I fumed. I didn't want to trust something so precious to these strangers. I didn't trust them. I trusted Homage. That was all. Plus... It felt wrong. Like a violation. Which I knew was hypocritical at best considering how much time I'd spent prying into the memories of others.

The voice on my left intoned, "We already know that Red Eye is threatening this tower and the lives of everypony in it to motivate you. If you are playing with our lives, do you not think we at least deserve to know what the score is?"

I stopped fuming, considering that.

Finally, I took a deep breath. "Will I get them back?" If the answer was no, this deal was off. And if necessary, I would fight my way out of here.

"Of course," the gentestallion told me.

"Fine. Then yes, but on two conditions."

Underneath his robe, the gentestallion cocked his head, "And what conditions would those be?"

"One: the memories do not leave Homage's possession. I trust her to guard them. So far, I have no reason to trust any of the rest of you."

"Agreed. And two?"

"Homage continues to live here as long as she wants, safe from any repercussions for having helped me or for revealing what she did."

More murmurs. Unhappy ones.

“Non-negotiable,” I said. I hoped I had this card to play. What if they decided that they really weren’t that interested in me after all?

But the gentlestallion answered, “Agreed...” I felt a sigh of relief.

“...Conditionally.” I felt my heart skip a beat. The robed pony elaborated, “No actions will be taken against Homage until all of us have had the opportunity to view the memory orbs. Should what they reveal of your character and methods persuade us to deem you an asset rather than a threat, then no action will be taken against her and record of her misdeeds will be expunged. If, however, your memories prove you are a menace to our society or this tower as a whole, then Homage will be judged accordingly.”

I knew that by agreeing to this, I would be putting my memories in jeopardy, running the risk that I might never see them. But in the end, what else could I do? My memories were a small price to pay compared to the potential rewards. I prayed that I had at least a shred of the sort of character that DJ Pon3 attributed to me. I was relying on myself to have been a decent pony.



I was given the memory orb again, and instructed to lose myself in it while they returned me back to the bench they took me from. All of which seemed utterly silly to me, but I went along anyway. I suspected Life Bloom was with them, and that made me feel just a touch safer, if only because Homage and Velvet seemed to think well of him.

When I came out of the memory orb for the second time, the feeling of déjà vu was almost enough to make me wonder if I had imagined the Twilight Society. I wondered how often ponies in Tenpony Tower suddenly found their days interrupted, and what the Twilight Society used when there wasn’t a convenient memory orb in play.

Revisiting the orb in the wake of my odd abduction had left me thinking about secrets. About the dissemination of information. Covert operations depended on secrecy for the safety of those involved. But it seemed cruel for Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie to leave Applejack and

Rarity in the dark about Zecora, believing that a close friend of theirs had betrayed them. Was it necessary to cause them that pain? Could they have been trusted with that secret? Everything I had seen suggested that Rarity was well-practiced in keeping secrets, but Applejack? How convincing could the Bearer of the Element of Honesty be if put into a position where she had to maintain a lie? Was it better for everypony (and one zebra) that she not know?

I packed up the memory orb, checking my PipBuck to make sure the other one was still with me, and all my equipment was still in its proper place. Then, getting up, I started to walk down the hallway, away from the bathrooms. My mind was still engaged in contemplation.

Likewise, it was clear from several previous memories that the Mares knew the truth about zebra religion. Or at least knew enough about their beliefs regarding Nightmare Moon to try to use that against them. But SteelHooves had been blindsided by the idea. Clearly, a decision had been made by the heads of government not to inform the general population or even the lower ranks. I found myself second-guessing that decision, even though I could understand why. How demoralizing would that knowledge have been? Would knowing have served any positive purpose? Littlehorn was such a painful horror, the massacre of a school full of pony children, that it left a black and weeping wound in the psyche of Equestria.

Littlehorn had surely been a point of no return for both sides. At that point, I wondered if the ponies would have been any more capable of surrender than the zebras were.

A zebra dropped in front of me. I jumped back, already floating out Little Macintosh, my heart pounding. But recognition struck and relief passed over me. "Xenith, you scared me!" Flustered, I hastily slid Little Macintosh back in its holster. "I mean, uh, you... broke my train of thought."

"Brave little pony," she intoned.

"Where have you been?"

"Hiding," she said simply. "When they took you, I followed. But they did not seem to hurt or threaten you, so I did not act."

I suddenly felt a lot better about the day's strange interlude. At the same time, I realized that I needed to speak to Homage and let her know what was coming. If she didn't already.

"I'm going to see Homage," I said, not adding if she'll let me. "Are you okay following?" I remembered the zebra's discomfort with my Homage, and wondered if that was why I hadn't seen her all day. Well, that and her ability to hide like a living StealthBuck, and on the ceiling no less.

"If you wish."

I stopped. "Well, what do you wish?"

"It does not matter," Xenith informed me. "I am not welcome here, so I cannot do as I wish. For too many, my stripes make me the enemy. Or worse, a demon from the past responsible for all the misery in this world."

"That's unfair."

"It does not matter that it is unfair. It still is." She looked down. "Sometimes, I feel as if I am an earth pony and that my stripes are really great wounds, a punishment for some great wrong the ancestors of my ancestors were connected to."

I shuddered, as much at the pain and resignation in her voice as the mental image her words conjured. There had to be something I could do. "If you could do anything, what would you want to do most?"

"I would like to go shopping," Xenith said. She smiled at my surprise. "What? Everyone likes to shop. I would like to be able to stride into a store, look around, greeting the sales pony and make purchases. All while being treated only as rudely as every other pony customer is."

I felt a little rocked by the normalcy of the request. I tried to imagine how it must be not to even be able to go into a store. To buy. I couldn't, and I felt awful for it.

Surely there had to be a way to fix this.



“We could dye her coat a new color,” Homage suggested as she floated the huge painting of Splendid Valley away from her safe. She was moving my box of memory orbs to another location so that she would not have to reveal this safe when the Twilight Society came for them. “A near-black charcoal would hide her beautiful stripes enough for a modest gown and hat to obscure them completely. Although for the life of me, I can’t imagine wanting to do that.”

Homage turned and smiled warmly to Xenith. “You’re gorgeous the way you are.”

Xenith scowled.

“I’m being honest,” Homage insisted. “I’m sure my Littlepip has drank in the sight of you at least once. Haven’t you, Littlepip?” she asked, deliberately putting me in a humiliating spotlight. All the worse because I immediately thought of staring at Xenith’s flanks back in Stable Two.

“See?” Homage laughed. “That burning face means Littlepip’s been watching you.”

Xenith was staring at me. I sunk to the floor, putting my forehooves over my head. After a few excruciating moments, Xenith replied, “I am a zebra. And a scarred one at that.”

“Yes,” Homage agreed, unlocking her safe. “And a beautiful, sexy mare of a zebra at that.”

“A simple glamour should then mask your... zebra-ness from notice,” Homage suggested as she swung the door of the safe open. “But are you sure you want to hide who and what you are like this?”

“I hide all the time,” Xenith said simply. “This is no diff-“

Xenith made a slight choking noise, backing up, her eyes fixed on something just beyond Homage. At her reaction, we both followed her gaze.

The Star Blaster.

"You... have it locked away like a treasured possession..." Xenith intoned.

Homage frowned. "I have it locked up to keep it from hurting anypony."

Xenith blinked. The zebra cast a look to me as she slowly asked, "Then you know that it yearns to kill."

Homage gave me a quick quizzical look. I tried to return it with an expression that told her Xenith was deadly serious in the claim. Homage didn't laugh. She didn't look like she found the idea even a little funny.

"I'll admit, I'm a much better shot with that thing than I've ever been with any other weapon I've tried, including other magical energy weapons. But I attribute that to magical energy weapons being damn rare in most parts of the Equestrian Wasteland, and all the others I have tried being poorly maintained pieces of rubbish."

Xenith remained silent, waiting.

"No, I don't think it actually wants to kill. I don't believe that thing is alive or sentient," Homage told her. "But I do believe that it was made by crafters with murderous intentions."

"Crafters?" Xenith asked.

"It's a complex techno-magical tool. I don't think the stars just willed it into existence. Someone, or something, made it." She looked at the zebra, "Isn't that how the stars work? They help guide people to their own destruction?"

I was startled by the response. I remembered now that it was Homage who first spoke to me of the zebra's mythology. And she had spoken as one who put some credence to the notions.

"Then you... believe as we do?" Xenith asked slowly.

“I believe that most all religion is born of a mixture of truth and fantasy, hope and fear. How much truth is in any one mythology is hard to say.” Homage pulled the box full of my memories from the safe before closing the safe up again, sealing the weapon from the stars away once more.

“But I believe that the amount of truth in the zebra’s legends is a good bit more than zero. I don’t believe that your ancient ancestors understood the stars nearly as much as they believed they did...”

Homage looked to me, addressing us both, “But I have seen enough to be certain that the void beyond the moon holds wonders and terrors far beyond our imaginations. And that at least some of what is out there is malicious beyond our conception of evil, and is looking this way with hostile intentions.”



“I’ve changed my mind,” claimed the exotic voice of the charcoal-black earth pony next to me who was really Xenith. “I like her.”

Xenith the not-a-zebra was peering into jars of strange things floating in stranger liquids that lined the back shelf of the secluded apothecary which crouched around a corner from the main stores like a little colt hiding from bullies. The proprietor kept shooting us nasty looks, but I felt they were more directed at me than Xenith. She was dressed in a gown of subtle goldenrod and ivy, with a matching wide-brimmed hat. The entire ensemble made her look not only lovely, but right at home amongst the fine ladies and gentlestallions of Tenpony Tower.

I looked like me.

“Like who?” I asked before I realized the obvious answer. “Homage?” I suddenly felt a little giddy. The not-a-zebra nodded with a smile.

I wanted to dance around shouting “yes!”... but I was already getting enough looks from the proprietor.

Xenith had clearly been enjoying her evening, strolling openly down the streets, passing through the crowds, sitting down at the same restaurants

and being served by the same snobbish waiters. Paying the same unreasonable prices as everypony else for confections made of sweet potato pudding and deep-fried apple sauce.

More than once, somepony had snidely suggested she take me to a dress shop, and gave her sympathetic looks, as if I was a younger relative she had been burdened with and my appearance was some sort of youthful rebellion. Sometimes I hated being small-framed.

"The selection here is wonderful," Xenith commented. "But I had not expected such high prices."

"In case you haven't noticed, miss," the stallion behind the counter grumped, "We're not getting any fresh product anytime soon. It's a seller's market."

The prices of everything in Tenpony Tower had tripled since the first time I had been here. Red Eye's blockade was killing commerce with the caravans and scavengers. I could feel an undercurrent of worry in the marketplace.

Earlier, a mare had snorted, exclaiming, "The mere thought of the wines meant for my cellar being sold instead in one of those dirty little places like Guttersville or Arbu gives me the vapors."

I had remembered how much I really didn't like the company of these ponies.

Shouts from outside drew our attention. Xenith smiled politely to the stallion glowering from behind the counter, saying, "We will be right back." He didn't look like he believed it and scowled at me as if I had been intentionally wasting his time. Backing away from him, I turned to follow Xenith out of the shop.

Ladies and gentlestallions gathered by the nearest outside windows in small crowds. Prim and proper young fillies and colts squirmed about, and climbed on their parents, momentarily forgetting proper decorum as they tried to get a peek.

Xenith, reveling in her ability to talk to these strangers, asked, "What is the commotion?" It surprised me not for the first time how easily she

blended in now that the perceived stigma of her race had been obfuscated.

"The slavers," a colt replied as he quickly trotted past us, heading towards a window. "They're leaving!"



"I don't like this," I told Xenith as we stood at one of the windows, looking down through the darkness of early night. The burning lights of torches drifted away from the base of Tenpony Tower like rivulets of lava. Over half of Red Eye's forces were pulling out. "The only reason I can think of for Red Eye to withdraw before I fulfilled my end of the bargain is if he decided to blow the tower anyway. Now."

"But then, would he not remove all of his men?" Xenith asked cautiously.

"Not if he wanted to make sure we weren't able to evacuate," I suggested. Although I realized it didn't make much sense, I couldn't think of another reason for this behavior.

"Perhaps it is part of your cunning plan?" Xenith suggested hopefully.

"Doesn't feel like it."



"Aren't I supposed to be being punished?" I asked, sitting on Homage's bed inside Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum, staring out the huge windows at the retreating forces. I was tense. And worried. I wanted to know what Red Eye was up to. He was making a move. And while I had nothing but a gut instinct to base my opinions on, it didn't feel like this was something I'd predicted.

Throughout the tower, ponies were cautiously optimistic.

"I gave up," Homage admitted as she sat down behind me and began to massage my shoulders, working to relieve my tension. Xenith had

convinced me not to assume the worst, but that didn't keep me from contemplating all the other avenues of bad.

Homage's gentle hooves worked in slow circles over my shoulders and down my spine, moving towards my flanks. I couldn't hold back a sigh.

My eyes flew open as a dark thought struck into my brain like a dagger. "Homage! You know I've been Tainted, right. The Goddesses only know what that vile stuff did to me. I might be... abnormal now."

Homage giggled softly -- not at all the response I expected. "Love," she said, sending a thrill up my spine, "We've already had this conversation."

"Oh..." I said, feeling embarrassed. Homage planted kisses up the length of my mane.

"The highlights: both Doctor Helpinghoof and Life Bloom have given you a look over. There is a tiny mutation, but it is benign. Nothing to worry about." She gave one of my ears a nibble. "The fact that you risked Taint for me and the ponies of this tower has not gone unnoticed. Or unappreciated, especially by me."

I felt relief. The dagger in my brain melted away.

"I've even checked you over myself, quite thoroughly, and you are definitely still my Littlepip."

My ears shot up as she whispered, "Orb number eight."



I held Homage in my forelegs, nuzzling her softly. She leaned into me, her body warm, her breathing pleasantly heavy.

"Homage," I asked with trepidation. I didn't want to spoil the night.

"Yes love?" Homage's sweet voice panted gently up to me.

"Are you... doing all right?"

"After that? Ooooh yes." She giggled.

I tickled her absently, enjoying the ability to just touch her. “You know what I mean. Things here have been... rough lately. And a few days ago, what you had to do to save us...”

Homage sighed and curled around to look at me even though we couldn’t really see each other in the darkness. “After all you’ve been through for me, you’re still more worried about me than yourself.”

That was... a dodge. And I wasn’t going to let her get away with it. “Doesn’t change the question.”

“Jokeblue was usually the one doing the shooting,” Homage admitted. “I have only taken a life a few times (not counting beasts and robots) but each time it was to save somepony... although sometimes that pony was myself.” She reached a hoof up to brush my muzzle. “I don’t like it. I don’t enjoy it. And I’m really no good at it. But I don’t regret it.”



The next morning, a light rain had begun to drizzle, spotting the windows and making the grey-on-grey of the Manehattan Ruins into a monochromatic haze. I had used my binoculars to search the ground below, startled to find that only a third of Red Eye’s forces remained. But they looked like they were camped out permanently.

My heart felt heavy, and my head was foggy from a lack of sleep, the latter being entirely Homage’s fault. Not that I minded. Not even slightly. But I was beginning to feel guilty for the amount of attention she lavished on me compared to the other way around. I couldn’t do anywhere near the things to her that she could do to me, and I was beginning to feel inadequate in comparison. I’d reached the point where I was going to have to start asking her for instructions. A request that, no matter how I tried to phrase it in my head, always sounded pathetic rather than romantic.

The little red wagon squeaked along behind me.

I stopped as I reached the door to our suite. This time I raised a hoof and knocked. Twice.

Calamity opened the door, smiling. "Howdy, Li'lpip. Mornin'."

"Good morning to you too, Calamity. I see you're in a good mood."

"Ayep."

"Are we ready to do this?"

Calamity grinned. "Ah reckon she's been ready fer a few days now." He flapped his wings, scooting out of the way.

Velvet Remedy lay on the edge of her bed (and Calamity's now, I was willing to bet), her plaster-bound leg stretched out uncomfortably in front of her. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the wagon. Then narrowed. "What exactly is that for?"

"Today's the big day," I said sweetly. "Ready to go to the Clinic and get that cast removed?"

"I can remove it myself," Velvet Remedy insisted. "And you're not hauling me around in that."

I wrapped her in a telekinetic blanket and floated my unicorn friend into the air.

"Put me down."

"Doc's orders," Calamity reminded Velvet. "Helpinghoof wants t' get a good look at yer leg t' make sure everythin' healed proper."

"We're your friends," I chimed in as she waved her legs helplessly in the air. "We insist you get the best treatment and won't let you skimp out on it. You've always given us the best care and often shortchanged your own. Not this time."

I floated her down onto the wagon. She tried sticking her legs down and pushing away, but with her cast, it was a losing battle. Finally, she tucked her three good legs in and settled into the little red wagon.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you."

"Yep," I said with a smile. I turned and strode out the door, pulling her slowly through the hall towards the elevator in the very same wagon she had once hauled me to the very same place in.



“You were right,” I told Velvet as Doctor Helpinghoof did one final examination of my friend’s foreleg. There was a slim scar that encircled her leg. It wouldn’t even be visible when her coat had grown back.

Velvet Remedy looked up at me as she flexed her foreleg in every possible way at the doctor’s insistence. Life Bloom was standing nearby, his horn glowing as a spell allowed Helpinghoof to examine the inner workings of Velvet’s leg.

“You said that I can’t be trusted,” I reminded her. She sighed heavily and started to say something that would surely have been comforting, but I didn’t let her. I needed to say this. “And where Party-Time Mintals are concerned, you are right. I can’t be trusted.”

I frowned, trying to push the words out of my muzzle, knowing I had to. “I don’t know if I really needed them. There’s a chance I never will.” She didn’t know the context of that; only Homage and Xenith knew that my memories were now being reviewed by the Twilight Society. “But I do know that when confronted with the chance to slip some into my saddlebags, I wasn’t strong enough.”

Velvet Remedy was looking at me sadly.

“So from now on, I need you to do what you said you would. Go through my things. Check my PipBuck. Maybe Life Bloom can teach you a PTM-detection spell. Whatever it takes.” I trembled a little, hearing the tone of begging creep into my voice. “Please. I want your help. I need it.”

Slowly, Velvet nodded. “Of course, Littlepip.”

“Well,” Doctor Helpinghoof announced, “I’d say you’ve made a miraculous recovery, young lady. You’re fit to go.” He looked to Calamity, “You can settle up the bill with Life Bloom on your way out.”

Calamity nodded, wrapping his recently-wounded wing around Velvet in a snug. Looking to me, he asked, “So, where to next?”

I pressed my lips together, thinking. “The Canterlot Ruins are our goal now. But we have a few places to visit along the way. The village that Xenith believes her daughter lives in is on our way. But first, we need to arm ourselves with all the information we can on surviving in the Pink Cloud. And that means our next trip has to be back to Stable Twenty-Nine.”

The others nodded in agreement. “We need SteelHooves.”



It was a particularly beautiful day in Ponyville. The sun was shining, pouring a warmth down on the Equestrian village that cheered both the land and the soul. Only a few clouds spotted the sky, and a mint-green pegasus flew about overhead, belatedly kicking them away. Below, brightly-colored ponies trotted about their daily business, often stopping to give a neighborly hello to those they passed on the street. A trio of bunnies darted between bushes, carrying radishes pilfered from somepony's garden.

“Oh my...” Fluttershy said, watching through strands of solid pink mane as the bunnies darted between her legs. For a moment, she seemed ready to break away from the other ponies she was walking with to fly after them.

“New feller's doin' all right,” Applejack commented, looking up into the sky. “But it just ain't the same without Rainbow Dash.”

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about,” Twilight Sparkle told her, floating a letter out of her saddlepack. “I got a letter from the Princess today. She says that Rainbow Dash isn't just on a vacation. She's signed up for the new Equestrian Skyguard.”

“Poor dear took what happened to the Wonderbolts really hard,” Rarity commented, adjusting her newest hat creation so the feathers all flowed with the gentle summer breeze. “I can't say that I blame her.”

“Yes, well, the Princess doesn’t want to see her get put in harm’s way, but it wouldn’t be right for Her to tell Dash no. So...” Twilight opened the letter as the others gathered around her, listening intently, “...Princess Celestia has given us a mission. We’re to travel to the buffalo and try to strengthen diplomatic ties with them. Given Rainbow Dash’s previous experience with them, the Princess feels that she would be the ideal envoy.”

“Oh goodie!” Pinkie Pie bounced. “I’ve been working on my song and I think...”

“Oh hay no,” moaned Applejack.

“Oh dear,” winced Rarity.

“umm...” umm’ed Fluttershy.

“No singing!” Twilight Sparkle said sternly.

“But...”

“No singing,” she repeated. “Princess’s orders.”

“Awwwww.”

“Twilight, Darling,” Rarity asked, concerned. “Did Princess Celestia say why exactly we are strengthening diplomatic ties with the buffalo? I mean, other than to keep Rainbow Dash occupied?”

Twilight shook her head. A heavy silence fell over the group of friends that was distinctly at odds with the cheery brightness of the day.

Applejack was the one who broke it. “Ah heard talk from some o’ the folk at the farmer’s expo last week. They’re sayin’...” She paused, as if scared of the words she was thinking and what would happen if she said them out loud. “...we might be a’headin’ t’ war.”

Fluttershy gasped and disappeared behind a stump.

“Th-that’s impossible, Applejack. Equestria has never had a real war in...” Twilight Sparkle paused, clearly running through her vast studies of Equestrian history. And finding nothing. “...I don’t think Equestria has ever had a war. At least, not in over a thousand years.”

“Yeah, well, we all know how mighty stubborn ponies c’n get when their livelihoods are bein’ threatened. Only this time, Ah fear it ain’t gonna be pies they’re throwin’. Big Mac brought home one o’ them new-fangled firearms t’ take care o’ the cockatrice that’s been attackin’ our pigs...”

Applejack was interrupted by an upset squeak from Fluttershy, who had finally managed to come back out from behind her stump. “He wouldn’t!”

“Sorry, Fluttershy,” Applejack said apologetically. “But that thing was killin’ our pigs. Sometimes, ya just gotta take care o’ dangerous predators the hard way.”

“You should have told me! I could have stopped him for you,” Fluttershy said, uncharacteristically raising her voice just a smidgeon. “Now your pigs will stay dead forever, you know. Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic. And he would have if I’d had the chance to tell him to.”

“What?” Applejack moaned. “Nuts and shrews.”

Fluttershy turned meekly to Twilight Sparkle. “There’s not really going to be a...” Her voice faltered on the word ‘war’, becoming barely a squeak, “...will there?”

“I hope not,” Twilight said. “I don’t know what we’d do if there was.”

“But... people would get hurt. And animals.” Fluttershy was trembling just at the thought. “We can’t let that happen. We just can’t.”

“I think that’s why the Princess wants us to start talking to the buffalo,” Twilight said unsurely.

“Well, whatever the reason, we’ll do this together,” Rarity asserted. “Give me a few days to close up my shop, and I’ll be ready for the trip.”

The others nodded. “Yer right. Ain’t nothin’ we can’t handle together,” Applejack said, smiling at Rarity.

“Right,” Twilight Sparkle said, back on firmer ground. “Whatever the cause, Princess Celestia has given us this mission and we will not fail.”

This was familiar to her. She'd done this before, and she could do it again. "Everypony, make whatever arrangements you need to. We may be gone from Ponyville for a while. I'm going to go get Rainbow Dash. Let's meet back here in less than two days." The faith she had in her friends virtually radiated from her.

All her friends nodded, Fluttershy looking both exceptionally nervous and particularly determined. Then everypony galloped off, leaving the yellow pegasus standing on the path alone.

"Oh, so much to do. But we must not fail. We must not, must not, must not." She fretted. "Who will take care of my animals?"

"Can I help?" my host asked, flying up to the distraught yellow pegasus.

"Oh!" Fluttershy jumped. Then crouched meekly, looking around until she spotted me. "Oh, hello Ditzzy Doo. I didn't see you there." She looked away shyly. "Um... sure, if you would like?";

I felt my host smile happily. Today was a good day.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



CRUSADERS

"I am impervious to such corrupting ambitions."

Rain.

What had started out as a light drizzle in the morning was a gusty downpour by early afternoon with ambitions towards a brutal deluge by the evening. The Manehattan Ruins matched the clouds above in a montage of grey on grey, made hazy by a screen of precipitation.

Raindrops bombed the puddles on the roof of Tenpony Tower, swelling them until their edges pushed together, kissing and coupling into miniature lakes. Xenith's hooves splashed through them as she carried the last of our supplies across to the *Sky Bandit*. I watched as she rose up on her hindhooves and passed the bag to Calamity, who stored it inside. My gaze lingered on her, taking in the stripes that covered her back, rippling a little as the muscles beneath her coat moved. I had to agree with Homage; I liked her better this way. As pleased as I was to give her the opportunity to shop and mingle amongst the ponies of Tenpony Tower, I was happy to see her stripes again.

Removing the dye had been a little more difficult than I had anticipated. It would have taken weeks for her coat to resume its color naturally, or multiple herbal baths that would have depleted supplies Xenith insisted were best kept for other uses. So we sought out Life Bloom, hoping he might know a spell that would remove the false coloring. Fortunately, he did, and he offered to teach it to us for a small fee.

Velvet Remedy jumped at the opportunity. She was certain that the spell should fall within the boundaries of her magical prowess. Cosmetic magic was at least tangentially related to the medical and entertainment spells that came natural to her, after all. I recalled how easily she had cleaned the Sky Bandit with her magic once; I expected this to be even easier. But while Velvet was capable of casting the spell, it proved surprisingly taxing for her and yielded somewhat limited effects. The dye had faded only enough to turn Xenith's once-white coat a muddy grey.

I gave it my best effort, but in vain. My horn would not even deign to glow as I poured my concentration into the spell. In the end, we had to pay Life Bloom to cast it himself.

"You're staring at her ass, aren't you," Homage whispered into my ear, startling me just as my gaze had slid down to linger on Xenith's rear.

My ears shot up in alarm, and I felt myself blushing as I stammered, "What? N-no. I was just... plotting. That's it! With the plan and the plot and things."

Homage chuckled. "Sure you were."

Adopting a musing tone, the grey unicorn teased softly, "Next time, I'll try to give you those *instructions* you wanted." I blushed harder, thankful that she wasn't speaking loudly enough for my friends to hear. "Although I'm not sure how. You're such a delightfully sensitive thing that when I demonstrate on you, you have a hard time focusing on the lesson." Luna's mercy. My ears were burning. "And I'll admit it would be difficult for me to concentrate as well."

Homage leaned close and whispered in my ear, “Maybe bringing in a third party would be in order? Xenith perhaps?”

I felt myself splash into the puddle before I realized my legs had gone out from under me. The rooftop water was cold and soaked beneath my armor, getting trapped against my coat and skin.

Homage giggled. She was joking of course. She had to be. As I picked myself up, my mind had already dug out half a dozen reasons why a threesome with Xenith was out of the question, not the least of which being that the striped mare didn’t like to be touched. But the little grey unicorn had planted the seeds of a fantasy in my head now, knowing it would not make my time away from her any easier.

I shot Homage an annoyed glare, deciding this was probably her revenge for my having responded to one of her favorite *toys* with a lack of enthusiasm.

“You’re just a little bit evil,” I hissed. “You know that, right?”



“What’s this?” I asked as Velvet Remedy floated some sort of railing onto the roof of the *Sky Bandit*.

“Luggage rack. Sorta,” Calamity said as he landed on the top of the rain-slicked passenger wagon and began to tug straps tight. “Ah figured, the way SteelHooves took on that Star-spawn thing while standin’ on the roof worked out mighty good.. Settin’ up a mountin’ position fer a pony t’ ride topside even if Ah need t’ do some fancy maneuverin’.”

As Calamity pulled a little welder out of his saddlebags, the reward (I assumed) of recent bartering, Velvet Remedy primly added, “It can also carry luggage.”

Putting down the welder and checking his work, Calamity suggested, “Ah reckon it wouldn’t hurt t’ put some armor on ‘er too. Would slow us down, an’ Ah’d have t’ take breaks more often. But some ablative plates would make ‘er a whole lot safer.”

I got the feeling Calamity was expecting a fight I didn't know was coming. Was this part of the plan to deal with the Goddess? Something I had made sure I wouldn't be aware of? Or maybe this had to do with his new concerns regarding the Enclave. If it was the former, we would be better off if I didn't ask him about it. Pressing the issue would leave him in the uncomfortable position of having to lie to me. Worse, I could cause him to slip and give away something important. I would just have to trust him.

My thoughts flicked back to the memory orbs I had viewed yesterday. According to Calamity, I had told him it was safe for me to view them. Had I known about them, I would have been driven to distraction by curiosity. But I had not been aware of them until Calamity had set them on the table and sent them rolling towards me. Now I wondered if this was just a gift to myself, or if there was some piece of information in those orbs I felt I needed to know.

The first orb held a potential wealth of information. Two elements stood out amongst the others, the first being the vision of The Black Book. Clearly, The Black Book was itself a soul jar. At first, I wondered if Rarity herself had made it one, but I dismissed the idea quickly. Far more likely, it had been infused with the soul of the mad zebra alchemist who had written it. If the zebras feared and loathed everything they associated with the stars, and The Black Book was supposedly dictated to that mad zebra in dreams, this explained how the book could have survived destruction for generations in zebra lands before finding its way here. And it would certainly have enhanced and given credence to the darkest legends that formed around it.

Furthermore, I recalled that soul jars could have other magic "hung" on them. Who knew what mystical effects The Black Book might be asserting over anypony in its vicinity?

The other aspect of the orb which stood out to me was the conversation between Rainbow Dash and those three bucks. In that argument, I had witnessed the beginnings of the Enclave. The orb spoke to a spreading sentiment amongst the pegasus ponies -- a resentment of their sacrifices in a war that they believed themselves literally above -- that had even

reached the heart of at least one pegasus in a position of power. One who would be killed as the first zebra megaspell annihilated Cloudsdayle.

And with it, an acknowledgement that Rainbow Dash, heroine of the war, leader of the Shadowbolts, had become a driving force behind the pegasi's escalating involvement in the fighting. I recalled a news article in the Fillydelphia Ministry of Image hub: in response to the zebra's recruitment of dragons, Luna intended to strengthen Equestria's pegasi forces. Rainbow Dash's new magically-powered armor, I suspected, was at least one part of that.

Rainbow Dash had become an icon of pegasi participation, both to those who supported it and those who had grown to despise it... the Dashites were an almost foregone conclusion.

The isolationist core of the Enclave was at odds with Calamity's worries. Unless... unless they threatened the Gardens of Equestria. Icy fear shot through my body at the idea. But if that was true, surely that wasn't something I'd want to forget. I would need to act on it immediately! No pony would keep me from joining Spike in his defense of that cave, least of all myself.

The second orb had been a deeply bittersweet experience. I felt such happiness and sadness at seeing five of the mares I had grown to know and love in a warmer and happier time, a spring before the summer of war that would bring such heartache and horror to all of them. They had stood on the precipice of something terrible, and they had loved and laughed and danced.

The memory, to the best I could see, was of no strategic value. This was not the first I had heard of their mission to the buffalo, although now I had much more context. Instead, this was a vision into the beauty of the past, a reminder of what ponies had been. And what, I prayed, could... *would* one day be again.

"Prayer alone is not enough," I murmured to myself. No, for our world to change, there had to be action. There had to be ponies who would stand up to the darkness and Stare it down. I would be such a pony.

“hmmm?” Homage said, standing next to me again. I was so soaked by the rain now that the discomfort from the puddle earlier had been forgotten. “You look lost in thought so deep you could be in a memory orb.”

I grimaced. I reached into my saddlebags and floated out the Ditzzy Doo orb, passing it to Homage. “I want you to have this,” I told her. “You’ve been my voice in the darkness more than once. If things ever get too bleak for you to find your way to hope, watch this. Let her be your guide back.”

Homage cocked her head curiously. With half-lidded eyes, she whispered, “I won’t need it. You are my guide.” But she slipped a telekinetic blanket of her own around the gift, taking it anyway.

“I would fight to make that bright and innocent past our future once again,” I said, turning to her. “Even if it means dashing myself against the evil and cruelty of this wasteland until there is nothing left of me.” Like the ponies who cracked and shattered their hoofs pounding at the sealed door of Stable Two, I would persevere, making Equestria a better place one battle at a time. Until there was nothing left for me to give. “And then, when I am too broken to go on, I will float my dying body right down the throat of the darkness and make it choke on me.”

Homage gave me a sad, knowing look. Then leaned forward and nuzzled my cheek softly.

Forcing a smile, I chuckled. “Or, you know, this could all end in sunshine and rainbows. No need to get pessimistic.”

Homage laughed despite the tears that had begun to well in her eyes. Or maybe that was just the rain.

“Speaking of orbs,” I said, changing the subject.

Homage blinked in the rain and smiled wanly. “Got it. If they want to see your memories in order to get to know you, then they need to have as much context as possible. So anyone viewing them is required to watch them in order, starting with the first.”

“Perfect,” I replied, now wearing a more genuine smile.

“Although I’d prefer we kept orb number eight to ourselves,” Homage added. And for the first time, I saw *her* blush.

“So would I,” I admitted dourly, “But at the time I figured that denying them one of the orbs would undermine the notion that I have nothing to hide from them. Sadly, I still think so.”

Homage nodded. “Indeed it would.” Her gaze shifted off to the side. “Maybe I can persuade them it isn’t necessary. At least after the first pony sees it.” Knowing what she could do to me, I doubted anypony would pass up the opportunity to experience that. The thought of people enjoying Homage’s attentions meant only for me, *as* me, felt slimy. It was a violation that made me sick inside. This was not a sacrifice I wanted to make. But knowing how much good the secrets locked away inside the hidden chambers of Tenpony Tower could do for all of Equestria, the pony in my heart demanded it.

“Can I ask why?” Homage questioned. I blinked. She had to know why I was willing to let the Twilight Society into my memories. Seeing my confusion, she clarified, “I caught that smile. You’re planning something. Why the instructions, if it’s not just about context?”

“Oh!” I bit back a snicker. “Well, it’s just that those memories cover, what, two days? And it takes as long to view a memory as the events themselves. And, unlike when I lived them, those ponies will have to take breaks. Stop, eat, sleep, do whatever work those ponies do...” I shrugged. “I figure, if we’re lucky, by the time they get to the more telling orbs, everything will be over. And if not? Well, at least I will have forced a whole bunch of hoity-toity ponies in Tenpony Tower to eat zebra cooking and like it.”

Homage broke into a laugh. The mare threw her arms around me, hugging me so fiercely we both fell into the small lake that had formed on the roof.

I splashed her. She splashed back. The two of us lay there in the cold, pooling water, kicking waves and sprays at each other until I could swear we were wetter than the rain was.

"Give up?" she squealed. Absolutely not! My finishing move was to telekinetically grasp about a barrel full of the water, hovering it over her head. I pointed up with a hoof and got a most delightful squeak out of her before dropping the deluge onto my Homage.

"Okay, okay, I give up!" she cried out. Slowly, we both got to our hooves. Homage was shivering, dripping, her blue hair hanging straight down like a wet curtain. She was impossibly beautiful.

"Ready to go?" Velvet's voice called out kindly from within the *Sky Bandit*. I turned to see that Calamity had finished attaching the mounting on the passenger wagon's roof and was already harnessing himself to the front.

I looked back to Homage. "I've got to go."

I smiled. "But you will never be far. I'll be tuned in, listening to your message of hope..." I gave her horn a soft kiss. "...DJ Pon3."

The somber mood of our former conversation seeped back, making my sopping coat feel all the chillier.

"Promise me you'll see me again."

"Pinkie Pie Swear."



The *Sky Bandit* cut through the heavy mid-afternoon downpour. Calamity was getting a miserable drenching. He had hoofwaved off Velvet Remedy's offer of a protective shield, claiming he was already as wet as he was going to get after attaching the new roof mounting. The claim was half bravado and half being Just Plain Wrong. Now, while he said nothing, I could tell he was regretting it.

Not that any of the rest of us weren't dripping wet. The passenger wagon, with its broken windows, provided only cursory protection from the elements. Soon, all the benches were soaked and the metal floor ran with rivulets of water. The tarps covering our gear kept our supplies partially dry, but water was seeping underneath to soak the bottoms of packs and bags.

Pyrelight kept giving us miserable, mewling hoots. Velvet Remedy had tried using her cleaning spell to dry us over and over; but it had been an uphill battle, and after an hour she gave up.

Velvet and I were huddled together on some benches in the back of the passenger wagon. Velvet Remedy's horn glowed, a soft melody seeming to pour out of it. "More like that?" she asked me. All I could do was nod, feeling a little stunned.

"Did you... just come up with that now?" I asked timidly, amazed once again by how easily she could create entirely new music and have it be utterly beautiful.

"Well, yes, but I've had years of practice," Velvet Remedy admitted. "And it is one of my natural talents." Giving me a motherly look, she advised, "Before I can create the music for your song, Littlepip, you should really come up with some lyrics. At least enough for me to know the rhythm and meter you wish to use."

I gave a deep sigh. The idea had sounded so good in my heart last night, and so easy in my head this morning. I wanted to create a song that expressed my feelings for Homage. Not something sappy, but an honest, earnest outpouring of my heart. Something that I could have Velvet Remedy perform next time we went to Tenpony Tower as a special gift for the "disc jockey" pony who had let me fall in love with her.

With Velvet Remedy by my side, I had thought I could have something at least halfway decent by the time we reached Stable Twenty-Nine. But...

"I'm just no good at lyrics. Coming up with words is..." I sighed. "...really hard."

"Let me help," Velvet suggested, listening to what I had so far and politely trying not to wince.

Within a few hours, Velvet and I had put together a few passable lines, stringing them into what could be a full verse. Or the two halves of two different verses. I wasn't sure yet.

♪ "...In the warmth of your embrace, I've found acceptance,
And I know our moments, through all my adversities,
In my darkest hour will save and anchor me.
And I will kiss the orb that holds these memories..."

Velvet Remedy sang my lyrics experimentally, smiling at how they came off her tongue this time. "Much better. Although I still think some of your other phrases are a little *too* specific."

I shook my head. "This is from me to her. It's personal. It *should* be specific." I was being stubborn in the face of wisdom, but it was my song, and I rather liked the line: *I've been crushed under the train car of loneliness.*

Velvet Remedy gave me a patient and charmingly understanding smile, and I knew she would manage to talk me into changing the line before the night was over.



The storm continued to escalate, the winds blowing the rain sideways and tearing at Calamity hard enough that we were stopping every hour to give him rest. Even flying, our progress had become achingly slow as Calamity continuously fought to correct our course as the wind blew us off our path. I hated seeing him work so hard for us.

The third time we landed, we were able to take shelter in the overhang of the remnants of a recharging station somewhere in the holocaust-blasted remains of a small business community which had once sprawled between Manehattan and Fetlock. I spotted a mostly intact storeroom in the otherwise collapsed building. On the door was a faded and stained poster of a genial Twilight Sparkle. *Knowledge is Magic* insisted the words above her friendly smile. And in smaller font beneath: *The Ministry of Arcane Sciences is Looking for a Few Bright Minds. Together, We Will Save Equestria!* Equally ancient graffiti scrawled across the poster. Partial words -- *ight the Mini* – drove me to

imagine the poster had been moved, the rest of the rebellious words left behind on a wall somewhere.

Calamity unhitched himself and trotted into the supply room to have a good shake while the rest of us starting digging through our supplies for the boxes of Pony Joe's Donut Holes and cans of sweet potatoes which would be our dinner. I eyed the boxes dubiously; I had overcome my squeamishness for eating two-hundred-year-old food, but I still planned to give the donut holes a pass. Calamity returned as Pyrelight was giving the cans a warming (and slightly radioactive) breath-bath. He was less soaked and unsurprisingly more laden with scavenged goods.

"Ah'm gonna swap out the spark batteries while we're sittin'," Calamity announced as Velvet Remedy magically cleaned away the rest of the water from his fur and feathers. "Ah don't want us losin' 'em in the middle o' the storm."

Velvet Remedy gasped. "Don't you dare. You've already worked hard enough. And now you're finally dry. You will not immediately go wallowing around in the mud under this wagon. You rest. One of us will change them out for you."

By necessity, that meant me. But I was more than happy to be volunteered.

"Well," Calamity looked thankful for the offer and the chance to rest his sore and aching wings. "Ah figure maybe we oughta hunker down for a bit, till the storm loses some o' its rage." We all readily agreed. I knew from experience that rain in the Equestrian Wasteland could last for days, but I hoped the worst part would pass within a few hours. The burning white flash of nearby lightning turned the world into stark light and black shadow. Calamity looked over his shoulder and said something more, but his words were drowned out by a pealing roar of thunder that shook bits of debris from the cracks in the overhang.

Minutes later, I squirmed under the Sky Bandit. The slosh sliding under my body wasn't exactly mud but a gritty mixture of water and ashes. I tried not to think of who I might have been laying in. Surely most of the ash was from incinerated buildings, right?

As I telekinetically removed the screws on the plate covering the spark battery array, I heard a familiar marching music leaking through the storm. An approaching sprite-bot. The music grew louder as the floating radio drew near, the tinny quality of the music more noticeable through the white noise of the rain.

A burst of static killed the music. The sprite-bot went silent.

“Hello, Watcher.”

“Hey, Littlepip. Been a while, and I can tell you’ve been busy.”

I laughed ruefully as I thought of just how much I’d been through since I’d last spoken to Spike. “How are things at your... house?” I asked, an itch of paranoia preventing me from referencing the cave more directly. “Are the... um... unwanted house guests giving you any more trouble?”

“Actually, they’ve been really quiet recently. I don’t know if they’re preoccupied or just avoiding the place.” Changing topics, “You haven’t, by any chance, found any other... others, have you?”

Wow, this conversation was awkward. “No. Not yet. But I’m looking.”

“Thanks.”

We were either dancing around something, or we really had nothing to say to each other. I felt a resurgence of the pain caused by realizing I was not the heroine that Spike had been looking for. I was not one of the ponies who could make everything right. For a brief, sparkling moment I had thought I knew my purpose, only to have that hope dashed against the cold rocks of an unforgiving reality.

But then, the Gardens of Equestria wasn’t going to make everything right with the wave of a hoof and a rainbow of good intentions. Even after it purges the taint from the world, the mutated monsters that taint has created will still be left behind. The alicorns, those *things* from the hospital (if any survived), bloatsprites, hellhounds. Even after it washes the tint from the air, the world will still be trapped under the depressing bleakness of the constant cloud cover. Even though it will rid the world of radiation, it will not exorcise the evil that has festered

in the hearts of so many ponies. Raiders and slavers will not disappear like the poisons in the soil.

In short, there was so much more to do. And I didn't have to be destined to be something great or important or vital. I just had to do something good.

And if I could help a little towards something as great as the Gardens of Equestria, that was just icing on the cupcake.

The pause had stretched to uncomfortable lengths. Finally, Watcher said, "Well, I guess I should be going then."

"Wait," I said, suddenly having a question. "Can non-ponies ever be bearers of the Elements of Harmony?" Maybe I needed to widen my search.

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Oh." Well, it was worth asking. I searched my mind for anything else to say. Finally, the star-spawn in the room couldn't be avoided any longer. "Sp... Watcher. I know what happened to Twilight Sparkle."

Silence. Thunder rumbled in the background. Then, "Oh."

Spike was silent a little while longer, before finally daring, "Please, tell me she went quickly. Without pain. It was fast, wasn't it?"

A rock lodged in my throat. As I felt my ears paste back, I was thankful that I was beneath the *Sky Bandit*, the passenger wagon shielding him from my expression. I opened my muzzle, but I didn't have the breath to speak.

I... couldn't tell him. He didn't deserve that. She was his closest friend -- a sister, mother and best friend all in one -- and the weight of this horror was too much. The pain of knowing now, and knowing that maybe some part of Twilight was still in the Goddess, alive but no longer herself or even sane, and had been for centuries...

I realized I was going to lie to Spike. *Corrupted kindness*, a pony's voice hissed in my mind, but it wasn't the voice of my little pony; it was the voice of the Goddess.

“She died trying to save other ponies, Spike. It was a noble death.” She died crying out a name. Was it his? “And... I believe she was thinking about you fondly as she passed. I think she was happy you weren’t there, that you survived.”

It was an utter, bold-faced lie. Except my face was not bold, and no pony would have believed me if they had been able to see me. No dragon, either, no matter how much he needed to.

Another long pause. “Thank you, Littlepip.” The mechanical voice of the sprite-bot couldn’t convey emotion, but I could still tell that hidden in his cave, the mighty dragon Spike was crying.

“Did you... find her body? Is she buried?”

I felt a hard pang try to tear apart my heart. After a moment of panic, I let out a shuddering breath. “No, Spike. I saw her death on a recording. But... after she was dead, the Goddess... ate her body.”

Utter quiet from the sprite-bot, from Watcher, from Spike.

“I’m going to end the Goddess,” I said, and this time truth flowed in every word. “And if, by a miracle, there’s anything left of Twilight, I will put her to rest.”



The fury of the storm beat upon the wasteland for most of the night, finally exhausting its rage and slipping back into an almost peaceful drizzle, like a snoring yao guai. We reached Stable Twenty-Nine in that foreboding hour of darkness whose name I could not remember.

I gently told Pyrelight to stay behind and guard the *Sky Bandit*. Considering the plethora of monsters that we had encountered in Fetlock before, it was a reasonable precaution. But in truth, I just didn’t want to bring a radioactive bird into the Outcast’s new home base.

Outcasts, their Steel Ranger armor bearing stripes of red, took battle stances at our approach. I saw them tense. A moment later, soft light erupted around us and Velvet Remedy’s satin voice rang out through the darkness.

“Hail, followers of Applejack. Littlepip and her Entourage bid you welcome and request an audience with SteelHooves.”

Hearing Velvet Remedy refer to us like that was uncomfortable. I didn't deserve that sort of credit or attention. But more, I didn't want my friends thinking of themselves that way. Still, as I watched the Outcasts relax, I was thankful for her diplomacy. Two of the former Steel Rangers trotted over to us, flanking us as we were guided towards the door of Stable Twenty-Nine.

I recalled with a shiver my last visit here. Since then, new scorch marks littered the walls of the maintenance tunnel. Bullet casings littered the floor, and dark stains told of the ferocious engagements between the Outcasts and the Steel Rangers as they vied for control of the Stable and the Crusader computer inside.

One of our escorts motioned to another guard who stood at the control mechanism for the Stable door. A cable ran from the guard's magically-powered armor to the controls; she didn't even need to throw a switch. With a teeth-hurting grind and a hydra-like hiss, the huge gear-shaped door was pulled open on its internal arm.

We marched forward. As I set hoof into the Stable, part of me couldn't believe I was returning here. I remembered vividly the events and emotions of my previous excursion into this place. As we walked, I was relieved to see that the Outcasts had taken the time to clear the bodies away, and young knights were making headway on the rest of the detritus that littered the floors of the Atrium. My first time here, I was bothered by the wrongness of the Stable's layout. It did not conform to Stable Two, to the way a Stable should be. Now, after my final visit to Stable Two, there was no such feeling. Seeing the death and destruction visited upon Stable Two had stained its memory for me. There no longer was a “proper” Stable.

There had been fighting inside as well as out. One of the columns in the Atruim, previously whole, was now smashed. The floor showed the sort of damage only a grenade machinegun would cause. I spared a glance towards the Clinic, shuddering a little as I remembered the Atrium guns pinning us in there. Those turrets were now replaced by

models bearing the Outcasts' colors and three-apple symbol. I wondered what Applejack would have thought of her cutie mark on turrets facing into a Stable.

My gaze traveled to the grey-tiled roof, and down the catwalks that hugged plain grey walls. Morosely, I thought: *this room needs a mural.*

The two Outcasts led us up the stairs to the second level. I glanced at the bulletin board as we passed. The old messages and notices had been cleared away. The board itself had been bleached clean. Its ghastly message written in pony blood existed now only in memories.

The final resting place of Vinyl Scratch, the little pony in my head reminded me. *The tomb of the original DJ Pon3.* I quickly chose not to dwell on that. Down that path lay dark things.

We walked by a couple of knights, one hauling a trash cart, the other walking behind her, chatting amiably. "This place could really use some colorful posters. Not to mention a few throw rugs. Maybe some curtains."

"This place isn't exactly rich with windows," the other said pointedly. "And I don't think Elder SteelHooves is the sort to embrace draperies."

I covered a snicker with a hoof.

"Truuuuue. But he'd probably go for the idea of posters."

"Good luck finding a good one for us now. All the Ministry of Wartime Technology posters just say 'PROGRESS' and have images of tech advancements. I've never seen one poster from them that featured their Ministry Mare."

As we passed, I found myself thinking of the two mares whose Ministries never boasted their image, Applejack and Rarity. One because her Ministry didn't want to give her the honor, and the other because she did not wish to take the honor for herself.

SteelHooves, whose love for Applejack had never faltered, had a statuette of the mare ("Be Strong!") in his shack. I suspected that was the best image of Applejack they would find.



Instinctively, I had assumed SteelHooves would have taken the Overmare's Office. But as our escorts turned us into the security station, I remembered that Stable Twenty-Nine didn't *have* an Overmare's Office. A ghostly touch of that sense of wrongness brushed the back of my mind.

SteelHooves was pacing the room, speaking to a brown mare with a cropped yellow mane whom I quickly gleaned was (ex?) Star Paladin Crossroads. She wasn't wearing Steel Rangers armor, painted or otherwise. But then, they had to take it off sometime didn't they? Except SteelHooves, of course.

They're calling him Elder now, I thought bemusedly as I watched our former companion.

"...can't send a full detachment with him," SteelHooves was arguing. "That would leave Stable Twenty-Nine dangerously low on defenders." I did not yet know what this was about, but I recognized the dire necessity for the Outcasts to keep Stable Twenty-Nine. If the Steel Rangers took the Stable, then all the Outcasts drawn here for refuge would be galloping into a trap.

"And if we send only a small honor guard, it invites an attack," Crossroads retorted evenly. "We can't ask our ponies to walk into that kind of danger with insufficient numbers."

SteelHooves disagreed. "They're Applejack's Rangers. Galloping into danger for the sake of another is exactly what we should expect from them, and what they should expect of themselves."

"Any one of us should be willing to rush to the aid of the innocent without thought for ourselves. But there are no innocents here to be saved. This is a prisoner transfer in hostile territory. This is different," Crossroads insisted, "And you know that."

The Outcasts flanking us stood silently and at attention. I felt I should clear my throat. To announce our presence. Not out of impatience but

to make sure the two leaders of this new faction were fully aware their discussion was not private. I didn't feel like I was politely waiting; I felt like I was eavesdropping.

"If the Steel Rangers open fire on our paladins, then they risk catching their own Elder in the crossfire," SteelHooves countered, but then seemed to have second thoughts about his argument. "Actually, if the Steel Rangers were to kill Elder Cottage Cheese in an attack, that might actually be better for us in the long run. Letting him go free is only going to borrow future trouble and death for the Outcasts."

Crossroads sighed and smiled reasonably, "True, but we shouldn't allow ourselves to think that way. Remember, we're the good ponies." SteelHooves nickered in response.

"Howdy y'all," Calamity called out, "Who ya takin' where now?"

I caught Velvet purr something under her breath. Our escorts bristled a bit at the audacity of Calamity's interruption, but as SteelHooves and Crossroads turned to face us, Crossroads gave us a smile. "And you must be Calamity, Velvet Remedy, 'That Zebra' and, of course, Littlepip."

For a moment, I glowered at SteelHooves. *That zebra*. Really? But then Xenith spoke -- "Your reputation spreads, little one." -- and my indignation deflated. There was, after all, a touch of fair turnabout at play. I didn't believe for a moment that was why SteelHooves referred to Xenith that way. But if I spoke up, he could argue it was, and I could not win that argument.

Velvet Remedy stepped forward and dipped her head in greeting. "We are. And our zebra companion's name is Xenith. We are pleased to finally meet you, Crossroads."

SteelHooves seemed to look us over in lieu of a more formal or familiar reunion, then told Calamity, "Elder Cottage Cheese of the Manehattan Steel Rangers is currently under... house arrest. We have negotiated an agreement to return him to the Steel Rangers at Bucklyn Cross."

"Bucklyn Cross?" I asked out of curiosity.

“Why don’t they jus’ come here t’ get ‘im?” Calamity wondered.

Crossroads frowned. “For the same reasons, I suspect, that we are disputing how many of our own to commit to the delivery. Elder Cottage Cheese devoted most of his knights and paladins to the assaults on Stables Two and Twenty-Nine. The forces holding Bucklyn Cross are depleted enough to explain their refusal to divide their forces.”

“Then ya hardly need t’ worry ‘bout them attackin’ here.”

“Them, no.” SteelHooves paced. “Others, yes. We can expect a counter-strike by forces sent from Fillydelphia at any time. Their Elder was killed in Stable Two. They will not forgive that. And they may receive reinforcements from other contingents.”

Crossroads shook her head. “Hoofington is still dark. And Trottingham is such a mess that the Elder there will be hard-pressed to devote forces to anyplace else...”

“Unless the Steel Rangers abandon Trottingham entirely,” SteelHooves pointed out.

“At this point, that might be their best strategic option. But even if they left now, it would be difficult for them to rally with the Fillydelphia forces in enough time to attack before our ponies have returned.”

“Hard, but not impossible.”

Calamity whinnied, whispering to Velvet, “Ah almost wanna tell ‘em t’ get a room.” I shook my head. “But, y’know, this would be it.”

One of the security intercoms let out a burst of static, followed by a stallion’s voice. “Elder SteelHooves, sir. My apologies for the interruption, but Elder Cottage Cheese is demanding his medical chair.”

In the background, I could hear the grumpy yet cultured voice of a very elderly stallion. “...still an Elder, and you traitors will show proper respect. I will *not* be hauled back to my citadel in that capsule like a piece of luggage. I will return with my head held high.”

“Medical chair?” I asked.

SteelHooves groaned. Crossroads trotted to the intercom switchboard, glancing briefly at the map of lights above to determine which button she needed to press to speak back to them. Velvet Remedy whinnied softly. "Oh, Pip."

I wasn't sure why she had said that at first. But when I noticed which light was blinking on the map, I realized they were using the PipBuck Technician's stall in the maintenance wing as a jail.

I stared as the brown mare found her button, the pony in my head trying to decide how I should feel about that. I dispassionately settled on, "Makes sense."

"Elder Cottage, it's raining," Crossroads nickered politely into the intercom. "You could catch a cold. Which you know would probably kill you. Your life support capsule is the only way we can ensure you will survive the journey."

"You traitorous lot have already killed me," the Elder retorted. "The Crusader Maneframe in this Stable was my last hope, and you have ripped that from me. Whether the finishing draught be from sword, drizzle or cup of poison, I will face my end with dignity."

Crossroads took her hoof off the intercom, looking at SteelHooves with an expression of concern.

SteelHooves marched over, accessed a terminal, then pushed Crossroads out of the way as he pushed the intercom button. "Elder Cottage Cheese," his voice rumbled into the intercom. "This is SteelHooves. This conversation is now being recorded. Please state your request again."

"Request," the Elder responded with irritated civility. "Yes. I require that my medical chair be brought here at once, and that your knights here assist me in transferring to it. I will return to Bucklyn Cross as a pony, not a parcel."

Crossroads shook her head. "We can't. Chances are he'll die."

SteelHooves pressed the button again. “You have been informed of the risk this poses to your health. If you refuse to travel in a life support chamber, you could expire. Is that what you want?”

“Damn you, SteelHooves, yes, now bring me my Goddess-damned chair.”

SteelHooves looked back at Crossroads and gave a grunt of satisfaction. Hitting another button, “Will somepony please bring Elder Cottage Cheese his Goddess-damned medical chair.”

“SteelHooves!” Crossroads gasped.

But our armor-entombed companion had made his decision. “He is an Elder. He has the right and the authority to make his own decisions.”

The familiar voice of Knight Strawberry Lemonade burst from the intercom. “I’m on it!”

Star Paladin Crossroads looked grimly displeased with her new Elder’s decision. “Honestly, I don’t think the assisted suicide of an enemy Elder is the best stone we could have laid in our movement’s foundation.” More tenderly, “Do you believe Applejack would have approved?”

I could feel SteelHooves’ glower radiating from behind his visor. His response was slow in coming. “I don’t know. This is not the sort of decision she would ever have wanted to make. But there will be many such difficult decisions over the next several months, and the survival of our faction has to take priority.” He added solemnly, “Applejack would want us to help the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland however we could. And we can’t do that if we’re crushed before we can get our hooves under us.”



“Littlepip, what brings you here?” SteelHooves asked once his discussion with Crossroads had ended and a few other interruptions had been attended to. “I promised I would rejoin you, but as you can see, I have my hooves full.”

“We need your advice,” I told him. “We have to go into the Canterlot Ruins. We need to know what to expect. And how best to survive.”

Crossroads gasped. “You’re... going where? Why?”

SteelHooves was taken aback. “Do you have a deathwish, Littlepip? It’s not enough to throw yourself against raiders? Why are you driven to constantly find new and more extreme ways to punish yourself, risking your life and often the lives of those who follow you?”

That hurt. “I’d do this alone if I could. But we have to get into the Ministry of Awesome in Canterlot, and I can’t do that by myself.”

“Eyeah,” Calamity stomped. “We appreciate yer not wantin’ t’ put us in danger, Li’lpip, but ya c’n just cut that crap right now. Ya ain’t pullin’ another one of yer solo missions.” Fillydelphia was still fresh on everypony’s mind.

“How bad is what we’re trotting into?” Velvet Remedy asked.

SteelHooves gave a low nicker. “Bad. Not like it used to be, but still bad. At least, am I correct that you know where you want to go and what you want to do? The Canterlot Ruins is not a place for sightseeing.”

I nodded. “We have two objectives. Rarity’s office in the Ministry of Image, and the secure vault in the Ministry of Awesome.”

SteelHooves nodded. “Good. You have that in your favor then. Once you enter the ruins, do not let yourself get distracted.” His visor turned to stare at each of us in turn, ending with Calamity.

“Why...?” I asked, concerned that SteelHooves seemed to expect us to have trouble with that. “Are there ponies still alive in the ruins who need our help?”

“No.” SteelHooves’ tone was final. “There is nopony in Canterlot who would meet your definition of alive. And nopony who is looking for rescue.”

“Well that’s ominous,” Velvet Remedy whinnied.

Xenith surprised me, saying “All those with the minds to leave Canterlot have long since fled. Those who remain are Canterlot ghouls. But not the manner of ghouls that have sound minds. These are empty shells filled with necromantic poison, retracing the last steps of their obliterated lives. Zombies performing rote tasks over and over because that is all they can remember to do.” The zebra frowned deeply. “Other than attack. That is the one thing they all seem capable of. And they will move to slaughter any living thing whose presence they sense. Anything that is not one of them.”

“Canterlot zombies?” Velvet intoned. “Lovely.”

“Your biggest threat is the Pink Cloud,” SteelHooves informed us. “It seeps into everything. Corrupting, decaying, killing all it touches. Over the centuries, the cloud has thinned to a mere haze. Canterlot itself absorbed most of it like a sponge, and now it bleeds from the walls and the streets, slowly released as they decay.”

I nodded. This much I had heard before.

“These days, it is possible to survive if you are fast and careful. Some ponies can even survive hours of exposure at a time. But taking that risk is foolish. Do not fall asleep. You will never wake up.

“Limit your exposure. Every second you remain outside, the Cloud is seeping into your lungs and your skin. Interiors are safer, intact buildings and tunnels, but only where the Pink Cloud has yet to penetrate. You will want to bring every healing potion you can lay your hooves on, and drink them regularly. Their healing magic can reverse the effects of the Cloud before it causes permanent damage. Do not use healing bandages. They can cause... other problems.

“There will be pockets where the Pink Cloud has settled and pooled. Avoid them if you can, dash through them with all haste if you cannot. While still only a fraction of the potency of the original Cloud, such pockets will kill you in seconds.”

Velvet Remedy raised a hoof. “Other problems?”

SteelHooves sighed. "I have told you why I cannot leave my armor. You do not want to be wearing anything when you go into the Canterlot Ruins. No protective gear is a guard against the Pink Cloud, and there is a chance that anything touching your coat may fuse to your skin under prolonged or extreme exposure. Littlepip, you will want to carry everypony's weapons telekinetically. The rest of you: take hold of those weapons only when you are using them. Pack lightly, save for medical potions, as Littlepip will be floating your saddlebags."

I was tempted to tell him that weight didn't matter, but realized that there might be wisdom in having less objects floating about me to keep track of.

"Iffin there ain't ponies there t' save, why you so worried 'bout us gettin' distracted? Canterlot don't seem like the sort o' place t' poke 'round in."

"Because Littlepip is fatally curious," SteelHooves said flatly. "And you are a kleptomaniac."

"Scavenger," Calamity corrected with a flap of his wings. SteelHooves ignored him.

"The Canterlot Ruins suffered only the single strike. I heard rumors in the days after the apocalypse that after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination. Canterlot is surprisingly well preserved, at least within those places the Pink Cloud has not touched. The city contains a wealth of treasures from the world before. Is it even possible for you two not to get distracted?"

Xenith turned to Velvet Remedy. "It would seem the task falls to us to keep our two companions safe from themselves."

"There is more," SteelHooves warned. "The Pink Cloud has seeped into everything it touched, and the decay has transformed once benign objects into lethal traps. The most noteworthy of these are the broadcasters and the sprite-bots."

“Broadcasters?” I asked. “You mean the PipBuck peripherals like the one Blackwing gave me?”

The magically-armored ghoul nodded. “They were all the rage amongst Canterlot’s elite just before the end. PipBucks had become the latest fashion accessory, and the broadcasters were rare enough that having one was prestigious.” SteelHooves gave a dry, humorless laugh. “Now the Pink Cloud has both weakened and decayed their signals. I cannot explain how, but the static they now emit has a necromantic component. If you find yourself within the range of their effect you must either destroy them or flee immediately. You do not wish to know how you will die if you do not.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I gasped. The dangers of the Canterlot Ruins had galloped past deadily and into outright insane. How was I going to get everypony through this alive?

“I wish that I was,” SteelHooves grumbled. “If you are going there, then I should accompany you. You will need more than advice. You will need a guide. Somepony who knows the streets and can get you where you need to be swiftly.”

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “That means... a lot. Thank you. We really need you.”

“We miss you too,” Velvet Remedy purred. SteelHooves stomped and nickered.

“And maybe we can help you in return,” I offered. “You don’t need to commit any of your Outcasts to delivering Elder Cottage Cheese to... where was it?”

“Bucklyn Cross,” Calamity answered with a grin. “Li’lpip’s right. We got me an’ we got the *Sky Bandit*. We c’n make the trip ourselves in half a day.”

Crossroads, who had remained mostly silent during our reunion, spoke up. “That is a splendid idea. But as much as we appreciate your offer, we couldn’t have you do it alone. There will need to be representatives of Applejack’s Rangers present for the exchange.”

SteelHooves seemed to consider this. “No. There only needs to be one, so long as that representative is appropriately high ranking...”

Was it my imagination, or did he sound ever so slightly happy?

“...I shall go.”



SteelHooves was with us again. The little pony in my head gave a small squeal. We were together once more.

The door to the security station slid open, and I stepped out into the hall, SteelHooves close to my side. Alarms went off everywhere.

“W-wha...?” I stumbled, looking around.

“We’re under attack!” SteelHooves spun on his hooves and pushed back into the security station. “Star Paladin Crossroads report!”

“I-I don’t know, sir,” Crossroads said, zipping between monitors and panels of flashing lights. “Perimeter is secure. No hostile contact at the entrance.” The Outcast Star Paladin paused. “Oh damn. The attack came from inside. I’m reading explosions in the maintenance wing.”

“Cottage!” SteelHooves growled. He threw himself to the intercom switchboard. “Ponies, report. What’s going on down there?”

No answer.

“Cross, bring up the tags of every pony in Stable Twenty-Nine. And tell me we have the tag for Cottage’s damn chair.”

My friends and I had re-entered the security station and stood watching as a glowing map of the Stable began to light up with tag markers. I knew this procedure although I had never witnessed it before. All PipBucks had a tag that allowed their wearer to be located; this was how the Overmare had intended to find Velvet Remedy, and why Velvet had tricked me into removing her PipBuck. Steel Ranger armor was built with nearly the same technology. It made sense that they would have similar tracking devices. But what about everypony not wearing their armor, like Crossroads?

The Stable map was flooded with tags now. But two stood out. Because two were in a section of the Stable that, according to the map, didn't exist -- the empty space where the Overmare's Office was supposed to be.

One of those two tags flashed red. "That's the Elder's chair," Cross stated. "Where...?"

I knew. "The Crusader Maneframe." I didn't know how he managed to get inside a room that not even Shadowhorn had known how to access. But then, I knew I shouldn't be surprised. Elder Cottage Cheese had clearly been in tight communication with Elder Blueberry Sabre. And that Elder's citadel had been in the headquarters of Stable-Tec itself. They had full schematics of all the Stables. It would be easy for them to know things about each Stable that the residents themselves did not.

"What the hell is he tryin' t' do?" Calamity neighed. "He don't have that book y'all been fussin' 'bout, does he? Uploadin' himself inta that machine ain't gonna save him."

"No," SteelHooves replied, "Cottage keeps sending Rangers into the Canterlot Ruins after that thing, but none of them have ever returned. However, I'm not sure he cares at this point."

"Even if it won't be him," Crossroads suggested, "He may still view it as a sort of living legacy."

The intercom burst with static. "Elder... SteelHooves..." a pony's voice breathed. "Elder Cottage... has escaped."

"I can see that," SteelHooves retorted. "How?"

"His chair... lockbox held... matrix-disruption grenades."

SteelHooves stomped. "Didn't anypony check the chair for weapons before giving it to the damn enemy?"

"Sir... it was... an Elder's private... lockbox," came the reply. "And... it was locked."

Crossroads whinnied. “You can’t expect them to just abandon the respect that had been ingrained in them for decades. *I* would have had a hard time breaking into the Elder’s private possessions.”

“This world needs more Littlepips,” SteelHooves grouched.

Velvet Remedy piped up, looking at the map. “Who’s in there with him?”

Star Paladin Crossroads turned to a terminal and scanned it. Looking back to us, the brown-coated mare replied, “Knight Strawberry Lemonade.”

SteelHooves reared. Crossroads continued to scan the terminal. “Her armor’s spell matrix has crashed. She’s paralyzed.”

“He has a hostage.”



I crouched against the wall between the security station and the two V.I.P. rooms (once belonging to Shadowhorn and Vinyl Scratch, I recalled). A security panel lay next to my hooves. I had my PipBuck plugged into the junction terminal hidden behind it.

On my PipBuck, I could see into the room from a camera whose visuals were only available to somepony connected into this junction. Not even the security station had access to it. I saw the Crusader Maneframe -- a giant pillar with arms that reached out to smaller maneframes along the walls like spokes from a wheel. I could see Knight Strawberry Lemonade lying immobilized in her dead armor. Her helmet was off, revealing a very cute, youthful mare. Her coat was pink, her mane a gentle yellow. Her palette struck me as a reversal of Fluttershy’s although her mane was cropped very short, better for one who constantly wears a metal helmet.

She was glowering at the ancient, wrinkled pony with a sickly oatmeal coat sitting in a high-tech wheelchair. According to SteelHooves, the chair had been “reclaimed” by the Elder from a crumbling Ministry of Peace hospital, along with several egg-shaped life support chambers and

a variety of other advanced medical gear. Tubes continuously fed the decrepit body of the Elder, a body kept alive only by extremes of medical science and a tenacious force of will.

The Elder was fussing with a helmet covered in gems and lights attached to what I could safely assume was the Crusader Maneframe's brain transfer-mapping unit. The unit was meant to be worn on the head of a pony resting in a gel tank beneath it. Cottage was being delayed by an inability to physically move himself from the chair to the tank, so he was unfastening the helmet.

As I watched, he floated it free. The helmet levitated through the air towards his head, then stopped as it reached the length of several vital cables that still bound it to the rest of the machine. The Elder started jockeying his chair, trying to move close enough for his head to reach the helmet.

It occurred to me suddenly that Elder Cottage Cheese was the first... no, second unicorn I had seen amongst the Steel Rangers. Their helmets weren't exactly designed for horns. I wondered if he had cut his horn off to wear their armor. It would have certainly been a sign of dedication to the Steel Rangers. But, if so, then the horn had re-grown, and I hadn't thought that could happen. If so, it was a bright spot of news for Silver Bell's future.

Or, I realized, he may have just moved up through the ranks of non-armored Steel Rangers. They did, after all, have unicorns like the one whose body I found in Old Olneigh. Scribes, I think they were called. Researchers.

I knew SteelHooves was working to find a way into the room. Cottage would certainly try to use Strawberry Lemonade as a hostage. But knowing SteelHooves, that wouldn't stop him. Fortunately, I had another idea.

"Hello, Elder Cottage Cheese," I said, speaking into the terminal. "I'm Littlepip. I've hacked into the room to beg you not to do this."

The Elder frowned but ignored me, trying to nudge his chair into a better position next to the tank.

“Stop him!” Strawberry Lemonade cried out. “Do whatever you have to do. Gas the room.”

“Shut up,” the Elder said almost amiably. Then, addressing me, he announced, “Any attempts to interfere will cost this young traitor her life.”

“I’m not a damsel in distress,” the young knight bit back. “I am a knight of Applejack Ranger’s. And I won’t be your leverage. I’d self destruct if I could to stop you.”

First I felt a warm pride stretching out towards Strawberry Lemonade. You tell him, girl! Then I blinked. Nothing I’d seen had ever suggested that Steel Ranger armor could do that. But then, I supposed it would depend on the payload in their battle saddles.

“But you can do nothing,” the Elder replied coolly. “So cease your prattling.”

“This won’t save you,” I told Cottage through the terminal, trying to be reasonable. “You have to know that. The mind you create inside the Crusader won’t actually be you.”

“I am well aware of that,” the Elder replied. “I’m not an ignorant tribal.” He tilted and strained his neck, attempting to get the helmet to reach. He was getting close, but there were still several inches of space between the helmet and the few remaining wisps of his mane.

“Then why?” I asked plaintively as my PipBuck scanned the junction terminal.

“My body and soul may not survive, but my mind will go on. This rebellion will fail, and when the Steel Rangers reclaim this place, my intellect will be here to guide them into the future.”

“What future?” I countered. “All you ponies do is raid and horde technology. While other ponies are building a new world, you are hiding in your citadels. How much guidance does that take?”

“You are an ignorant insect,” he grunted in annoyance as he shifted painfully in his chair. “You cannot be expected to understand.”

"Then educate me," I offered, my voice a little more curt than I would have liked.

"Educate yourself," he replied. "Look around you, if you have the eyes and the wits to comprehend your surroundings. These tribals have no future. What you see as progress is just brief distraction along their march to destruction. More ponies choose to be raiders and bandits and slavers than seem to flock to the dying embers of civilization. Only Red Eye has any real ambition towards creating a new world, and you have seen the depths of depravity he has fallen to in his attempts to manifest his vision."

"At least Red Eye is actually *doing* something."

"All he is doing is stabbing a poisoned dagger through the heart of ponykind." Cottage shifted further, straining his neck in a way that caused him to quiver and grit his teeth in pain. But he managed to get the helmet onto his head. "Do you truly think any society that evolves from the pits of misery he has created can be anything other than a degenerate and vicious abomination?"

I cringed, fearing he might be right. "But what about the Steel Rangers? What possible good could come out of the murderous thugs you have cultured?"

"We do not pretend that we are building a society now," Elder Cottage Cheese informed me. "We are just gathering what is necessary for those who will. The Steel Rangers will wait out this plague. And when you debased creatures who have no right to call yourselves ponies have finally extinguished each other, generations from now, the Steel Rangers will emerge into a world clean of you. We will rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Not the twisted blasphemy of a balefire phoenix, but a pure and true one, bringing with us all the glory and knowledge of the past to create a new world of proper ponies."

"And you will guide them."

"Yes." He grunted, starting up the scans for the mental transfer-mapping.

“You will rule them?”

“Indeed.”

“And what will keep you from becoming a tyrant? For that matter, what will keep you from making the same mistakes as old Equestria? All you are preserving is the knowledge and science that they had when they fell. Nothing you are saving will prevent ponies from falling again.”

The device began to hum. The gems on the helmet began to glow. The lights began to flash.

“I will,” the Elder claimed confidently. “My intellect. My judgment. Unfettered by emotion and the selfish desires that have brought ruin to the ponies of past and present. It is, in retrospect, better that I never did acquire that Book. I will be wiser this way.”

“You would be heartless,” I mused sadly. “Lacking in compassion. Lacking in any of the virtues that make ponies worthy of saving. It is the virtues of our hearts that make us something good. That can make us something great.”

The Elder started with alarm. “Wait. What are you doing?”

“Stopping you,” I told him gently. “The vice-president of Stable-Tec gave Shadowhorn the codes to shut down this Crusader completely if it should ever pose a threat. I should have used them before. I’m doing so now.”

“NO!”

“I’m truly sorry. Mister Cottage. But there is no place in this wasteland for a cold, ever-living despot who would rule this world through soulless vision.”

I sent the code. The lights of Stable Twenty-Nine went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



EDGE OF NIGHT

“Aaaaallrighty. What do you say we get on out of Creepytown...?”

Darkness.

Everything had gone black. Even the junction terminal was completely dead. Well, fuck.

Okay, not entirely unexpected. The message left for Shadowhorn by Scootaloo warned that shutting down the Crusader Maneframe would shut off all the automated systems. And since the Crusader Maneframe ran virtually everything, that meant all the systems were automated.

I had stopped Elder Cottage Cheese. I just hoped I hadn’t cost the Outcasts their base in the process.

I turned on the lamp of my PipBuck. Its light seemed somehow ghostly in the reigning quiet. Checking my PipBuck’s automap, I was pleased to find that interfacing with the junction had revealed the entrance into the Crusader Maneframe’s secure room. I pushed myself up and started towards the entrance. With speed, I could get there and reboot the spell matrix in Strawberry Lemonade’s power armor before SteelHooves finished cutting his way in.

I fought a niggling sense of panic. If I just broke the Stable, I was going to be in *so* much trouble.

The quiet didn't last long. Shouts echoed down the halls. As I trotted into the atrium, I passed the two knights I had overheard talking earlier. They were galloping towards the security station, the spotlights on their helmets cutting swaths of illumination, one of them still pulling a trash bin behind her.

Emergency lights came on throughout the Stable, bathing the halls with pale orange. I exhaled in relief. Thank you, Apple Bloom, for thinking of everything!

"Hello, residents of Stable Twenty-Nine," a sweet-sounding mare's voice called out over the Stable loudspeakers. *"My name is Sweetie Belle, and I am... was one of the founding ponies of Stable-Tec..."*

I cast a look at one of the speakers as I passed by. What was this?

"If you are hearing this, it means that the Crusader Maneframe that has been running Stable Twenty-Nine since it was sealed was shut down moments ago because it posed a threat to the ponies under its care."

Sweetie Belle's voice was calming. I slowed to a walk.

"Emergency subsystems have been activated to take care of vital life-sustaining and security-related systems," the voice of Sweetie Belle informed us. *"Unfortunately, these subsystems have a limited lifespan and will only function for five years."*

For ponies trapped in a Stable beneath an irradiated hellscape, five years would have been a major problem. For us, it was virtually a gift from heaven.

"I'm afraid you will have to figure out what to do from here on your own. But don't panic. You are good ponies, and you can do more than you think if you just put your minds to it. I know you will do just fine."

"Good luck, my little ponies."



I rounded the corner into the maintenance wing only to see a machine gun turret lowering out of a sliding ceiling panel, silhouetted hellishly by the orange emergency light behind it. I slid to a stop, eyeing the turret. Calamity had shut down all the security turrets last time we were here. But the subsystems must have brought them back online. Still, without the Crusader trying to wipe out the Stable's population, they shouldn't be hostile, right?

The turret clicked, beeped, and spun towards me.

BRAT-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

I dove back around the corner as bullets sparked off the walls. What the fuck?

A new automated voice came over the speakers, this time an anonymous mare. *"Crusader Maneframe emergency shutdown successful. Security subsystem attempting to discern the nature of the emergency and provide assistance."*

I heard more gunfire from deeper in the Stable.

"Analysis: dead water talisman. Celestia-Tier Emergency. Contacting nearest Stable-Tec supply house for delivery of replacement talisman... Contact failed. Supply house not responding or no longer exists. Attempting to contact secondary supply house... Contact failed. Secondary supply house unreachable."

I floated out Little Macintosh and checked the load.

"Analysis: hostile takeover. Luna-Tier Emergency. Anti-intruder measures have been engaged. All residents of Stable should retreat to one of the safe rooms until threat has passed."

I slid into S.A.T.S. as I jumped back into the hall. My targeting spell locked onto the turret, and I fired four shots into its hull. The turret exploded in a shower of sparks with the third hit.

I broke into a gallop, sure that the Crusader Maneframe was in a "safe room". I wanted to get there and get Strawberry Lemonade back up on her hooves before the room sealed off. Fortunately, the secret entrance

that Cottage had used was on the maintenance level, just around the next...

I skidded to a halt as I turned the next corner and found myself facing two more sentry guns. I scrambled back the way I came as bullets tore at the air behind me.

"Identifying resident locations via PipBuck tags. Number of Stable Twenty-Nine residents: zero," the voice said dispassionately. *"Number of Stable Twenty-Nine residents still outside of safe rooms: zero. Safe rooms sealing now."*

Crap!

I didn't have time to reload Little Macintosh. Instead, I drew out both the zebra rifle and the sniper rifle. I hoped my skills in marksmanship had improved enough to target multiple stationary targets on my own. S.A.T.S. was not designed to aid with multi-weapon telekinesis, especially with such different weapons.

I spun around the corner, aiming as swiftly as I could. The hall filled with bullets flying in each direction. I felt the impacts as several shots hit my armor but did not penetrate. I felt a burning graze on my left cheek, and a much more serious pain as a bullet punctured my right hindleg.

The sniper rifle fired twice, punching holes through the hull plating of the first turret. The zebra rifle tore at the second one as it set the turret on fire. The turret exploded, taking its wounded twin out with it.

I wobbled, pain lancing up my hindleg. I wasn't going to make it now, not when I couldn't run.

"Safe rooms sealed," the mare's voice announced, informing me that it wouldn't have mattered anyway. There had never been enough time. *"Deploying neurotoxin gas."*

Wait, what?

I remembered Knight Strawberry Lemonade calling for me to take out Cottage by gassing the room, but I didn't realize that was actually

possible. *But Stables tend to be dangerous*, Stern had warned us in Fillydelphia. *They often have their own security or their own... unique dangers.*

I turned frantically, looking around. I needed to get out of the hall. But where could I go that would be safe? The safe rooms were already sealed. I suddenly felt very tired.

Having no better choice, I started hobbling back down the maintenance wing. I wanted to get to the PipBuck Technician's stall. There was no logic behind the choice. It just felt like the best place for me to be. I probably wasn't thinking straight. I felt so tired.

Tired... and heavy.

I wondered what kind of gas was going to be released. Would I hear it? Would I be able to smell it? Would it burn my eyes and lungs? So far, there was nothing, not even a haziness to the air. A flutter of hope moved in my heart. Maybe, after two hundred years, the intruder counter-measures no longer worked. Maybe there was no gas. The idea made me feel better, but also a little dizzy.

Dizzy. And tired. And heavy...

Oh no...

And then I was falling back in the darkness again. I didn't even feel my body hit the floor.



I woke up in the Stable Twenty-Nine Clinic. Not my favorite room in any Stable, and particularly not in this one.

"Welcome back, Littlepip," SteelHooves' deep voice rumbled. "We're situated to leave for Bucklyn Cross whenever you are."

My mouth felt dry and cottony. My voice rasped as I asked, "Why am I not dead?" I could feel a throbbing pain in my right hindleg, beneath the compressive wrap of healing bandages.

"The toxin was designed to incapacitate, not kill." The voice was Velvet Remedy's, but I barely recognized it. She sounded as bad as I did. "Either Stable-Tec didn't want to trust the threat analysis of their subsystem with something that could wipe out the Stable... or they expected the inhabitants to want prisoners." She sounded like she was quickly reaching the same level of dislike for Stables that I had. "I can't believe they gassed the Clinic."

"Well," I grunted, unsurprised that Velvet Remedy's response to the power shutdown had been to push her way to the Clinic -- the place ponies would come to for help. "Maybe they just gassed the Atrium. After all, there is that big hole where the window used to be."

I pushed myself upright. A nauseating wave of dizziness nearly knocked me off the gurney I had been laying on. "unnngh." I looked to Velvet Remedy. "Are you okay?"

"I won't be singing again for a few days," Velvet said dourly. She looked a little haggard, but thankfully uninjured. "But otherwise, yes. Everypony is fine." She added, "And zebra."

"And the Rangers?"

"Environmentally sealed armor with rebreathers," SteelHooves said, sounding just a touch proud of Applejack's technology. "Gas never got us. Well, those of us in our suits, that is."

"Cross?" I asked, my throat hurting. "Strawberry?"

"Both fine. They were in Stable safe rooms. I rebooted Knight Strawberry Lemonades' armor myself."

I nodded. Made sense security would qualify. Or at least the armory. And Star Paladin Crossroads would have had plenty of time to step into it before it sealed. From the tone of SteelHooves' voice, I guessed that Strawberry Lemonade had shown more thanks than he was comfortable with. I wished I could have seen it.

"Was anypony... shot?"

“Well, you were,” Velvet Remedy rasped snarkily. Then, with a more somber tone, “Yes. A few others. Mercifully, no fatalities, but there are some ponies here who won’t be walking around again for a few weeks. In one case, I’m afraid, the damage was permanent.”

The weight of the damage I had caused pushed me back down onto the gurney. I stared at the ceiling, wondering how many ponies had been hurt and how long they would be in pain.

“Good work with Cottage,” SteelHooves told me although I certainly didn’t feel like I deserved any congratulations. “The Elder is still alive, but comatose. His fault, not yours. We have him in his life-support pod, ready for delivery.”

“Comatose...” I whispered as a dull pain settled over me that had nothing to do with my injuries. “Will he ever...?”

“Probably not,” SteelHooves replied bluntly. He made it sound like a good thing.



“I... I’m sorry.”

A lump caught in my throat as I stared up to a knight stallion laying on a gurney. He’d been shot up pretty badly by one of the suddenly-active turrets in the men’s dormitory. He hadn’t been in his armor; he’d been off-shift and had curled up to sleep... only to wake up as bullets tore into his back, screaming in pain as two of his fellow Rangers leapt to destroy the turret.

I imagined myself in his place, and I wondered if he’d ever be able to sleep easily again.

“Fer what?” the stallion asked bitterly. “Hey, ain’t yer fault. Ah blame Cottage, if anypony.”

I didn’t. Blinking back a tear, I put a hoof on his shoulder. “Is there... anything I can do?”

“Think you’ve done enough,” he retorted, then looked apologetic as I winced.

I nodded and turned to go.

Calamity and Xenith were trotting down the hallway towards me. I stopped in shock as I saw Xenith’s horn. For a moment, I thought the zebra had been transformed into a unicorn... badly. But I quickly saw the straps holding the metal plate to her forehead, the curving, wicked horn jutting out of it. I chuckled despite my melancholy.

“So, you finally got a chance to build the hellhound helmet, I see,” I said to Calamity as the rust-coated pegasus paused to tip open a trash bin with a wing. I recognized now the product of the schematics we had discovered at Hippocampus Energy Plant #12. Several hellhound claws were wonderglued together to form the exceptionally lethal horn.

“Ayep!” Calamity said proudly as he fished an old pack of cigarettes out of the trash. Xenith looked mildly less thrilled.

“Using such a weapon is not proper Fallen Caesar Style,” she commented, her exotic voice taking a dour tone. “But the pegasus has argued well that hooves alone are no match for an alicorn’s shield.”

I blinked. “Are we... expecting more trouble with the alicorns?” I asked hesitantly. I seemed to remember a warning about alicorns in the Canterlot Ruins. “I thought we were on a mission from the Goddess? Surely, they’d let us pass.”

Slipping the cigarette pack into his saddlebags, Calamity frowned with a look of grim discomfort. “Well... Let’s jus’ say we just ain’t takin’ any chances.”



The storm from the night before had given way to a light drizzle as Calamity wove the *Sky Bandit* between the dark, skeletal husks that had once been Manehattan’s skyscrapers. We were heading to Bucklyn Cross in a part of the city that I had not yet seen.

Velvet Remedy stirred, coming out of the Fluttershy orb for what was the second time since we left Stable Twenty-Nine this morning. I looked away, not meeting the gaze coming from SteelHooves' helmet. Everypony deserved their little retreats.

"There's something I don't understand," Velvet Remedy admitted, looking to me as she put the memory orb away. Her voice was still raspy, but not as bad as it was a few hours ago.

I wasn't in the mood for conversation. At my insistence, I had been led around to all the Outcasts who had been hurt when the security systems activated. I apologized to each one. Most were polite, and some even thanked me for dealing with Cottage and possibly revealing two locations for backup water talismans to boot. Only one of them snapped at me over it. More should have.

"Littlepip, you said that Red Eye talked about controlling the sun, the moon and the weather. But not even the Goddess Celestia was able to control the weather all across Equestria. Does he really expect that mimicking what Trixie has become will make him more powerful than Celestia?"

I shrugged, not feeling like speaking. And honestly, I really had no idea.

Velvet Remedy shook her head. "For that matter, why focus on the sun and the moon? Either Celestia and Luna are up there somewhere, guiding them like They always have..." Velvet glanced towards Calamity, her eyes meeting with his as he looked back over his shoulder at the conversation. "...or Calamity is right, the Goddesses are simply dead, the sun and moon are doing just fine on their own."

Which would mean that the Goddesses were never really needed in the first place.

"Sure, being their guide would be a status symbol," Velvet said. "But Red Eye seems... practical. Why turn himself into... something like her to do something that doesn't need to be done?"

Calamity veered away from the blackened husk of a building as dozens of pigeons burst out. I slipped off my bench as the passenger wagon

tilted, thumping my right hindleg hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. Pyrelight leapt from Velvet's side, soaring out of one of the windows into the open air, giving chase.

Blinking, I considered crawling back onto the bench. The bench was more comfortable but laying on it risked another spill. I decided to just stay on the floor.

"Is it not obvious," Xenith said. "He wishes to be worshipped like a God. How better to become one than to take on the role of your Goddesses?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that's it." Red Eye had talked as if he was removing himself from the equation. Like doing this was akin to dying. He was many things, but not a megalomaniac.

"Ya'll are makin' an assumption that jus' ain't so," Calamity called back.

We all turned towards him. "And what would that assumption be?" Velvet asked in a voice that would have been a purr if not for the aftereffects of the gas.

"Y'all talk like the sun an' the moon are doin' what they're s'posed to," Calamity replied, swooping beneath a crumbling and dangerously canted walkway that stretched between two tilting towers. Several bloodwings were nesting underneath. "Way Ah heard it, Celestia would raise the sun at the beginnin' o' day, then lower it at night. Luna would bring out the moon, then put it away at dawn. That was s'posed t' be the order o' things, right?"

"Well, yes," Velvet Remedy replied. "Of course. But clearly that's still happening. It was night before, it is day now, and it will be night again, just like clockwork."

"Oh it's happenin', but it ain't nothin' like clockwork. Ah can't tell ya how many times when Ah was growin' up that Ah saw the sun an' the moon in the sky *at the same time*."

Velvet and Xenith gasped. I reeled. The very notion was... like something out of a doomsday prophecy. The sun and the moon never shared the sky. It was *unnatural*. *Blasphemous*.

“Usually, it was in the early mornin’, like they couldn’t decide which was s’posed t’ be out. They’ve gone wild, Ah reckon. Like the weather.” Calamity began a graceful turn that tilted the *Sky Bandit*, giving us all a view of the slate-blue expanse of the ocean beyond Manehattan’s harbor. I could see a few lights shining from the Pony of Friendship on her little island out in the bay. The storm clouds darkened as they stretched out across the sea, and the horizon was obscured by the heavy grey of rain.

“Don’t happen that often, but happens enough that no pegasus ever forgets that there ain’t nopony guidin’ ‘em anymore.” Calamity snorted, “An’ it ain’t always in the mornin’. Once, middle o’ the day, ‘bout a generation after the war, the sun an’ the moon weren’t only both in the sky at the same time, they were in the same spot! It was like they collided or somethin’.”

I was in shock, horrified by what Calamity was describing. The pony in my head tried to come up with an epitaph, but no lewd reference to the Goddesses could match the profanity of that event.

“Ah wasn’t there, o course,” Calamity told us. “But Ah’ve seen pictures. Sun turned into a big black disk pourin’ out reddish light like it was the end o’ the world. Plenty o’ pegasus folk thought it was. There was riotin’. Ponies got killed. Enclave stepped in, restored peace. Ah think that was when they really took control.”



It was late evening when I first laid eyes on Bucklyn Cross.

The skyscrapers had fallen behind us, and the Manehattan Ruins had become a grey maze of crumbling structures and flattened buildings radiating out from the Manehattan Blast Zone. We could clearly see where the Balefire Bomb had gone off. What had once been Manehattan’s city center had been scoured to the foundations in a huge

radius. The Blast Zone was almost uniformly smooth save for odd lines where underground tunnels had channeled the blast. It glistened like glass.

Beyond the Manehattan Blast Zone, beyond miles of shattered city, a murky river cut through the land. Its shores marked the boundary between Manehattan and Bucklyn, one of Manehattan's largest suburbs. The Bucklyn Bridge had once spanned the river. It has been one of Manehattan's crowning landmarks -- a massive, multi-tiered suspension bridge with huge brickwork piers that included rentable living spaces. The Bucklyn Bridge had collapsed from both ends, leaving only a single freestanding pier in the middle of the river, a stretch of roadway hanging out over the water in each direction. When viewed from the right angle, it did indeed look like a giant cross. Little rivulets of rainwater were pouring off of each end; the wind caught the water in misty sprays.

The meeting point for our exchange with the Steel Rangers was on this side of the river. So I was alarmed when Calamity flew past it, swooping out over the water. "Hang on!"

"What?" I asked, crawling up onto a bench and floating out my binoculars. I looked first downwards towards the cracked remains of a wagon hitching lot I believed was our destination. And indeed there were several Paladins looking back up through the rain at me with upturned visors. And more waiting in the ruins beyond. I spotted at least a dozen.

Were they planning to ambush us, or were they protecting themselves should we try to double-cross them? I pointed out what I'd spotted to SteelHooves.

"Make sure your guns are loaded," he replied. Then turned to Calamity. "Where are you going?"

I turned my gaze to Bucklyn Cross, noting more Steel Rangers moving between the wreckage of wagons and defensive barricades. There were multiple turrets (including several mounted on the bottom of the bridge which clearly kept it free of bloodwings), and I noted a few tank-

like sentinel bots rolling about on patrol. Structures had been built between the tiers and between the columns of the pier, supplementing the living spaces already inside the pier. A line of cranes held several small boats over the edge of the bridge railing. All in all, the Steel Ranger's Manhattan citadel looked cramped but ridiculously secure.

It would take them considerable time to send reinforcements. They would have to do so by boat.

I noticed other boats in the river -- small, light craft pushed over the water by huge fans. A hoof-full of them skimmed about like insects near a small settlement huddled along the shore in the dim shadow of Bucklyn Cross.

Once, in the old Equestria, the buildings had been a strip mall, apparently dominated by two competing coffee shops. The two shops had fought to out-advertise each other, cumulating in each building a giant billboard over their respective corners of the mall. The billboard for Java's Cup had collapsed, crushing through the roof of the adjacent Sunny Suds' Laundromat. The opposite billboard had suffered severe damage from smoke and age, leaving only four letters of the sign clearly legible: arbu.

The residents of Arbu had ringed the asphalt field that had once been the mall's complimentary parking with passenger and delivery wagons, using scavenged plates of scrap metal to fortify the barricade. It was a passable defense, but in comparison to the fortifications of Bucklyn Cross, the little village looked like a target.

Several of the signboards from above the strip mall's shops, including a sign for Java's Cup the size of a schoolroom chalkboard, had been cobbled together to create a gate which could be opened and closed through a system of chains and pulleys. Above, the ponies had fashioned a sign: *Arbu. Friendliest town in the wasteland!* The gate was being slowly drawn upward to allow a merchant caravan to exit from the town.

I knew what had drawn Calamity's attention even before I saw them.

The rain-soaked ponies I saw moving between the rubble, setting an ambush for the caravan, didn't look like raider ponies. They lacked the fucked-up, "scourges of ponykind" motif. No necklaces of pony bones or cutie marks of bloodied weapons. They just looked like bandits.

"Uh... Calamity? Maybe we should just scare them off?"

"So they c'n jus' attack the next caravan instead?" Calamity asked gruffly, kicking the reload bar of his battle saddle. "Plan t' go 'round 'pologizin' t' everypony they kill after we let 'em go?"

That stung. I shut up.

There were nine of them. I watched several taking aim down rifles pointed towards Arbu. One, a slate-blue unicorn mare, floated a heavy assault rifle into position. If we didn't intervene, this would be a slaughter.

Calamity lined up on the first of the bandits and opened fire. One double-shot from his battle saddle and the pony fell, missing part of his head.

The bandits all turned about, looking for where the shot had come from. Only one of them thought to look up into the sky. Calamity fired again, just as the pony pointed upwards and cried out a warning to her companions. One of Calamity's bullets tore into the bottom of her pointing hoof, wrecking her foreleg. The other hit her thick leather armor. She fell back, badly wounded.

Pyrelight swooped in front of us, diving down towards the bandit. The magnificent huntress let out a blast of green flame, setting the wounded bandit ablaze. I could hear her screams as she burned to death.

The remaining bandits, seven of them, dove for better cover, turning their weapons skyward. One black-coated earth pony with a sawed-off shotgun swung his weapon towards Pyrelight.

BLAM! The beautiful balefire phoenix let out a squawk of pain and fell from the sky, bouncing off a freestanding wall and landing in a trash bin. Velvet Remedy cried out in dismay.

“Calamity, get us down there now!” she screamed.

Dozens of bullets sparked off the *Sky Bandit*, echoing metallicity. I floated up the zebra rifle and peered down the scope. The other ponies were shooting back at us, but the black stallion’s shotgun didn’t have the range. Instead, he was crouching behind a mailbox, looking for better cover. I brought up my targeting spell and took aim. His cover was good; it would be a tricky shot to get him...

I paused. And slipped away the zebra rifle, bringing out the sniper rifle instead. I reasoned that an armor-piercing shot would go right through the mailbox. But the real reason is that I didn’t want to set these ponies on fire. It felt wrong to kill them like that.

But I was still going to kill them. Did that make me “corrupted kindness” after all?

Calamity banked, firing again. One of the bandit ponies learned the hard way that her cover was just not quite good enough. She screamed as one of the bullets clipped her in the flank, the other pinging off the concrete she was hiding behind with a shower of white dust.

“Dammit, move where Ah c’n see ya!”

SteelHooves’ deep voice wryly commented, “I don’t think she’s looking to oblige.” He moved up to one of the passenger wagon’s broken windows, warning us to get back. The missile launcher built unto his battle saddle opened up. Two rockets whooshed out, the backwash of their launch filling the wagon with choking smoke. I threw myself to a window, more to breathe than to see, and watched as the missiles struck home on the bandit mare’s concrete shield, blasting it apart. The mare’s body was bloodily torn by chunks of blast-propelled concrete.

More shots. This time neither from the bandits nor from us. Several armed ponies were charging out of Arbu, firing pistols and rifles at the bandits. Others were moving to protect the merchant.

The remaining bandits were forced to split their attention. The slate-blue unicorn bandit turned her assault rifle towards the incoming ponies of Arbu and opened fire, spraying wildly. The townsponties

dived for cover amongst the hulks of old chariots and the crumbled walls of what had once been a dentistry office. At the gate, one of the ponies knocked the merchant out of the line of fire, taking several bullets in the side. More hit the merchant's heavily-laden, two-headed cattle who mooed in fright and pain.

That broke my battle stupor. I floated the sniper rifle in front of me, peering down the scope, and sent three armor-piercing bullets through the mailbox. The black stallion toppled, laying on his side, his sides heaving with each breath as he slowly bled out.

Calamity had maneuvered us close enough in his efforts to land for Velvet that I could hear the cry of the colt who suddenly galloped out from under a pile of metal boxes. "Daddy!"

Oh no. No. Celestia rape me with a solar flare, no.

The colt ran right up to the fallen stallion, throwing himself on his dying father... and right into the line of fire.

What had I done?

Velvet Remedy's shield spell flashed up over the colt and his fallen father. I slipped my weapon away, feeling an icy numbness pass through me. They are bandits, I tried to tell myself. But I was not ready for bandits with family.

Please, I prayed to Celestia, don't let the father die. The father... I put three bullets through.

Below, a rifle shot from one of the bandits caught an Arbu mare square in the chest. She fell, coughing up blood once, twice... then never coughed again.

SteelHooves' grenade machinegun tore at my eardrums as a swath of explosions ripped through the bandits' defenses, killing two of them and sending the others scattering. Another twin-shot from Calamity felled one of the bandits as he ran, blood painting the broken wall beside him. Another took several shots from the Arbu townspies. Most of the bullets impacted the bandit's armor with little affect, but a lucky shot pierced her eye. The shot knocked her head back, the black

socket of her eye, ringed with blood, stared vacantly upwards towards us. Unbidden, the nightmarish vision of the sun and the moon sharing the sky, becoming a black disk ringed with fire, blossomed in my mind. I shuddered uncontrollably.

As the mare fell, the last bandit turned and fled into the ruins. Two of the Arbu ponies gave chase. I could tell Calamity wanted to as well, but Velvet was desperate to get to Pyrelight. The passenger wagon wobbled in the air as Calamity made his decision. Then we turned, dropping down in the nearest stretch of road.

Velvet Remedy leapt out through one of the windows before we had touched down. She too had a decision to make. Both the father and Pyrelight might already be dead. But if either lived, it was unlikely they would live long enough for her to care for the other first. She paused, looking in the direction of one, then the other. I could see the tremble pass through her legs. With a tormented cry, she made her decision. And galloped towards Pyrelight as fast as she could.

As she ran, her horn glowed, opening one of her medical boxes. Healing bandages and potions and drugs spilled out. "Xenith, Littlepip, please help him!" she begged us at the top of her voice as she left us behind.

Telekinetically scooping up the dropped medical supplies, I ran towards the father and his colt, Xenith galloping at my side.



"You can't... have... my son..." the black stallion rasped weakly as two of the Arbu townspanies pulled the colt off of him. The boy's wet mane hung in front of his eyes, the water dripping from it mixed with his tears as he struggled to be reunited with the stallion.

"We'll take good care o' him," one of the Arbu mares promised kindly. "Treat him as one o' our own."

Xenith and I were doing what we could. But the two of us did not equal one Velvet Remedy. And seeing the extent of the damage made

me think that not even she could save him without the aid of a full Clinic. Instead, the painkiller was at least dulling his pain. His last breaths were shallow. His eyes glazed and not truly seeing.

I could barely see him through the tears in my eyes.

"I... won't let..." The rest of the sentence was lost in a final exhalation.

The stallion was dead.

I stumbled away, breathing heavily, tears falling from my eyes. I'd killed him. I'd killed a colt's father.

I was having a hard time breathing. I tried to think of anything I could do to make this right. But you couldn't fix dead. There was no way I could make this up to either the father or his colt. I knew it, and it felt like it was killing me. I deserved it.

My ears caught the sound of creaking wheels and hooves clapping through puddles. I turned as a pony approached from Arbu, hitched to a wagon. She was a stout apricot unicorn with a wagon for a cutie mark and a scar just underneath it. Her coat showed signs of radiation poisoning. She waved a friendly hello that I half-returned. Her horn glowed with a soft brown light that enveloped the father and floated his body upwards and into the cart, placing the black-coated corpse on top of several other pony bodies. Arbu was collecting the dead, their own and bandits alike.

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Well, somepony's got to bury 'em," replied a green-coated Arbu mare with shockingly orange hair. I felt another shot of pain as I realized the good ponies of Arbu treated the dead of their enemies better than I tended to treat the bodies of ponies I had grown to care about. The images of Pinkie Pie's skeleton and Apple Bloom's both floated in front of my mind's eye.

I realized how utterly unworthy I was of Homage's affections. I didn't deserve the friends I had found. I couldn't keep going like this. I couldn't keep doing this. I needed to do better.

I needed to *be* better.

Velvet Remedy appeared, tears in her eyes. Oh Goddesses no. Not Pyrelight too.

But this time my worries were in vain. “She’ll live,” Velvet announced. “If the shotgun was in better repair, it would be another story. But she’s in bad shape. We should get her to someplace radioactive in the next few hours so she can begin healing properly.”

“If yer lookin’ for radiation,” one of the Arbu ponies (a milk-colored mare with a stringy tan mane and a birth defect that left her with only one eye) said as she trotted up, shaking Velvet’s hoof in a friendly greeting, “You can look ta the GRHAS breedin’ facility just up the river. Mind the radigators. And don’t go killin’ any of ‘em.”

“Gerhas?” I wondered quizzically only to be answered with a sharp nod.

My eyes strayed to her flank. Her cutie mark looked like several sharp teeth, radigator teeth perhaps. She too had a little scar beneath her cutie mark. A small brand, it looked like, reminding me of the brand that had obliterated Calamity’s cutie mark.

“Breeding facility?” Velvet Remedy asked. “Breeding what?”

“Why radigators, of course. Weren’tcha listening?” the mare replied.

“Oh,” replied Velvet politely. “Littlepip... we should go.”

I nodded numbly, ambling towards the *Sky Bandit*. SteelHooves was still there, keeping an eye on the life support cocoon strapped to the roof. The status of Elder Cottage Cheese had not changed. Calamity was pulling an old suitcase out of the rusty husk of a chariot. My little scavenger.

“Come back now, y’hear!” the green mare with the orange mane called out. “We’ll have dinner.”



"Third time this month I've had to break up a yelling match between Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe. Ever since Joe opened that

new Starbucked across from Mr. Beans' Java's Cup. First it was just the two of them trying to undercut each other's prices. Then that shipment of coffee beans went missing and Jamocha Joe started throwing some nasty accusations. Totally groundless, as it turned out. Shipment got rerouted to Fillydelphia because of some 'glitch' in the Starbucked terminal system. Can't stand those things. They seem downright un-pony.

"Yesterday, though, Jamocha Joe unveiled a new ad for Starbucked Steamy Coffee, and hoo-wee. Never felt more like buying a cup of coffee in my life, just to show my appreciation. Now I don't know what makes 'steamed' coffee so different from any other type, but Mr. Beans was sure steamed about the ads. Called it 'blatant use of sex to sell coffee', and I reckon he was pretty on the nose about that. Mr. Beans rallied together a flock of local ponies to stand in front of Joe's place decrying the poor guy as immoral and degenerate - the whole think-of-the-children routine -- and harassing customers. When I arrived to break it up, one of the old mares hit me with her protest sign. Jamocha Joe came out to help, and before I knew it, Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe were in each other's muzzles, and it looked like it was going to come to bucks. Didn't help that Mrs. Weather's stupid, yappy poodle got loose and was adding its own head-splitting noise to the ruckus.

"Got them settled, and went right to Qwik-Kare for some stitches. I can't believe I quit my job in Manehattan for this crap."

Calamity's suitcase had been locked. Opening it, I found an old security guard uniform, a cattle prod, a Four Stars month's pass on the Luna Line and a comic book (*Sword Mares*, the cover featuring a mare who was rendered to be ridiculously hot to the point of deformed, wearing equally ridiculous flank-baring armor and holding a sword in her muzzle as she faced down a monster that looked like a cross between a giant yao guai and Nightmare Moon, a wide-eyed buck cowering behind her). In addition, there were a whole mess of audio logs. Most of the logs had deteriorated beyond salvation, but I was able to download eight of them into my PipBuck.

My PipBuck was clicking at me with a chiding voice.

Calamity circled the *Sky Bandit* around the ruins of the garish pink-and-green hatchery building with the cartoonish, smiling alligator statue out front. The hatchery sat between the Manehattan edge of the gloomy river and a set of train tracks which crossed the street leading up to it. All about were strewn tank cars, most of which were leaking a glowing toxic sludge. When the Balefire Bomb had detonated, the train had derailed, spilling its shipment of radioactive waste across several blocks. The hatchery had gotten the worst of it. Several train cars had been flung into the building and its water pens, smashing them apart.

Gummy's Retirement Hostel & Alligator Sanctuary
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I spotted at least a dozen giant radigators milling about in the water pens and along the shore. Through a shattered wall of the hatchery building, I saw the shadowy movement of a legendary radigator easily the size of one of the train cars.

"We're not going inside," I announced. The mare from Arbu had asked us not to harm the local wildlife. I wasn't sure why, as the radigators posed a clear threat to the town just downstream. I suspected the bridge underturrets along Bucklyn Cross regularly had more to shoot at than just bloodwings. "There's a big one in there that looks like he could swallow me whole."

Velvet Remedy nickered, "We shouldn't need to. Just set us down on the roof, Calamity. I'll put Pyrelight someplace cozy to rest." She looked down sorrowfully at the wounded bird wrapped in blankets. The phoenix coughed and shuddered, sending a twinge of worry through my friend.

"Gotcha," Calamity called back. "But be quick. Ah don't think that roof is held up by much more'n wishful thinkin'."

"Why do you believe the ponies wish us to keep these beasts alive?" Xenith pondered.

"Ah'll tell ya why," Calamity laughed. "Cuz radigator is good eatin'!"

Velvet Remedy made a face and Xenith looked vaguely ill. I, on the other hoof, felt like I had missed an opportunity back on my first day

outside. I hadn't even thought of killing and cooking one of the radigators near the Big Macintosh memorial.

Calamity flew us in for a landing on the rooftop. He touched down with a clop of his hooves. There was a warning groan and the roof sagged perilously. I suspected Calamity might be right.

Velvet Remedy got out, floating Pyrelight's wrapped body next to her, and began to cross towards a set of crates on one corner of the building, moving cautiously on the unstable surface.

"I'm going to leave you right over here for a while," Velvet cooed softly. "There's lots of nice, warm radiation here. You'll be feeling your old self in no time."

The click-clicking of my PipBuck insisted that she was correct. And that we should all drink some RadAway as soon as we got away from here.

Velvet didn't see the pressure plate. To be fair, neither did I. The damn thing was well camouflaged. She was nearly to the crates when she stepped a hoof onto it. One of the crates burst open with an explosion of colorful streamers, confetti and party glitter. The sound of trumpets blasted through the air and several two-hundred-year-old balloons... did nothing but lie there in the bottom of the crate, deflated and greasy with rot.

Velvet Remedy jumped back several feet in panicked surprise. She landed on all four hooves with a soft thump.

The roof collapsed out from under us.

I felt an awful, lurching weightlessness as the *Sky Bandit* tilted and began to fall into the empty space where half of the roof used to be. Calamity flapped his wings quickly, lifting us into the air again as I lashed out with my magic to wrap Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight in bubbles of levitation.

Several chunks of ceiling splashed into pools below or clanged off of metal walkways as they fell. A crumbling rumble belched up from the building below us.

Velvet and Pyrelight slowly floated back towards the waiting *Sky Bandit*. Obviously, we would have to choose someplace else to cradle Pyrelight while she recuperated.

The hulking head of the legendary radigator snapped up through the opening. I barely pulled Velvet and Pyrelight out of the way, the creature's scales brushing against Velvet Remedy and knocking her out of the levitation bubble.

Velvet fell. The charcoal unicorn hit the side of the creature, sliding down its scales and splashing into a pool of much smaller radigators below.

The mammoth radigator twisted about and opened its maw, snapping at the *Sky Bandit*. With a mixture of comedy and horror, I realized the monster had no teeth. The huge jaws closed into our ride, threatening to drag us down as the monster gummed at the *Sky Bandit*. Calamity yelped, his body slamming into a bent girder as he was swung around helplessly in the air, barely sparing his wing.

Velvet Remedy splashed, struggling to keep her head above the water as the smaller radigators closed in. Swimming was not a skill normally developed in Stable life. The closest radigator opened its maw, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. Frantically, she threw her anesthetic spell at it. Then flung her forelegs over the paralyzed creature like it was a life preserver.

The behemoth radigator was pulling us into the hatchery. Still not wanting to kill this thing, I drew out the poisoned dart gun for the first time in ages, firing shot after shot into the soft tissue of its gullet.

The legendary radigator released us, tottering and collapsing back into the pool below. The splash hurled Velvet Remedy over the side of the pen, along with several extremely not-toothless radigators. Calamity grunted, flapping his wings as he regained control of the passenger wagon.

I threw another telekinetic field around Velvet Remedy, pulling her up from the floor as several radigator jaws chomped at the space she had just vacated.

"Plan B?" Xenith asked, not missing a beat.



"I was just starting to soak in a luxurious bath when I got an emergency call from the mall. Mrs. Weather was reporting a robbery. I get there, soaking wet, my uniform clinging to my coat, only to hear that the thief was the Sunny Suds' new Sparkle-Cola machine, and the theft was a single bit. Apparently, she'd hit the button for one of those new Sparkle-Cola Rads, and the machine dispensed a normal Sparkle-Cola. Oh, the horror.

"The operator at Sunny Suds naturally had no way of getting into the machine. I could probably do it with a crowbar, but then I'd probably be fined for the damages. I instead just gave her one of my bits. Which she promptly put into the machine, hitting the same button and getting the same damned result. I feel I should receive an award for refraining from using the cattle prod on the old hag."

An hour (and a couple packets of Rad-Away) later, the *Sky Bandit* flew over the designated meeting spot. The Steel Rangers had changed their configuration. Many of the backup rangers were now hiding in places that couldn't be targeted from the air. Either that or they had left, but I didn't believe the latter was at all likely.

I licked the inside of my muzzle. Rad-Away tasted like rancid orange juice and it left an aftertaste that was, somehow, even less pleasant. I suspected that somepony had decided to make Rad-Away fruit-flavored as a marketing technique. I wished I could meet that pony so I could shoot her with a poisoned dart.

Pyrelight was resting on one of the broken tank cars, bathing in radiation. The giant radigators shouldn't be able to reach her so long as she doesn't roll off the tanker. Velvet Remedy had planted herself a safe distance away, just out of the radiation zone, keeping watch through my binoculars. She had her anesthetic spell in case Pyrelight should fall or one of the radigators should figure out how to get up to her hiding spot, and combat shotgun and plenty of ammo in case the spell wasn't enough.

As Calamity circled the lot, the rain finally let up.

We landed, minus our medical pony, on the edge of the parking lot, facing eight Steel Rangers whom we could see, and several whom we could not. According to my E.F.S., one of them was outright hostile, a spot of red in the sea of lights on my compass, even though she stood her ground patiently like all the others.

We waited as Calamity released himself from the *Sky Bandit's* harness and shook the rain out of his coat. Then he flew up and released the chains binding Elder Cottage Cheese's life support pod to the roof mounting. As I floated the pod down to hover behind us, Calamity grabbed Spitfire's Thunder and took off into the air. SteelHooves grunted and took the lead. I followed, floating the pod. Xenith behind me.

The atmosphere was like a rubber band, stretched to the point of fraying, about to snap.

"Goddesses, I don't like this," I muttered under my breath. I had telekinetic sheaths around all my weapons even though they were still in their holsters. Armor-piercing or magical rounds were loaded into each. My ears swiveled, trying to pick up the sounds of the Steel Rangers we couldn't see as they moved into better positions, their little lights sliding back and forth on my E.F.S. compass.

Two of the Steel Rangers approached. One of them was a unicorn scribe wearing robes of pre-war armored mesh. The other was the red light on my compass, a paladin whose battle saddle held what looked like two anti-tank guns. The others stood at the ready, weapon ports open on their battle saddles.

"We were expecting Steel Ranger Traitors, not one traitor and a bunch of tribals," miss hostility growled. Then her head bobbed as she took in SteelHooves. "But it seems they did grace us with SteelHooves himself. So tell me, Hoovy, are they actually calling you Elder now?"

Hoovy?

"I have accepted the position," SteelHooves said shortly. "I believe you have somepony who wished to join us in exchange? Send her out now, take your Elder and go in peace."

"Oh, Knight Ant Meat?" the unicorn said with a note of regret that didn't touch her eyes. "I'm afraid she won't be joining us after all. Took a gallop off the short end of the bridge while trying to evade incarceration."

I felt my skin tighten around the hairs of my mane. SteelHooves' stance didn't change. His voice seemed unmoved by the news, although I suspected he had to be enraged inside. Were they trying to provoke something?

"More is the pity," SteelHooves replied evenly, standing very still. "The Elder had a bit of an accident of his own before we could depart. He is unconscious, but alive."

A few of the Steel Rangers bristled and stomped, but no pony made a foalish move, and the two addressing us seemed to shrug off the news as inconsequential.

"Paladin Amaranth," the unicorn scribe said in a tone that only pretended to ask, "Would you please check Elder Cottage's pod and make sure all is in order?"

The armored paladin with the anti-tank weapons trotted forward a step, stopped, then took several steps back.

"Paladin Amaranth?" the unicorn questioned.

"This is a problem," Amaranth intoned. "These aren't just any group of tribals. These are the Stable Two tribals. That's the Stable Dweller." She nodded towards me.

"Yes, I realize that," the unicorn said impatiently. "But I don't see how that matters."

"It matters," Amaranth growled, "Because DJ Pon3 has a boner for her." I cringed at that, the mental image being all manner of wrong. "And he's got the whole wasteland believing whatever she says. If it was

just the Outcasts, anything that went down here would be our words against theirs. But with her..."

The unicorn scowled. "And what, pray tell, do you think is going to happen here where the truth wouldn't favor us?"

Paladin Amaranth took two more steps back. "This is blown. Kill them all."

The moment she spoke, every spot on my E.F.S. compass changed to red. Except for the unicorn.

"What?!" the unicorn shouted, spinning around to face the others. "Belay that order!"

It was too late.

SteelHooves had been standing still, targeting Steel Rangers with his armor's targeting spell even as he talked. Before any of the Steel Rangers could react to the words of either Paladin Amaranth or the unicorn, our Applejack's Ranger was firing loads of high-explosive grenades at them. Three of the Steel Rangers were blown into armored giblets before the unicorn had finished saying "order", the word drowned out from the host of detonations.

Paladin Amaranth fired at SteelHooves almost point-blank, the rounds from her twin anti-tank guns punching through his armor and flesh and exiting the other side in perfect holes. SteelHooves fell to the ground with a metallic thump. His light on my compass winked out.

Amaranth turned back towards me with a swift canter only to find herself looking down the barrels of a sniper rifle, a zebra rifle and Little Macintosh. I pulled every trigger. From the way blue sparks erupted from the holes I blew in her armor, the magically-enhanced bullets in Little Macintosh were probably the ones which killed her.

The world around me erupted as the three remaining Steel Rangers launched grenades and missiles at us, neglecting the safety of the Elder and the unicorn alike. Mercifully, most of the first volley missed. They had been targeting SteelHooves, and the moment he went down, their targeting spells lost their lock. I felt shrapnel and fire slash at me as I

was knocked to the ground, my ears ringing. The magical grip I had on my weapons evaporated.

Even through the near-deafness caused by the explosions, I could still hear Spitfire's Thunder echoing across the Manehattan shoreline. Two of the Steel Rangers dropped, dead before they hit the ground. The third fired two rockets. I watched as Xenith galloped past me, dodging between them, and planted herself on her forehooves, swinging about to buck the knight's helmet with such force that it broke his neck.

As she looked at me, I saw she had a vial clenched between her teeth. She dropped it. The vial shattered against the ground and the lot began to fill with fireless smoke.

I pushed myself to my hooves, pain lancing through multiple parts of my body. My PipBuck was sending me medical warnings. Some of my cuts were pretty deep, and I was bleeding badly. My inventory sorter immediately placed within reach the remaining medical supplies I had taken from Velvet Remedy earlier. I administered the last of the painkiller and downed a healing potion.

More explosions tore the ground near me, throwing me back. My head hit the concrete hard enough to daze me. The Steel Rangers who had remained hidden before had now moved into positions that gave them clear lines of fire. My ears were ringing and my vision blurred, but I could still tell the sound of machine gun fire.

The smoke and dust were obscuring my vision as much as anything else, but my E.F.S. was still picking out targets. I had no idea what had happened to Xenith. I looked around, blinking concrete dust out of my eyes, but I couldn't see her. Not even the friendly light that should be her on my compass.

Another light flared up, a friendly one, as a terrible sound warped the air. SteelHooves got back to his hooves in a vortex of unseen necromantic energy. Canterlot Ghoul's don't stay dead. You have to turn them to ash or dismember them to keep them down.

I was at once thankful and horrified, fearing even more our trip into the Canterlot Ruins.

Somepony was crawling towards me. A friendly light on my compass. I turned, expecting to see Xenith. It was the unicorn scribe. She was dragging herself across the broken asphalt, a swath of red smearing out behind a tattered flank. An explosion had torn off one of her legs.

"I..." she said weakly, focusing on me as if her life depended on it, "...don't... understand..."

Her life didn't depend on me. It was already over. For the second time that day, I administered painkiller (all that I had left) to a pony who should have been my enemy.



I found myself laying down on a straw bedroll in the common lot of Arbu, watching colorful ponies trot about. Many of them stopped to wave hello, or trotted up to greet me. "Friendliest town in the wasteland" had been the claim on their sign, and they seemed determined to live up to that. As one pony (a fairly ugly puce-colored mare with a withered left hindleg and a cutie mark that looked like a stew pot) told me, "Well, we got t' be good at somethin'. And everything else 'bout this town sucks. So it might as well be us that's the good part, right?"

Most of the store fronts had boarded-over windows, except for the Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare (whose windows were covered in aged fliers and posters) and Virtue Comics (which no longer had a front wall, much less windows). Still, the entire place was clearly in use, the home for a half a dozen pony families.

We would be spending the night here. The good ponies of Arbu insisted on being gracious hosts after we came to the merchant's rescue earlier today.

I was too numb to argue. Or, really, to feel anything. Part of that, I knew, was the painkillers that Velvet Remedy had doped me with before wrapping me in enough bandages to be a museum exhibit. Come see the mummy of the rare Stable Dweller. Beware the curse.

I couldn't remember how the fight ended. I couldn't remember much past holding the unicorn scribe as she passed from this life. I had a concussion. Velvet Remedy warned that I might have blacked out.

"Thanks again for your kind help, stranger," the merchant pony was saying to Calamity. "That might have been the end of me if you hadn't stepped in."

Velvet Remedy trotted up to me, seemingly from out of nowhere. She gave me a gentle kiss on the horn as if I was her little filly. "How is your head?"

I grunted in response. My head was full of crying shadows.

"You'll be okay, Littlepip," she said soothingly. "Just rest." She sighed as soon as she said it. "Why do I even bother saying that?"

"Where were you just now?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Helping patch up the merchant's brahmin," she replied, indicating the two-headed cattle. "One of them took a few bullets and the other had a sliver of glass wedged in her hoof. It will be another day or two before the first brahmin can travel, so the merchant will be joining us here for dinner."

I nodded. "That was nice of you." I wondered how the hell you could notice a sliver of glass in the bottom of a creature's hoof. I mean, they were standing on it, right?

"Oh, she told me," Velvet said casually as I vocalized the last question. Then she kissed my head again, informing me, "I'm going to go sit with Calamity." She trotted off, leaving me wondering when she had picked up an ability to communicate with animals. The gears of my mind felt broken, and I was sure I was missing something.

Getting up, I started to look around. I had nothing better to do, and my usefulness seemed to be limited to shooting things. I played another of the audio logs of an unnamed mall security guard.

"Spent the day at my niece's birthday party. First time I actually wanted to be called away, so naturally nopony had any problems. I was tempted to feign a call anyway. I know

that is awful and selfish of me, but Darling is suffering from Wartime Stress Disorder, and there's really nothing I can do to help. I hated just standing there feeling useless, sharing worried looks with my sister as Darling went on and on, muttering things like 'So what if it's my birthday? We could all be dead tomorrow. I hate this war! Why does it have to be like this? Is it really too late to come to a peaceful resolution? I'm sure not all zebras are bad.' Nopony was enjoying the party.

"According to sis, Darling has been depressed for months now and nothing she does seems to pull her out of it. She was really hoping the birthday party would raise the girl's spirits, but if anything, it seems to have made her even more withdrawn. Sis is at her wit's end. I advised her that it was time to call the Ministry of Peace. Darling needs help that we can't give her."

One of the Arbu ponies trotted up to me, a canteen around her neck. "Would you care for some water?" I realized I was parched and nodded. My PipBuck clicked softly as I levitated the offered canteen close. The mare looked apologetic.

"I'm afraid all we have is dirty water here. The purifier's down again. Been down all week. We've captured as much rainwater as we could, but we're saving that for the children."

I nodded, understanding, and took a small drink. Just enough to be polite and to wet my mouth. Then, remembering that it might be a long time before I had water even this good again, I took a deeper sip. The Goddesses only knew what the water would be like in Canterlot. Velvet Remedy had loaded up on canteens of pure water before we left Tenpony.

"GIT! GIT YER SORRY HIDES OUTTA HERE! Y'ALL AIN'T WANTED HERE!"

I jumped at the voice booming from the loft above what had once been a Custard's Cakes shop.

"Grandpa Rattle, you get back in yer room!" the mare with the canteen shouted back.

"GIT OUT! GIT OUT AND DON'TCHA EVER COME BACK!" the crotchety old buck yelled, levitating a stick and wiggling it in a threatening manner. "I'VE GOT A SHOTGUN!"

He had a stick.

The mare looked abashed. "Please don't mind Grandpa Rattle. His mind's a bit gone."

Above I saw the green mare with the orange mane whom I'd spoken to before appear at the old buck's window and gently but forcibly guide him back into his room. The canteen mare gave me an embarrassed smile as she reclaimed her canteen, and trotted off.

I shook my head, feeling a bit woozy, and looked around for my friends. I glanced towards where Pyrelight was sleeping, perched on an old vendor sign above where the brahmin were tethered. She was glowing softly, mostly healed and sleeping off her injuries. I trotted closer, admiring the subdued majesty of the sleeping phoenix.

I clicked another audio diary entry.

"Today has been the latest chapter in the continuing war between Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe, and I must say, I really don't like where this is headed. Jamocha Joe is threatening to sue Mr. Beans over his latest advertising campaign, which features the assertion that 'all our beans are Equestrian grown'. According to Jamocha, the ads are trying to paint Starbucked as unpatriotic, suggesting that some of their beans might come from zebra lands. I tried to point out that the ads said no such thing, but he wouldn't listen.

"I talked to Mr. Beans about the new ads, and he said (and I quote), 'Hey, I'm not sayin' his beans are zebra beans. I'm just sayin', y'know, do you know where his beans come from? Cuz I don't. But our beans are pure, 100% patriotic pony beans. That's all I'm sayin', okay?'

"Just awesome. Mr. Beans reminded me that winter was almost here and that winter makes or breaks a pony in the coffee business. He needed every edge he could get against Starbucked. I told him that maybe he should instead try to make coffee that didn't taste like it was filtered through something used to wipe a mule's backside.

"'But that's how coffee's s'posed t' taste!' he told me."



Sandy Shore.

That was the name of the black-coated bandit's son. I kept watching him from across one of the picnic tables in the Arbu common lot as I ate from the meaty bowl of stew that the good ponies of Arbu had offered us.

Sandy Shore was lethargic, slow to respond, and very withdrawn. His eyes were red from crying, but he wasn't crying now. He was staring at his stew with very little interest. I empathized. It was an absolutely delicious stew (radigator is good eatin'), but I just didn't have any appetite. I put another spoonful into my mouth, chewed and swallowed mostly from rote memory.

My PipBuck clicked slowly at me. The stew was made with mildly irradiated river water. After the radiation exposure at Gummy's, I wasn't so concerned about the negligible amount I was ingesting from the "dirty" water used in the stew. I was a touch worried about the colt, but I had to imagine he had ingested worse. Often. And at least the water in his glass was pure rainwater.

"So, what's the market here?" I heard Velvet Remedy ask. She and Calamity were chatting amiably with several of the Arbu ponies and the caravan merchant at the next table.

SteelHooves was sitting nearby, keeping watch over Elder Cottage Cheese in his medical pod as the repair spells enchanted into his armor slowly patched up the gaping holes created by Amaranth's anti-tank guns. I'm not sure what SteelHooves planned to do with the Elder now. I didn't think he knew either.

"We're always lookin' fer parts to keep up that damned piece o' shit water purifier," Emerald Fire (the green mare I had met before) told her. "And more RadAway, especially fer when it's broke. Which is like every day that ends in 'y'. Beyond that? Basic supplies. And, by the fucking Goddess, if we could just get some toilet paper!"

By the Goddess? Which one? Or did they actually follow *that* one here?

Velvet Remedy had caught that too. “The Goddess?” she asked politely.

“Yeah, ya know. Unity and all that crap. We’re all going to be together as one, ain’t we?” Emerald Fire’s raised voice brought laughter from nearby picnic tables. Lowering her voice, “We had one o’ her wanderin’ preachers come through a few years back. It was a bad year fer us, so we took some solace in him.”

Velvet Remedy nodded and then redirected the conversation. “So what do you barter with here?”

“Meat,” the milk-colored mare spoke up proudly. “Come from generations of radigator hunters.” She thumped a hoof on her chest. I understood now why she didn’t want us killing the monsters in the hatchery. The giant radigators were their livelihood.

I faded out of the conversation. I was having trouble keeping focus. I looked down at my stew and realized I’d eaten more of it than I thought. My head was throbbing even behind the painkillers.

Sandy Shore had pushed away from the table and was wandering off towards a section of the strip mall which had once been a Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare. Amongst the faded posters and fliers papering its windows, I spotted a grey one with black block letters:

**Remember what Separates
Ponies from Zebras
Not Stripes. Not Cutie Marks.
But What is Inside
*THERE IS GOOD IN ALL OF US!***

No pictures. No Ministry affiliations. It almost looked like it could have been locally made. Embarrassment pushed through my numbness. I hoped Xenith hadn’t seen it. I looked across the lot to where she was eating food of her own cooking. Alone, save for the merchant’s cattle, one of whom had bandages wrapped around its leg courtesy of Velvet Remedy.

"What are the marks on yer flanks?" I heard Calamity ask as I got up from the table and made my way over to Xenith. "They look like brands." There was an odd tone in his voice.

"Yep. It's an Arbu mark," a mare told him proudly. "We get it after we eat the heart of our first kill. Only ponies with an Arbu mark can vote in the town council..."

I settled down next to Xenith, tuning out the conversation the others were in. I was having trouble following it anyway. Probably the concussion. Or maybe it just didn't seem so important. It was hard for such little things to seem important when I kept seeing Sandy Shore hugging his father, crying. Or the mare whose eye had become a horrific black moon-sun thing. Or the unicorn scribe murdered by her own Rangers in some sort of political move I still didn't understand.

I looked at what Xenith was eating. "Please tell me they didn't refuse to offer you food," I said, my hackles rising.

"No," she said simply. "I cooked for the medical pony and myself. Neither of us cares for stew of meat. I just hope I did not offend."

Oh. Oh yeah. That makes sense. "We should be apologizing to you," I replied earnestly.

"Why?"

"Well... because..." I glanced back in the direction of the poster. Maybe she hadn't seen it.

"You did not write that." Dammit, she had. "Nor any of the ponies alive today, here or elsewhere. You should not apologize for what ponies who are not you did long before you were around to stop them."

My head swam a bit, and it took me a moment to realize we weren't just talking about ponies. I nodded, understanding. "None of us would blame you for what happened in the war." I paused, realizing that wasn't correct. "Well, SteelHooves would, but I think even he is coming around." My thoughts returned to the poster. "They could have at least painted it over though."

"They are hunting their prey to extinction," Xenith informed me. "Soon there will be no more meat to barter with. I do not begrudge them for not spending what little they have on such luxuries as paint."

I thought of the number of radigators we had seen at the hatchery. When I had been thinking we might have to fight them, there had been a lot. But when viewed as both food and trading supplies, there were hardly any. I hoped the river held significantly more and found myself wondering what a "bad year" amounted to here in Arbu.

My brain seemed to slip. I felt like I had lost a bit of time. Back at the tables, I heard Calamity asking where the new graves were. I felt a sudden urge to pay my respects to the bandit I had killed, no matter how ludicrous or meaningless the act would be.

"Oh we ain't buried them yet," an Arbu buck replied. "Ground's too muddy. Got the bodies locked up in the clinic cellar fer now."

Emerald Fire shot a dark look at the buck. Calamity nodded. Velvet Remedy coughed with alarm, "Hey, isn't that where Sandy Shore was headed?"

"Don't worry, miss. Got the cellar locked up tight. No pony's gonna get in there without the key."

Yeah. Because apparently the only pony in the entire wasteland who can pick a lock is me. No, wait, there is at least one other. Probably part of the Fillydephia Steel Rangers. Or maybe somepony who works for Red Eye.

I stopped, suddenly suspicious that my lockpicking rival must be Red Eye himself. I had no facts to base such an assumption on, but it felt right. The sense of duality was too perfect.

The certainty slipped from my wounded mind almost as quickly as it manifested. I found myself staring at a puddle and not knowing how long I had been doing so. I looked up swiftly enough for my head to pound. But everypony was where they were when I last saw them. Except Sandy, who was sitting morosely in the corner between the

clinic and a dark vertical wall-sign for Starbucked, the coffee shop that wasn't Java's Cup.

As the first rays of sunset dipped below the cloud cover, the wall sign suddenly lit up, bucked on by some ancient timer miraculously still running. Other lights flickered on, about a third of them still functional, illuminating the mall in patchwork pools of light. My eyes caught on the sign and lingered there: an image of two very attractive mares -- twins, one with a cream-colored mane and a coffee-brown coat, the other with the same brown for her mane and a creamy coat -- who were entwined around each other almost as much as their tails were entwined around a cup of steaming coffee with the Starbucked logo, all backlit by lights that flickered and threatened to go out.

My mind supplied a logo for them: "Buy our coffee and we'll let you watch us make out."

"What was that?" Xenith asked. I flushed with embarrassment as I realized I'd said that out loud.

"Um... nothing. Just looking." I winced and quickly clarified, "At the coffee shop over there."

Xenith followed my gaze. "Are they bucking the stars, or are the stars bucking them?"

"I think they're bucking each other," I replied before I realized she wasn't paying attention to the lesbincestuous mares. I thought about turning to see her expression, but my eyes didn't want to leave the sign.

"Are you all right, little one?"

"Concussion," I answered. Then, in a transition that only made sense to me at the time, "Velvet Remedy talks to brahmin now."

"Ayep. She's a real kind pony, that one," one of the brahmin responded. "Polite too."

I began to nod. "Yes, she really... hubazawha?!" I jumped up, stumbling backwards over Xenith, and fell on my tail.

The brahmin's right head smiled at me while the left one continued chewing its cud obliviously.

"Y-you can talk?" I stammered, then flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know brahmin were... well..."

"Smart?" the brahmin head asked as I picked myself up, looking at Xenith apologetically. The zebra just shook her head.

"um... yeah," I admitted, feeling foalish.

She chortled. "Not many pony folk even try t' talk t' us. Not that I blame ya. Most of us are dumb as posts. Ain't that right, Herbert?" she said, looking at her other head.

The other head kept chewing. I looked to Xenith, but she was just watching me with amusement.

"Yeah, Ah don't really get any good conversation from him," she said dourly.

"You... um... I..." I felt stupid. "Sorry. Concussion. Brain no work-y. um... I'm Littlepip."

"Well howdy there, Littlepip. Ah'm Bess. And this is muh other half, Bob."

"Bob?" I asked, wondering how one head could be male and the other female. I looked Bess over. She sported several bandages including a bandaged leg in a medical brace courtesy of Velvet Remedy. Definitely a female brahmin, judging by her bulging udder. Although I couldn't recall if I'd seen any male brahmin. Not that I had been paying enough attention to notice if I had.

"Ayep. Bob," the brahmin told me. "I jus' call him Herbert t' get on his nerves."

"Oh." From the looks of Bob, nothing much could get on his nerves. I didn't think Bob was even aware that a conversation was going on.

"Most brahmin got two heads but only half a brain between 'em. I'm one of the lucky ones," Bess claimed. "If you c'n count being saddled

for life with Bob here lucky. Anyhoo, tell that mare friend of yours thanks again for patchin' up muh leg. Did a real fine job, she did. Polite too."



"A mare from the Ministry of Peace took Darling away yesterday. Apparently, she's being held at a WSD treatment facility in Manehattan. I've picked up a renewable one-month pass on the Luna Line so that I can visit her regularly.

"Had our first snow today. Winter brings its own set of problems to the mall. Now I'm in charge of shoveling snow from the sidewalks and rooftops, keeping the lot salted so nopony has an accident. Business is picking up for the coffee shops, but most of the other stores are suffering the normal drop in customers. Only the regulars are up to braving the snow.

"Caught a couple hoodlums spray-painting disparaging things about Princess Luna on the backside of Sunny Suds. One of the delinquents tried claiming WSD as a defense for his actions. That pissed me right off. Having a family member who is really suffering, I'm sick of seeing ponies use WSD as an excuse for what's really just bad behavior. Then the other little bastard turned his spray can towards me and I finally got a chance to use this cattle prod. He was still shaking when the police ponies arrived.

"Spent the afternoon giving statements. Mrs. Weather's damned poodle peed on my leg while I was talking to the officer. I really wanted to club that little monster with the prod as well."

As the audio log ended, I trotted slowly over to the table where Velvet Remedy and Calamity were still chatting with the Arbu ponies. The merchant had finished eating and was rolling out a sleeping bag just inside the shattered storefront of what had been a comic book shop (sandwiched between Sunny Suds and Custard's Cakes). I could see another *Sword Mares* poster on the wall above rows of empty shelves.

"This is the fifth time this year that the damn water purifier has burned out. Honestly, Ah think the little bastard is simply beyond hope. We keep fixin' her up and jury-riggin' her together, but there's only so

much we c'n expect," Emerald Fire was telling Calamity. "Once its gone, Ah don't know what we'll do. We've tried negotiating with the Steel Rangers for access to their water talisman, but all they do is shoot at us."

I came to a halt, blinking. "Wait..." I looked up at the dark silhouette of Bucklyn Cross, scattered lights illuminating small bits of the shadowed pier that towered out of the water just downstream of Arbu. Turning to SteelHooves, I asked, "That bit of bridge had a water talisman built into it?"

"No," SteelHooves replied with a slightly derisive tone. "But Elder Cottage Cheese brought several back with him from his raid on the Ministry of Peace hospital out near Friendship City."

"Friendsh..." I paused, "Hold on... *several*?"

"Yes. Even then, I think he was planning ahead."

"DAMMIT!" Grandpa Rattle screamed out from his loft. "YOU FUCKERS STILL HERE? GIT OUT O' ARBU BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Emerald Fire facehoofed. "Will somepony shut him up?" A couple of ponies, including the one-eyed, milk-colored pony, scooted off.

"I'VE GOT A SHOTGUN!"

I ignored him, turning to Emerald Fire. "They have several water talismans in there, and they won't give you clean water?" My mental haze was fading, sharpening into deadly focus.

The green pony (with a cute little flame for a cutie mark above her Arbu brand) nodded. "We don't have much. Radigators have been gettin' scarce. But we're willin' t' trade what we've got for good water."

I felt a simmering anger. "Why should you have to? It's water! You need it to live."

SteelHooves bristled. Calamity jumped up. "Whoa there, Li'l pip." He neighed as he flew over to me, "Nothin' wrong with sellin' necessities

iffin that's whatcha got t' sell." He whispering hastily, "Do remember these folk make a livin' sellin' meat."

SteelHooves nickered under his breath. "Applejack sold apples. Got a problem with that?"

I stopped, checking myself. In the Stable, the needs of life were provided by the Stable. Basic food, water, a place to stay, even barding. Work was assigned too, according to our special talent. We paid only for luxuries, either from the allowance that the Overmare assigned, or from the gains of profitable hobbies. That worked for Stable Two, but it was not the way of the Equestrian Wasteland. Still, I couldn't help but feel angry at the Steel Rangers' refusal.

"That's different," I insisted finally. "You're talking about ponies who work for what they sell. The ponies here risk life and limb hunting. Even gardeners toil to grow their vegetables. But the Steel Rangers... this is a water talisman. It provides water freely. They didn't even create it. They stole it!"

"Scavenged," Calamity correctly curtly.

"Fine. Scavenged. So they worked to get it too. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't share!" My voice was rising. Unbidden, a stupid song started playing in the back of my head. *You gotta share. You gotta care. It's the right thing to do!* I hated the song, but at the same time it struck me as impossibly sage.

Sandy Shore's glass had been filled with pure rainwater. But what would happen when the rainwater ran out and the water purifier still refused to function? I killed the poor colt's father. The least I could do was make sure the water he was drinking wasn't fucking poison. I owed him that much. I owed him a whole hell of a lot more.

"Littlepip," Velvet Remedy asked cautiously. "What are you thinking?"

"Load up Elder Cottage Cheese," I barked to SteelHooves. If I was the leader here, then I was damn well going to lead. "We're heading to Bucklyn Cross. But this time, we're not giving their Elder back for free. We're bartering."

SteelHooves neighed. "Judging from what happened this afternoon, what makes you think they even want their Elder back?" He walked towards me. "I've been thinking about this all evening, Littlepip, and I am convinced they were hoping he would die at our hooves. Or, at least, that they could claim so with little opposition. Dead, he is a martyr for their cause. Alive, he's the Elder who keeps sending Steel Rangers to their deaths in the Canterlot Ruins and whose leadership led to the crippling of the Manehattan contingent in his efforts to take Stable Two and Stable Twenty-Nine."

I stared back at him, taking that in. "Think they'll attack us again?"

"Probably."

"Good," I hissed.

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy gasped.

I turned to her, "I didn't start this. But I'm itching to end it. One way or another, we're coming back from Bucklyn Cross with a water talisman." I scowled. "No, make that two. We're getting one for Stable Twenty-Nine too."

Calamity shook his head. "Li'lpip, think this through. Do that, ya sign Arbu's death warrant." I stepped back, stunned by his words. "Right now, they're nothin' t' the Steel Rangers. Give 'em a water talisman, an' you give 'em somethin' the Steel Rangers want. An' you know the way they'll come t' take it."

I grimaced, thinking of the Steel Rangers' attack on Stable Two. "Oh, I have. Not. Forgotten."

Velvet Remedy cringed, her voice soft and still slightly raspy, "Littlepip... I know where this comes from. There is part of my heart that wants revenge on them too. But this isn't right."

"No," I stomped. "I think it is. And I think it's about damned time." I looked over my friends. They were eyeing me with concern. Maybe even fear. "I understand if you don't want to come with me on this one. I won't think less of you."

Xenith had held her tongue as she had done for years. Still saying nothing, she trotted to my side. Calamity shook himself, spreading his wings. "Ah ain't sayin' Ah don't wanna go. Ah'm just sayin' we do it smart. Friendship City ain't too far from here. We take the first water talisman there and Velvet Remedy talks 'em into a trade that includes water rights fer the Arbu ponies."

I nodded. Calamity's plan was much more sound than mine. "So you're in?"

"Hells yeah," Calamity grinned. "Y'think Ah'd pass up a chance fer an adventure with ya? After all muh whinin' 'bout bein' left behind?"

Velvet Remedy facehoofed. "Somepony should stay here with Pyrelight..." she began. Then sighed. "But you ponies are going to get yourselves killed without me." She looked to me sternly, "But I don't like this. And I'm going to do the negotiations. I don't think any of you are diplomatically inclined towards the Steel Rangers right now."

"Are you?" Calamity asked her.

"No," Velvet admitted. "But unlike most of you, I can fake it."



"Spent time with sis today filling out applications for a place in one of the Stable-Tec war shelters. The non-refundable deposit took most of my paycheck, but it will be worth it just to take one worry off of my sister's head. Ever since Darling was taken, she's been slipping from me. I think she's been drinking, although I can never smell it on her breath when I'm over.

"I've been to visit Darling twice this month. She is definitely looking better and has some of her cheer back. Whatever the Ministry of Peace is doing to treat her, it seems to be working. She's almost like her old self now. Only thing I've noticed that seems a bit off is that she seems to have forgotten things. I asked her about her birthday party and she got strangely quiet, then told me she doesn't remember having one this year. The mare I spoke to at the hospital says that temporary memory loss is a side effect of her therapy.

"Honestly, it was just so good to see Darling smile again that I was fine with that.

"Saw one of those little hoodlums that I caught spray-painting a couple months ago. He was dressed up fine, mane combed, looking presentable. He stopped on the street to thank me for helping put him on the right path. I was so stunned I told him it was my pleasure. Asked him how that other buck was doing, and he looked away, saying something about trying not to think about bad influences.

"Things at the strip mall have been interesting. Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe have stepped up their advertising war. I fully expected to get an earful from Mr. Beans last week when Jamocha erected (no pun intended) that huge "hot and steamy" Starbucked sign with the twins Espresso and Latte laying all over each other surrounded by steaming cups of Starbucked. But he seemed almost cheerful about it.

"Found out why yesterday when the new Java's Cup sign went up. Not as much sex appeal, but the billboard was huge! Easily twenty-percent larger than the Starbucked billboard. And the whole thing is done in patriotic colors with an image of Princess Luna in the corner endorsing it as 'The best thing to keep you up all night!' I have to wonder if he had permission to use her image like that.

"Jamocha Joe spent most of today trying to persuade me that the Java's Cup billboard was too big, against regulations, and a hazard come the next windstorm. I told him to file his complaints with the zoning office."

The sun was setting as the *Sky Bandit* flew towards the black form of Bucklyn Cross.

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity shouted, pulling up sharply as half a dozen automated turrets turned our way. Velvet Remedy threw her shield around him as the guns opened fire. Bullets and lances of colored light filled the air around us.

I focused, my horn glowing, as Velvet Remedy cast her disintegration ward over us. The light of my magic flickered around each turret on Bucklyn Cross -- not just the ones shooting at us, but *all* of them. For good measure, I extended my spell over the sentinel robot I could make out on the bridge.

Calamity danced in the air, trying to keep the *Sky Bandit* from taking more than a few minor hits by putting himself between the guns and us. The shield around him was taking so many bullets it looked like a sparkler.

I focused harder, working as fast as I could. I knew I could do this; I'd effectively done it before. Just yesterday I crawled under the *Sky Bandit* and swapped out the spark batteries. I had the technical expertise. This was easy... but it was taking longer than I wanted.

Calamity's shield went down, a stream of bullets tearing through it and slashing across his side. Flesh wounds, little more than scratches, but over a dozen of them. He yowled. We suddenly dropped several yards as he briefly forgot to keep flying. Calamity spread his wings and caught air again as Velvet Remedy threw up another shield as quickly as she could.

All the turrets shut down simultaneously. I had unscrewed their maintenance plates and pulled their spark batteries. They were dead. The sentinel robot as well.

I scowled, floating several dozen spark batteries back to the *Sky Bandit*. I was going to give the Steel Rangers every chance to do the right thing. But if the exchange earlier today was strike one, then this was strike two.

Calamity lifted us back up and flew in for a landing.



"Responses came back from Stable-Tec today. Sis found them in the mail. She was weeping over them when I got home from work. I've been accepted. She has not.

"I've been given a special broadcaster. When the call comes, I'm to make my way to Stable Thirty-Four. The broadcaster will be my proof of acceptance according to the letter, which warned me not to lose it. I offered to give my sister the broadcaster and thus my place in Stable Thirty-Four. But she refused. She says she should be out here anyway. If the warning comes, she'll try to make it to Darling.

"I spent most of the evening pleading with her as she drank herself into a stupor. The rest I spent crying and trying to convince myself that it doesn't matter anyway. The Stables will never be used, after all. There's no way the zebras would dare use weaponized megaspells. It would mean their destruction as surely as ours. I have to believe that.

"It's bad when work has become the high point of my day. But I'm not sure how long that will last. Java's Cup is still losing a lot of business to Starbucked, and Mr. Beans is getting desperate. Today, Mr. Beans added a new vending machine to his coffee shop, an Ironshod's Ammo Emporium vendor. Now you can buy your caffeine and your bullets in one easy stop.

"No good can come of this."

As we landed, Velvet Remedy tossed up a shield in front of the *Sky Bandit*, molding it between the ruins of several chariots and then stepped out.

Several Steel Rangers came charging towards us. A rocket whisked out of one of their battle saddles, impacting on the shield, which immediately collapsed in a stark reminder of the limitations of our unicorn's magical power.

"Greetings, Steel Rangers!" Velvet said, magnifying her voice magically. **"We come in peace to negotiate the safe return of your esteemed Elder."**

I was willing to forgive the missile. But if they shot at her after her greeting, that would be strike three.

The Steel Rangers slowed to a brisk trot. They were not firing. At least, not yet.

"Bucklyn Cross is the property of the Steel Rangers," one of them called out, her own voice magnified by the armor she wore. "Leave at once. Any negotiations will commence afterwards."

"I know what this place is, Knight Riverseed," SteelHooves announced, stepping out of the *Sky Bandit* and striding up to Velvet Remedy's side. "And you would do well to mind your place. You are in the presence of two Elders, one of whom is speaking to you."

“St-star Paladin SteelHooves?” the knight mare asked, clearly recognizing SteelHooves’ unique voice. She stammered, trotting in place a moment. “W-we d-don’t recognize your authority anymore. You’re a traitor.”

“No, I am a loyalist to the Ministry Mare and the true purpose of the Rangers,” SteelHooves told her flatly. “And you are a wet-behind-the-ears knight barely graduated from initiate, Knight Riverseed. Send out the pony in charge here!”

“um... That would be me, sir.”

SteelHooves stood silent. Then, calmly, “You’re kidding.” The Steel Rangers stared back at us, three more joining the three already facing us. I spotted two more stepping out of doorways high on the stone arches above, taking sniper positions. SteelHooves’ voice couldn’t hide his disbelief. “You’re kidding, right?”

“N-no sir,” Knight Riverseed said, shifting hesitantly into a battle stance. “And I’m afraid I h-h-have to ask you t-to leave.”

“I can see you are afraid, Knight Riverseed,” SteelHooves replied. “We have come bringing Elder Cottage Cheese, whom we will return to you in exchange for two of the water talismans stored here in Bucklyn Cross. After that, we will leave. Not before.”

Velvet Remedy was looking uncomfortable. Clearly, her intention to be the negotiator had gone up in smoke. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle and slipped out the sniper rifle, targeting the two ponies in sniper positions. Even with my skill and targeting spell, it would be a tricky shot to hit either of them. But even if I missed, I could at least pin them down.

The Steel Rangers looked as taken aback as they could considering they were completely concealed behind metal armor. “I-I’m sorry... what was that?”

“After the disgraceful actions of Paladin Amaranth at the previous exchange, you are lucky we are asking so low a price for the return of

your Elder,” SteelHooves informed her flatly. “Whom your own ponies shot at, so be careful whom you call a traitor.”

Knight Riverseed hesitated once more, then took a step forward. “We can’t comply with those demands and you know it. Request denied. Now get off our citadel!” The two light machineguns on her armor’s built-in battle saddle clicked as they reloaded, pointing threateningly at us. But my E.F.S. was not registering her as hostile. It was a bluff.

“Are you really going to attack an Elder with two hundred years combat experience, backed by a team of wasteland heroes who have defeated a dragon?” SteelHooves asked warningly. “You. Can’t. Win.”

“I can’t give you one water talisman, much less two,” she spat back. “Your offer is absurd. And you are trespassing!”

This sounded like it was going downhill, but nopony was red on my E.F.S. compass yet. We could still talk this out. I was beginning to really hope we could. I hadn’t realized how badly the losses at Stable Two and Twenty-Nine had depleted the Manehattan contingent of the Steel Rangers. The battle earlier today must have taken out their remaining hierarchy. All that were left were the knights left behind to guard the fort and probably a hoof-full of scribes.

These weren’t the ponies who attacked Stable Two. They weren’t the ponies who attacked us earlier either. They weren’t even the ones responsible for refusing water to the civilians of Arbu.

POW!

One of the snipers fired at SteelHooves. The knight wasn’t even red on my compass. I think it was an accident. The bullet ricocheted off the ghoul’s magically-powered armor and struck Velvet Remedy. She fell with a yelp, bleeding out of a hole in her flank, her blood running down over her nightingale cutie mark.

Everything went to hell.



“Stop shooting at us!” I yelled. “Surrender!”

The two unicorn scribes were clearly panicked. With all the alarms and the explosions outside, I wasn't surprised. One of them cast a blinding spell that filled the stairwell with strobing lights. I closed my eyes tight and fired blindly with the poisoned dart gun, not wanting to kill these ponies. Unfortunately, they weren't showing the same restraint.

A crackle of lightning cut the air, making my coat hairs all stand on end and filling the stairwell with the smell of ozone. I backed up the stairwell, pressing against the wall, nearly tripping on the steps. One of the unicorns had combat spells. I fired again, hoping that if I couldn't hit them, I could at least keep them from getting any closer.

The two water talismans we had come to procure dangled from my horn on chains. They were amazingly small things, no bigger than a particularly gaudy necklace. They radiated a cool power from the large sapphires in the center of their golden latticework, but were otherwise almost unremarkable. I had braved the internal rooms of the pier and picked one of the hardest locks I had ever come across in order to get them. But my relatively stealthy entrance was obliterated when the alarms went off.

I felt a cold breeze and could clearly hear the sound of SteelHooves' grenade machinegun as he battled knights with a fraction of the skill but just as much ridiculous firepower. When I dodged into the interior of Bucklyn Cross, Calamity had been swerving through the air, dealing with the two remaining sentinel tanks, the ones I'd missed.

Another bolt of electricity lashed out, this one hitting me square in my breast. My body locked up in intense pain. My magic imploded and the dart gun went tumbling down the stairs. I teetered, gasping, and fell back through the window.

Freefall, just for a fraction of a second but long enough for the pony in my head to be convinced that I was falling to my death. Then I hit the metal girder. I opened my eyes, blinking, my vision still swimming with foreign colors and shapes from the blinding strobe spell. I was laying on one of the understruts that had formed a latticework beneath the Bucklyn bridge, looking up at the underside of street.

A cold wind blew across me, carrying the first drops of another rainstorm. I turned my head and immediately regretted it. It was a long way down!

Okay. Being very, very still. Just float myself back into the window, I told myself. Not a problem.

The two unicorn scribes appeared at the window above me, their horns glowing. Motes of magical energy formed around one of them, forming into eldritch daggers.

I whipped out Little Macintosh, slipping into S.A.T.S. and fired twice.



Calamity flapped his wings and the *Sky Bandit* lifted away from Bucklyn Cross. The rest of us huddled in the *Sky Bandit*, which was now considerably more riddled with bullet holes. Next stop, Calamity insisted, we would start putting on armor. While we still had much of a passenger wagon left.

Xenith was tending to Velvet Remedy, who was breathing heavily as she slept. The bullet had lodged inside her flank, and Velvet had spent the battle digging it out while Xenith applied healing potions and zebra poultices as needed. Velvet would be okay, but she had lost a fair bit of blood and needed to rest.

In the end, only two of the Bucklyn Cross ponies surrendered. We let them go in one of the Cross's boats. I watched them as the crane lowered them, shuddering under waves of deep hurt at how very few ponies were in that boat.

We had stripped the fallen knights, scribes and initiates -- fourteen in all -- and built a funeral pyre. They deserved that much. I wondered if the Outcasts would claim Bucklyn Cross for their own now. We would take our two water talismans to Friendship City and Stable Twenty-Nine. But first we needed to rest. Arbu had offered us sanctuary and I was eager to take them up on it.

The light from the pyre danced into the sky. As if summoned, a streak of green and gold appeared, whirling and pirouetting amongst the flames.

I played the final audio log that I had been able to recover as we flew through the darkness.

"I woke up in the hospital this afternoon. Apparently, I've been in and out of surgery for two days. Fortunately, the company is paying for most of the costs, seeing as I was injured on the job. I'd gotten a frantic call from Mrs. Weather who was screaming about murder. I rushed to the mall as fast as I could, telling her to send a terminal message to the police.

"We had had a doozy of a storm the night before. And when I got there, Sunny Suds' Laundromat was a complete disaster. Turns out Jamocha Joe was right about that fucking huge-ass billboard of Mr. Beans. Damn thing came crashing down this morning, a good three hours after the storm had passed, tearing through Sunny Suds' roof. The 'murder' victim, turns out, was Mrs. Weather's fucking poodle. She was screaming and hollering at Mr. Beans, so red-faced I thought she would explode, claiming that he murdered her poor little walking piss-dispenser. Like he was the one who left her damn dog in the laundromat while she popped out for a cake. I can't say I didn't laugh.

"I didn't even see the batty old unicorn produce the firearm. I still don't know whether she was actually trying to shoot me, or if the bullet was meant for Mr. Beans and her aim is just that bad. I'm told the police have her in custody.

"While I was in surgery, my Stable-Tec broadcaster went off. I missed the call, but that's okay. According to the message, this is just some sort of test run, like those fire drills they used to make us do in school. I've decided not to mention it to my sister. She's already too much of a mess.

"Sis is here, looking more depressed and anxious than ever. I don't think she's been sleeping. I told her the doctors all say I will be fine, I'll be up and about, good as new, by the end of the week, but I don't think she was really listening. I've been shot, and that's all she seemed to be able to focus on.

"Well, that and the other thing. Apparently, while I was in surgery, ponies from the Ministry of Morale paid her a visit. According to Sis, they were asking all sorts of questions about Darling. Weird things, like what she'd said at her birthday party and about her internship last year with Four Stars. Sis was freaking out. I think... I think she's losing it.

"I've seen this sort of thing before. As much as I hate it, I think it's time to call the Ministry of Peace. They're the only ones who seem to be able to deal with Wartime Stress Disorder."



"Where is everypony?" I asked, trotting out of the *Sky Bandit*. "Hello?"

"It is late," Xenith intoned. "They are likely all asleep."

I nodded. Night had fallen during our battle on Bucklyn Cross. I looked about. All the stores were closed up, but there was light pouring between the boards covering the windows of Starbucked. I contemplated heading there, but decided that I didn't want to break into anypony's home. Instead, I made for the comic shop with its collapsed front wall. I could hear the snores of the merchant, but I was so weary and emotionally exhausted that I could sleep through a firefight.

I was not a good pony. I wanted to be a good pony. I tried to be a good pony. But today... today...

"Hey!" a voice hissed at me from the darkness. I turned to see Grandpa Rattle huddled in the shadows. I looked for any sign of a shotgun, and by that I meant a stick. Instead, I noticed the red marks above his hindhooves. I knew such marks well. They meant he'd been shackled. And recently. My eyebrows raised in alarm.

"Shussh. They don't know this old man c'n still pick a lock," he told me, astutely judging not only what I had seen but what I had made of it. "You and yer friends wanna high-tail it on outta Arbu. This is a no-good place."

I blinked. “Wh-what do you mean? They seem perfectly nice to me.”

“Take a look in the basement, iff’n ya don’t believe me. But don’t say I ain’t warned ya.”

The basement? In the Qwik-Kare. Where they kept the bodies they were going to bury tomorrow. I had a sudden, dreadful, sinking feeling in my heart.

Grandpa Rattle looked about nervously. “Y’all git. Hear me. Git!” Then he shambled back into the shadows. I considered following him, then turned and galloped silently for Helpinghoof.



There were three ponies in Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare. They were chatting around bowls of stew, cigarette butts and a game that involved black chits with white dots. They looked like a family, one of them a mare hardly older than a filly, just barely old enough to have her cutie mark. And, I noted, her Arbu mark. They also looked like guards. Either way, they never saw me pass.

The lock on the basement door was a surprisingly expensive one for a struggling town like this. Not that I didn’t figure they could have scavenged it from somewhere, but I would expect such a valuable would have been sold during their last “bad year”. It was still the easiest lock I had picked that evening.

The smell hit me immediately, followed by the sound of flies. But then, I was expecting to find bodies. I closed the door behind me without a sound and descended the steps cautiously, turning on my PipBuck light. The two water talismans clinked together softly, still hanging from my horn. One of them I had procured for this town, risking my life and the lives of my friends. Killing ponies I didn’t want to kill. Self-defense didn’t make them any less dead.

Clink. Clink.

The basement was an abattoir. Blood both new and very old stained the tile floor in splatters and streaks, running towards the drain embedded

in the center. Bodies of ponies lay on the tables, carved not just open but apart. Skinned and flayed, the meat removed. I recognized the dead from Arbu and the bandits alike. The remains of more ponies were piled in barrels in a corner.

Beside the barrels were the refrigerators. They were lined up like soldiers wearing uniforms of discolored white except where they were stained with blood. Trembling, I approached one of them, my skin crawling as I stepped onto the sticky, wet floor. I reached out telekinetically to open the first refrigerator, feeling a sick terror at touching it even with my magic. It was locked.

So were the others. That didn't stop me.

I unlocked the first one and braced myself. I swung the door open. I saw the meat.

I turned, reeling. My gaze caught a pony skull hung on the wall next to the stairs where I couldn't see it before. The skull was mounted on a plaque. Beneath it, somepony had soldered the word UNITY.

We're all going to be together as one, ain't we? It was a bad year fer us, so we took some solace in him.

They ate him, I realized, my mind teetering on the darkest edge of night. They killed the preacher and they *ate* him.

Clink. Clink.

The black stallion who had been Sandy Shore's father lay on one of those tables. His ribs were cracked open. They'd cut out his heart.

It's an Arbu mark. We get it after we eat the heart of our first kill.

But I killed the colt's father. And I certainly wasn't going to...

Oh Goddesses...

I felt suddenly and violently ill. I stumbled against the wall, retching, trying to purge myself of every last bit of the evening's meal. My head began to pound again. I felt dizzy. My concussion.

And I'd *killed* for these ponies...

I shuddered and vomited again. Then spit repeatedly, trying to clear the taste from my mouth. I wanted to wash my mouth out with Rad-Away.

The water talismans knocked together. Clink.

The feeling of illness passed, leaving me just feeling violent.



“You’re *cannibals!?*” I shouted as I burst back into the Qwik-Kare, telekinetically lifting all three ponies and choking them. “*What the FUCK is WRONG with you! The wasteland isn’t fucked up enough!?*”

The mother of the family, the same apricot unicorn mare who had been collecting the bodies, levitated a knife from the table. I knocked it away with my own magic.

“*You fed the colt HIS OWN FATHER, you sick monsters!?*” I raged, seeing nothing but red. The youngest mare was passing out. The other two struggled, the father trying to buck at me even through I was across the room. He only succeeded in kicking over the table, spilling black chits and pony stew all over the floor. There was a rifle holstered on the underside of the table. The apricot mare focused, turning the whole table to fire at me.

Bang!

I felt the bullet impact my armor, bruising badly as it failed to penetrate. It hurt, but I didn’t let myself even wince.

“Where. Is. The. COLT?” I growled. I needed to find him. To save him from this place. Him and anypony else here who could still be saved. As for the rest...

The father weakly pointed towards Starbucked. “Thank you,” I hissed as I pulled the zebra rifle.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I dropped their burning bodies and trotted out the door.

A pony stumbled towards me from the darkness. I swung the zebra rifle around but stopped as I recognized the merchant.

"I heard a shot?" the merchant pony said, looking worried. "Are the bandits back?"

I studied the pony a moment before asking, my voice dangerous and low, "Did you know?"

The merchant froze, reassessing the situation. "Know... what?"

"That Arbu is full of cannibals. That the meat they are selling you is *pony meat*. Did. You. Know?"

The merchant pony blanched, looking immediately ill. The pony swayed, fighting to stay on all four hooves. That was answer enough.

"Go look in the basement," I said, pointing back the way I came. "Mind the bodies and the fire. Then go tell everypony you meet."

I turned towards Starbucked where light still poured out behind the boarded-up windows. I could hear my friends galloping towards me but I ignored them. Instead, I marched towards the door of the coffee shop.

The righteous fury of hell followed behind me.



"DJ Pon3 here, and I've got to tell you, I don't know what to make of this one, children.

"For weeks I've been telling you of the heroic deeds of the Stable Dweller, our Heroine in of the Equestrian Wasteland, our Bringer of Light in this time of darkness. But today...

"Another village in Manehattan has gone silent. Arbu is dead. Reports have reached me that every pony in the town, over two dozen, have been killed. And listen children, I don't know how to say this... but...

"But it looks like it was the Stable Dweller who was responsible. A witness from Bucklyn Cross reported seeing her opening fire on ponies in the Arbu commons.

“Now children... I don’t want to believe this. I don’t want to believe our heroine has turned on us. There must be more to this story than what I’m hearing. If you know anything about it, please contact my assistant Homage at Tenpony Tower. Anything at all...”

“I don’t know exactly what went down or why. But I’m not going to stop until I find out. And when I do, you’ll know too.”

“This is DJ Pon3. Bringing you the truth. No matter how bad it hurts.”

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



COLD DAWN LIGHT

“I heard something about a town south of here being attacked, but details are sketchy. All I know is there haven't been any refugees showing up here. Which means either the attack wasn't too bad, or it was very, very bad.”

“Heroes...”

“We all need heroes, children. Now more than ever. It's a good fight that they're fighting, and they're doing it on behalf of all of us. But the Equestrian Wasteland is hard on heroes. No... it's brutal to them. It beats them down. It tears them apart. Eventually, every hero falls. Inevitably, every hero fails.

“Now listen close children. Heroes ain't machines from some Equestrian Robotics factory. Heroes are ponies, just like us. Doing the things that we should be doing because there ain't nopony else doing them. The true mark of a hero is not that they never fail, never fall down. I've said it a hundred times and I'll say it again: the one great truth of the wasteland is that every pony has done something they regret.

“No, you know a true hero by what they do after they fall. By the way they pick themselves back up again, shake themselves off, and throw themselves

back into that good fight. Despite what they done, and despite the bleak prospects of a happy ending.

"Sad truth is most heroes don't survive. Or they become overwhelmed by the cruelty and despair and, disheartened, they give up.

"But in the Stable Dweller, the Bringer of Light, I've seen a hero of an entirely new tier. I was convinced... still am... that this heroine will never surrender to the wasteland, never give up.

"There is, however, one other fate that may befall heroes. When the horrors and the pain of the Equestrian Wasteland become too much for them, they can snap. They can turn into the very monsters they choose to fight. Sadly, children, it can happen to the very best of ponies. Even Fluttershy had her Gardens of Canterlot.

"Now we don't know if that's what happened to our Heroine of the Wasteland. Or if there's more to this story than we've been told. We just. Don't. Know. But I can tell you this:

"The pony who first reported the slaughter at Arbu was from Bucklyn Cross. Now that's a Steel Rangers stronghold, and I got my reasons to take a critical eye to what they have to say. So I've started doing some digging. And I started that digging by trying to contact a gal I know at Bucklyn Cross, Riverseed. A trustworthy pony.

"Turns out she ain't there anymore. No pony is. Bucklyn Cross, where our witness of the Arbu massacre claimed t' be from, is dead. Completely wiped out.

"Now children, I know this looks bad. Two communities in the vicinity of our Heroine wiped out. I'm still holdling onto hope, but I'd be remiss if I didn't send out a word of warning. Just on the chance that the Equestrian Wasteland's facing a whole new kind of dark.

"So if you see a band of well armed ponies, including a pegasus and a zebra, headed your way. Or a pegasus-pulled passenger wagon flying nearby... until we know better, maybe you best be someplace else.

"But if the Stable Dweller should come to your door, don't lock it. Because if our hopes are true, then she's more in need of our help and our support

right now than ever before. And if our fears are true, then... well, children... she just might see that locked door as a challenge."



"...How bad?" Calamity demanded, his snout pushed up against Grandpa Rattle as if the two bucks were going to kiss. "Ah need t' know. Cuz Ah'm tryin' real hard here t' make this make sense, an' it ain't happenin'. Ah love Li'lpip, and Ah want this t' be right somehow. But all Ah'm seein' is a group o' good folk who took us in, fed us, offered us shelter, and got slaughtered fer their kindness."

I just wiped out a town. A whole town. I just killed... murdered... so many ponies.

My rage had burned itself out, leaving me an empty husk. I wasn't sad or angry. If anything, I just felt hollow. And slightly confused.

The events of the last... how long did it take? An hour? Less? I couldn't remember. My thoughts and memories were all jumbled and refused to straighten out. My comprehension of what I had done was as much from the evidence in front of me as from my fragmented recollection of my own actions.

"They were cannibals," SteelHooves stated, not for the first time. "You saw it yourself."

The basement! Go! See for yourselves!

That's what I had told them. My friends had caught up to me just after I stepped into Starbucked. But not before I started shooting. The colt was in there, Sandy Shore, I remembered that now. They were at a dinner table. Eating. Again. The bastards had already fed the boy his own father, and it wasn't enough for them.

I remembered the fire pit. Hot coals and flame and the rod of iron with the twisted ending that took the shaped of the Arbu brand, glowing. In my rage, I assumed they were going to brand him. But in the wake of things, that didn't make much sense. And, I think, one of the other ponies there had been in the firefight against the bandits this morning.

I remembered that Calamity had been shocked and concerned as he watched me open fire. Velvet had been nearly hysterical. *The basement!* I had shouted. *Go! See for yourselves!*

"Ain't ponies here left worth savin', boy," Grandpa Rattle told Calamity. "'Cept fer the kids. Anypony worth bein' called a pony left this town years 'go. Found *other* ways of surviving."

"Yer still here!" Calamity pointed out harshly.

"Somepony had to stay fer the little ones," the elderly buck replied. "And to warn folk away."

Calamity looked like he wanted to argue that, but Grandpa Rattle continued, "Every other pony here was a willin' party t' murder an' worse. Those who didn't... Some went on to Friendship City or Guttersville. Some just joined up with bandits. Hell, boy, half the folk you shot up this mornin' used to live here."

Calamity reeled a bit at that revelation.

The little ones, the children of Arbu, were huddled together behind Velvet Remedy's shield spell. My unicorn friend had maintained the shield since the fighting started, dropping it only when I floated a new filly or colt from one of the old stores. She hadn't fired a shot the entire time. Just stood there, inside her shield, guarding the children.

By the time I had come out of Starbucked, the colt and two young fillies in tow, the others had come out of the Clinic. They had seen what I had seen. But by then, it didn't matter. The rest of the town was awake and they were shooting back. If it hadn't been for Velvet Remedy, the town might have killed its own children in the crossfire.

Calamity had shot back in self defense, firing to wound and incapacitate. I remember his look of horror as I finished off a pony he had taken out of the fight through crippling. SteelHooves had also fought defensively, letting me enter each place first. But unlike Calamity, my ghoulish friend didn't pull his bucks. Custard's Pies was burning from the missiles he had fired. Something in the architecture

must keep the fires from spreading, I thought, because all of Arbu should have been burning to the ground.

I looked at the children. They hugged each other, crying, terrified. Cowering behind Velvet, casting horrified or hateful looks at me. I stood there and soaked up their hate; I couldn't blame them. The poor children had just seen me murder their parents, their families. More than one had heard their mothers scream out "*RAPE!*" as I first ripped their clothing from them, looking to see if they had taken the brand.

I swallowed as the first feelings returned to my soul. Pain and self-horror at what I had done to these children. What I had let them see in the name of saving them. Oh Goddesses, what damage had I done?

There were five of them in all. Plus the colt whose father I had killed. Plus one young buck with them, not much older than a colt. He was old enough to have his cutie mark, but his flank did not bear the mark of Arbu. He had eaten, knowingly, but he had been unable to bring himself to kill.

I spared him. He could be saved. In the entire town, he had been the only one, save for Grandpa Rattle and the children. Even in my rage, I hadn't wanted to believe that the *whole town* was vile. Surely, I kept thinking, there had to be a few more. Even just one? Now, listening to Grandpa Rattle, I understood why, except for the young buck, each and every attempt to find a redeemable pony had failed.

Calamity turned, trotting towards Velvet Remedy, barely casting a glance my way. He stared at the unicorn who had become his lover through the shield of magical energy she was maintaining around herself and the children.

"Ya said Li'l pip had a concussion, right? Could that explain all this?" My pegasus friend looked desperate. "She's not thinkin' straight, not 'erself, right? That could... excuse this?"

Velvet Remedy stared back at him through the glow of magic, eyes narrowing. "She shouldn't need an excuse!"

I stared silently, watching my friends argue about my actions. Take sides. I was struck mute, like I was in shock. Only shock didn't feel this dead. My headache had returned. Actually, it had never left. But the pounding was getting worse now. Bad enough I couldn't ignore it anymore, not even with all that was happening.

"Pardon?" Calamity asked, eyes widening.

"They. Were. Cannibals!" Velvet Remedy snorted. "Maybe it's hard for you to see, being so quick to eat meat yourself, but these... ponies... what they have done is evil beyond the pale."

"Hey!" Calamity shot back, raising his voice to match hers, "Ah get that they were cannibals. Puts 'em right up there with New Appleloosa on the list o' places Ah ain't gonna settle down. An' the fact they fed *me* pony makes this a place Ah would never come back to an' would be warnin' other folk 'bout."

I winced. Calamity: equating cannibalism to trading with slavers on the morality scale.

"But Ah wouldn't go slaughterin' 'em fer it!" Calamity continued. "Far as Ah c'n see, they only ate bandits, raiders an' the like. Ponies who needed t' be put down."

"Aaarguh!" Velvet gasped in exasperation. "There are some things you just don't do, Calamity! I'm not a naïve Stable filly anymore. I've seen how hard the Equestrian Wasteland is. I know that you have to do awful things out here. Looting dead bodies? Okay. Killing? Monsters and vicious animals, all the time. Other ponies? Not as much as you like to, but yes. Even killing ponies is often and regrettably necessary."

Velvet Remedy had been a Stable Dweller like me. She grew up with the same morality I did. Only... she had always held to hers better than I had. The wasteland began to erode me from the first night out. Velvet's sense of right and wrong was made of sterner stuff than mine. And what she had seen in the basement was so far beyond what she could accept...

“But you treat having to kill them with respect. You bury them. Or, if you don’t, you at least don’t dance on them and urinate on their corpses. And you don’t carve them up for *snacks*.”

“You do what you must to survive,” Xenith intoned softly. It was the first thing she had said since the shooting started.

Velvet turned on her, eyes wide. “Are you seriously going to side against Littlepip on this with the argument of ‘Cannibalism: Yay’?”

Unlike Velvet and Calamity, Xenith’s voice only grew softer. “You cannot begin to understand what I let them do to me in order to survive. If they had put pony meat in front of me and told me to eat, I would have. It would not have been the worst thing I let them do. Not even that week.”

Velvet took a stumbling step back from the dour zebra. Turning to Calamity, “They didn’t just kill bandits, Calamity. You saw the head of the preacher pony. They had it mounted on their wall like a trophy! And if they murdered him, how many more?”

“Ah don’t reckon Ah know,” Calamity replied. “Point is, none o’ y’all do either.”

“They fed you the meat of ponies you killed. Probably fed you the heart of one of them...” Velvet Remedy continued.

“Ain’t happy ‘bout that.”

“...and they’ve been selling it to merchants, spreading their filth across the whole wasteland.” Velvet pointed a hoof towards the children clutching each other behind her. “And they have been indoctrinating a whole new generation to do the same...”

“Velvet...” I said softly. Too softly to be heard. Don’t defend me, Velvet. You were right about me back in old Appleloosa. I’m a murderer. A monster drowning in the blood of all the ponies I have killed. I’m the thing in the mirror, no better than a raider.

Except... I wasn’t, was I? These were *bad ponies*. They needed to die. I was saving ponies by wiping them out, wasn’t I?

Corrupted Kindness, the little pony in my head said angrily.

“Arbu wasn’t a town full of ponies,” Velvet Remedy asserted. “It was a cancer that needed to be destroyed before it could spread any further.”

“Velvet?” I said again, a little louder. Calamity was staring at her in silence.

Neighing loudly, Velvet exclaimed. “Arbu was mutated flesh that had to be cut away in order for the wasteland to even begin to heal.”

“Velvet... you’re scaring the children.” My voice was soft, but just loud enough for her to hear. The beautiful charcoal unicorn turned, aghast, tears forming in her eyes as she looked at the terrified expressions on the faces of the fillies and colts behind her.

I’m not corrupted kindness, I whimpered back at the mare in my mind. But I didn’t believe it. Not anymore. Trixie had been right. Or I had made her right.

If you haven’t found your own virtue yet, Monterey Jack had told me, *you best hurry up. While there’s still anything left of you to save.*

Was there anything left of me to save?

You just slaughtered over twenty ponies, the little pony in my head responded. What do you think?

My head was splitting open. I realized I was crying.

Calamity turned to SteelHooves now. “What about you?”

“What about me?” SteelHooves responded laconically.

Calamity shook his head. “Is this... is there a way for me t’ be okay wi’ this? Ah want t’ be okay with this... for Li’lpip... but...”

“Littlepip is our leader,” SteelHooves replied. “It was her call.”

“It was...?” Calamity blinked. His brow furrowed under his hat. “It...? Oh hells no!” The pegasus launched himself through the air, flying up to the Steel Ranger Outcast. SteelHooves stood his ground. The idea of Calamity intimidating the huge Ranger struck me as ludicrous.

“Yer the Elder of Applejack’s Rangers now. Ya don’t get t’ play the good li’l soldier card anymore!” Calamity informed him. “Tell me, what would Applejack think o’ all this?”

SteelHooves’ deep voice rumbled dangerously, “Applejack was a farmer. What she didn’t put into her friends and trying to save ponies, she put into her apples. She understood the need to get rid of bad apples. And I think she would be repulsed beyond the telling of it to see ponies eating other ponies.”

Calamity flapped his wings, moving back a pony’s length. “But... t’ kill ‘em all?”

SteelHooves whinnied. “She wouldn’t have done that, no. But she had other options. She would have had them all arrested. Rounded up and carted off to the Ministry of Peace, where they could be *fixed*.”

Calamity nodded. “But... that’s kinda muh point. Li’lpip had options. She coulda come t’ us. Why didn’t she come t’ us first?”

I was hating how Calamity was talking about me like I wasn’t there. Like he couldn’t bear to acknowledge me. But then... did I deserve better? Would I have been able to look at him, if he had just done the same thing?

“She was enraged. She was *not* thinking clearly,” SteelHooves informed Calamity bluntly. “The only thing she’s done wrong here is that she let her anger control her. Is that what you need to hear, Calamity? Then yes, I don’t approve. I would prefer she had killed these monsters with cold-blooded calculation.”

SteelHooves was right. Calamity was right. I had totally lost it.

But... they were bad ponies. They were *horrible* ponies. They deserved it!

All of them? the little pony challenged. *Even the young ones?*

I tried to save the young ones! I rescued them! But I had traumatized them in the process. Was what I had done any better than what the raiders did to Silver Bell?

Still, I'd only killed the responsible ones, the adults...

The mare in my mind spit back at me, asking: *what about the young mare in the clinic?*

My mind swam. I was still having trouble remembering everything that had happened. It was like trying to put together a puzzle while gagged, I couldn't hold the pieces in my hooves and they kept slipping away.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I remembered that much. Two three-round bursts. One into the mother, one into the father. I... I *hadn't* killed the young mare.

Are you sure about that? My little pony was quick to point out: *she's not here amongst the living, is she? Are you sure you didn't choke her to death? Were you even paying that much attention?*

I... I didn't... couldn't have... did I?

And even if I didn't, what had I done? I'd left her laying unconscious next to the burning bodies of her murdered parents. So much less evil, Littlepip.

I was evil.

But she wasn't a filly, I thought desperately, clinging to any illusion I could keep. She had her cutie mark already.

Stable-think, the mare in my mind chided. *You were older when you got yours.*

She had her Arbu mark. She'd killed and eaten...

How do you know her kill wasn't a damned radigator? my little pony spat.

She was a guard! The rifle under the table proved that. The Arbu ponies had guests in town. Guests they weren't going to kill. So they had guards. Protecting their dark secret. Ready to kill to defend it. She was one of them. She knew what the town was doing, and that it was wrong, and she was still protecting it.

The little pony in my head shut up at that. For what absolutely little it was worth, I had scored a point.

“Go up to my room,” a voice said beside me. Grandpa Rattle had walked up to me at some point and I hadn’t even noticed. I felt like I was missing time. “There’s a safe under my bed. Fetch the book inside. I know you can pick a lock.”

I turned to him. It was like he was forever away. I had the sudden sense that I was drowning in all this air around me. “What’s in the book?”

“It’s my ledger. E’ry pony they killed. E’ry pony they et.”

Velvet Remedy had heard him. “Why?” she asked softly. “Why would you keep a record of something like that?”

“Cuz I knew this day was comin’,” Grandpa Rattle replied. “An’ my mind ain’t what it used t’ be. Particularly in daytime.”

Velvet Remedy closed her eyes. A tear reflected the light of her shield spell as it trickled down her cheek.

“I didn’t figure it would be folks like you, though,” Grandpa Rattle added. “Actually,” he said, pointing at SteelHooves, “I figured it would be him.”



I found myself in Grandpa Rattle’s loft, staring at his bed. At the scuff marks on the floor. At the iron shackles that had been used to bind the old man to his bed.

I remembered running through the fire in Custard’s Cakes and galloping up the stairs. I lost my balance twice on the steps, feeling dizzy. I blamed the headache and the smoke. The loft was filled with smoke, forcing me to press against the hot floor. The heat was oppressive. But the fire wasn’t spreading up the stairs. The ceiling of the bakery below wasn’t catching the flames.

I coughed, trying to open the lock on the safe. But it was impossible. My mind just couldn’t grasp the image of the tumblers. Every time I tried, my thoughts got jumbled, fell apart. My headache was like a railroad spike being hammered into my skull.

I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin. I would have to do this the old way...

...It was too hard. The lock was ridiculously difficult. Or I was just too messed up to function. After breaking four bobby pins, I gave up. I just laid there on the hot floor, coughing and hacking, trying to still my head. The coolness of the water talismans was washing over me, buffeting against the heat, keeping the room bearable.

Why didn't you go to your friends first? The pony in my head would not let me rest.

I don't know, I told her.

Why didn't you talk to Grandpa Rattle? You could have gotten this ledger. You could have known for sure.

But I did know. I had seen... enough.

I had killed for these monsters. The Steel Rangers... those poor ponies up at Bucklyn Cross... they didn't have to die. They didn't deserve to die. Not for Arbu. Especially not for Arbu.

More memories came back. I could remember gunning down the milk-colored, one-eyed pony now. "We helped you!" she screamed at me as she dropped her shotgun, having run out of bullets. My mind flashed back to the Ponyville Bridge. Had I not said the same thing to Monterey Jack?

You've never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good. To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do.

Red Eyes was no longer my dark and twisted reflection... he *was* my reflection. I was a monster. I hadn't even been forced. I did it because I was mad. If anything, he was better than me.

No.

No, I wouldn't let it be like this. I wouldn't let myself become this. I had made a... mistake. A horrible, evil mistake. But this wasn't me. I was better than this, and I still could be. I had to find a way to make this right. To fix this.

You can't fix dead.

No. But I could spend my entire life doing everything I could to make up for it. I would...

I was Corrupted Kindness... but I could be more than that, couldn't I? Was it possible for a messed up pony to have a True Virtue as well?

Yes, a voice in my head insisted. My memories flashed to our last visit to New Appleloosa. To Silver Bell seeing Pyrelight, her eyes going wide with wonder as if suddenly a whole world had opened up to her. A world of beauty.

That voice out of nowhere (*It was under 'E'!*) took on a filly's tone: *I never felt joy like that before. It felt so good I just wanted to keep smiling forever.*

And suddenly, part of me knew, knew for sure...

Call me crazy, but after we go, Ah half expect that filly t' spend the next few days tryin' t' make New Appleloosa as pretty as that bird.

...that in that moment, Silver Bell had found her virtue. A real one, pure and true. And if the pony who had epitomized corrupted laughter could also be something greater, then so could I.

My headache had faded. I glanced towards the window. The sky was getting lighter. Dawn was almost here. I'd been in this room for hours. How? How had I lost so much time?

I pulled out another bobby pin. This time, I got the lock open. It wasn't nearly as hard as it had been when I first tried it.



"Howdy, children! This is your favorite voice of the airwaves, DJ Pon3, bringing you the news!

"First up, a warning to travelers. The fires in Everfree Forest are creating a major travel hazard from Splendid Valley to New Appleloosa. And I'm not just talking 'bout the air quality, although considerin' some of the things burning up in that place, that might be a righteous concern. No, I've got

reports of some truly fearsome monsters that have been driven from the forest. Caravans are cautioned to steer clear of the whole region until further notice.

"And now for a little something different.

"Mail pony dropped ol' DJ Pon3 a letter today. Written from our dear Ditzzy Doo out in New Appleloosa. Love that gal. Well, she was listenin' to the two reports I made regarding the Stable Dweller and the news out of Arbu... and she wasted no time in weighing in. Here's what she has to say about the Stable Dweller:

"I've seen her get raging mad. At what the raiders in Ponyville did to me. And to a filly. And to so many others. She saw, she went crazy, she pulled out her gun, and she started saving ponies.

"I was one of those ponies. Maybe you too. The bullets she fired are still saving ponies today, because those raiders aren't around anymore.

"I bet she saved a whole lot of ponies in Arbu.

"PS: Yummy, yummy muffins! Homage is awesome! Xenith is awesome! Littlepip is awesome! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"



"Took you long 'nuff," Grandpa Rattle grumped as I returned with his ledger. "Fall asleep in there?"

I set it down before him. "I... don't know."

"Well, I ain't got all day!" he snapped, floating the ledger up. "Dawn's almost here. Won't be lucid much longer."

Velvet Remedy was curled up with the children, singing a soft lullaby. She'd gotten most of them to sleep. At the elderly buck's words, she stopped singing, turning to him. "What do you mean?"

Grandpa Rattle looked to her without a trace of shame, as if he was too old and too weathered to be embarrassed about what he was saying anymore. "Told ya, my mind ain't what it used to be. I've been Kissed

by Luna since I was old 'nuff to have a cutie mark, but that don't help come dawn."

"Kissed by Luna?" I asked, my actions apparently having not killed my curiosity.

Grandpa Rattle regarded me. "That's right. Means I'm clearer headed and more perceptive at night. A blessing from the Goddess. Recent years, means the nighttime staves off the dementia."

The old buck floated the ledger in front of Calamity. "Well, ya gonna read it or not?"

The rust-colored pegasus looked at the book floating in front of him. Then shook his head, pushing it away. The book broke out of Rattle's levitation bubble, thumping to the ground.

"Ah don't need to," Calamity said walking past Grandpa Rattle and up to me, staring at me. "Ya did wrong, Li'lpip."

"Says the pony who shot her because he thought she was a raider," Velvet Remedy whispered.

"Don't matter what that book says," he continued. "Ya lost control."

"I know," I said softly.

Calamity lunged at me. I stiffened, too startled to react. He grabbed me, crushing me. I tried to fight back, but he was bigger, stronger...

He was... hugging me?

"Ah've seen yer heart, Li'lpip," Calamity reminded me, clutching me tight. "Ah know yer a good pony. Maybe the best pony Ah've ever met." I felt his tears. "An' if that heart cries out in pain an' rage an' fury, then Ah've got t' believe it's fer good reason. An' that Ah'm just too jaded t' see it."



The early morning breeze washed through the *Sky Bandit*. Six children, one young buck and Grandpa Rattle all accompanied us, scattered

about on the benches of the passenger wagon. This was the second time in two hundred years that it had felt full, even though there were still plenty of empty benches.

Velvet Remedy had been nothing less than amazing in getting the foals to come along with us. We were taking them to Friendship City, someplace they could be safe. Surely, a place called Friendship would take them in. And if they needed persuading, I had a water talisman to offer.

Now Velvet Remedy's attention was on me. Her horn was glowing as she looked into my eyes.

"If it would make you feel any better to claim temporary brain damage, I could probably give you a doctor's note," Velvet chided. "Your concussion was less than sixteen hours ago, and what you've done since is pretty much the *opposite* of rest."

"It's at least three days' flight to Canterlot," I reasoned. "I'll rest on the way." My headache was back, although not as bad as before. I hadn't been able to eat. But I really didn't want to. I wasn't sure I could ever eat again. I would never put meat in my mouth for as long as I lived.

Velvet nuzzled me softly. "But you shouldn't. Need to excuse yourself, I mean. You... you didn't do anything wrong." She took my face in her hooves and made me look into her eyes. "I know you, Littlepip. I can see that you've been bucking yourself to pieces about this ever since it happened. Possibly even while it was happening. You're not a monster. You're not a villain. You're a mare who loves ponies and cares about them, and who had finally seen too many hurt too badly to stand it anymore. Goddesses, if we were only all like you."

"Velvet?" Something in her voice worried me.

She looked down, dipping her horn. "If anypony is a monster here, Littlepip, it is me."

"What? No. That's..."

"Yesterday, you killed a bunch of ponies who were murdering and eating other ponies," she said softly, a tone of real sorrow in her voice. "Yesterday, I put the life of my pet above the life of a pony."

I shook my head quickly. And now it was my turn to make her look into my eyes. "You put the life of a beloved member of our group, a thinking and feeling creature, above the life of the pony who shot her."

Velvet Remedy gave me a wet, grateful look, but said nothing.

"What are these marks?" SteelHooves asked Grandpa Rattle. Calamity may have neglected the ledger, but the leader of Applejack's Rangers was giving it a close inspection.

"Say what now?" Grandpa Rattle asked. "Hey! How'd ya git my ledger!"

"You gave it to me," SteelHooves said evenly, patiently.

"Oh." He looked around. "We're leavin' Arbu, ain't we?" This was not the first time Rattle had seemed surprised at the change in his surroundings.

"Yes, SteelHooves said. "Now, if you please, what are these marks."

Grandpa Rattle peered at the ledger. "That there's how many times I warned folks off before the others kilt 'em. One mark fer each time I told 'em I have a shotgun."

"I see."

"For him to keep such records of his attempt to help," Xenith leaned close, whispering to me, "I suspect he was not expecting rescue at all. He was preparing his defense."

Grandpa Rattle turned his appraising gaze to SteelHooves. "Yer him, ain'tcha?"

SteelHooves looked up from the ledger. "Excuse me?"

"Yer Paladin SteelHooves!" he exclaimed. "I remember ya! Yer that ghoul my daughter kept lustin' after."

Velvet Remedy's ears perked. I stifled a laugh. SteelHooves nickered and tried to turn his attention back to the ledger.

"You must be mistaken."

"No, yer just none too perceptive," Grandpa Rattle insisted. "Never knew she was even there. Always pinin' for Applejack."

SteelHooves looked up abruptly. "Do I know you?"

"Scribe Rattle." Grandpa Rattle paused. "Former. Left after my daughter got pregnant." At SteelHooves' quick stomp, Rattle swiftly added, "Not yers! With that buck what's-his-mane from Arbu..."

SteelHooves cocked his head slowly. "Scribe Rattle. Transformations magic. Abandoned the Rangers after your daughter was disgraced. I remember now."

Grandpa Rattle's expression darkened, but he nodded.

"You knew transformation magic?" Xenith asked.

"Yep. Steel Rangers was tryin' to figger out a spell to turn Steel Rangers armor into clothing and back. Wouldn't work, I told 'em. Armor's already fulla spells." He looked suddenly eager. "I can change yer rifle into a stick if ya'd like."

I've got a shotgun.

"I do not have a rifle," Xenith pointed out.

"Oh." Turning to me, "How 'bout you?"

"Can you change it back?" I asked.

"uh... no."

He had a stick.

Looking past him, my eyes caught those of the young buck I had pulled out of Java's Cup. The young buck had been staring at me silently since laying down on one of the *Sky Bandit's* benches at the start of the trip.

You have no Arbu mark? I recalled asking him, my heart almost giddy with relief.

No, he had told me backed into the corner of his room. Last week, I was supposed to kill a mare and eat her heart, but... I couldn't. I'm sorry, I know I was supposed to, and Daddy was furious. He... Then his expression changed a flash of insight. You killed daddy, didn't you?

There had been such an odd look in his eyes. It wasn't blame. It was... resignation.

Now, for the first time since then, he spoke. "What happened to Clearglass?"

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the only other pony in Arbu of similar age, the young mare guard. The mare I hadn't intended to kill... but who I was sure now that I had choked to death without even thinking. I cringed, looking for words.

"I killed her." The voice wasn't mine. I turned, looking at SteelHooves in surprise.

"Comin' up on Friendship City!" Calamity called out before anything more could be said.

"This time, let me do the talking," Velvet Remedy said to SteelHooves. "Your diplomacy leaves a lot to be desired." The ghoul nodded wordlessly. The events of the night before were weighing heavily on him. And for him, Arbu was not the heaviest burden.

I got up, steadying myself as I was hit with an odd dizziness. It passed and I moved to the window, staring out at the Pony of Friendship, a huge statue made of greened metal that stared out over the Manehattan harbor. Living inside that metal structure surrounded by water was an entire town of ponies. I could see lights pouring out of tiny holes where the metal had rusted through. Friendship City.



I was thrown against one of the passenger wagon's benches as Calamity banked a hard left, dodging the shot.

"I can't believe Friendship City is shooting at us!" I cried out.

Smaller pops were followed by a massive crack of thunder below us. An explosion of black smoke and flame burst in the air a dozen yards away. The rifle ponies firing from the crown windows of the Pony of Friendship were not much of a threat, but the shells from the harbor artillery were a whole different matter!

"You haven't been listening to the radio, have you?" SteelHooves rumbled. "Your friend DJ Pon3 has had some unpleasant things to say about the massacre of Arbu."

"WHAT?!"

Another shell burst in the air. Calamity veered harshly, throwing me again. Velvet put her shield up around the children to keep them from getting tossed. "We can't land here," Calamity shouted. "Ah've got t' head back!"

"Sounds like one of those two Rangers you let go at Bucklyn Cross reported Arbu in the worst possible light," SteelHooves informed me bitterly.

I was dying inside. Homage... oh Goddesses, what did Homage think of me? Did she hate me?

"I have them recorded if you would like to listen later."

I wanted to gallop to her. To order Calamity to head to Tenpony Tower straight away. But...

But I couldn't. I had already delayed far too long. We needed to go to Canterlot. To deal with the Goddess. And to turn our attention to Red Eye. Right now, thousands of ponies were in danger just from Red Eye's threat alone, and I was surely already testing his patience.

I remembered thinking, in that one brief moment of memory I had kept for myself from the Helpinghoof Clinic in Tenpony, *it was the only way to make sure Red Eye listened*. I had communicated with Red Eye somehow. Presumably through somepony or griffin in his encampment. I hoped that I had been convincing him that I had a plan and that I just needed time. A lot of time.

More importantly, Homage needed the truth. Truth she could trust in. And I was the last pony to be able to give her that. She needed to learn what had happened from a source that was not as biased as I was.

If she learned the truth, it couldn't be from me. Anything from me would be tainted. And if she did not... or worse, if she did and hated me for it...

It would kill me. But like a ghoul, I would keep going anyway. If I lost Homage, I was losing something I didn't deserve. And if the whole wasteland turned against me. If everypony feared and hated me, it wouldn't stop me from trying to make Equestria a better place. Even if it meant that I would forever be seen as the villain of the piece.

Calamity flew us away from Friendship City.



We waited an hour after landing in the Manehattan Ruins, then worked our way towards the harbor on hoof. The rest of us stayed behind, watching from an observation platform, as Velvet Remedy lead the survivors out onto Friendship Bridge. Her horn was glowing. Behind her floated Elder Cottage Cheese's life support capsule. Pyrelight perched on top, enjoying the ride.

Friendship Bridge was a drawbridge that had once extended all the way from Manehattan to the island. I was astounded how close to intact it still was. There were gaps, but none looked longer than a hundred yards, and there were rope bridges spanning the collapsed sections.

"How did they do that?" I mused, staring at the extensive rope bridges through my binoculars. It seemed like an incredible feat even for unicorn magic. Calamity tapped my shoulder, then grinned and fluttered his wings.

"Oh. Duh." At some point, Friendship City had become home to at least one Dashite.

Through my binoculars, I could see that the ponies of Friendship City had fouled the Manehattan half of the lifting bridge, locking it flat, and

had re-engineered their half so that only they could control it. As I watched, Velvet Remedy, Grandpa Rattle and the children approached the far end on the Manhattan side.

It had to be Velvet, and it had to be her alone. DJ Pon3's warning had painted Xenith and Calamity as signs of danger. And only Velvet Remedy had the diplomatic skills to talk the ponies of Friendship City into letting the survivors in.

Well, not exactly alone. She had Pyrelight. I was suddenly reminded of how much solace Pyrelight had given me in Fillydelphia.

In the crumbling ruins of the building behind us, Xenith was talking softly with SteelHooves as she built a cookfire.

"You were swift to condemn those who eat the meat of other ponies," she said softly.

"I am a ghoul," he replied.

"And I am a zebra," she responded. "And, like the medical pony, a vegetarian. Yet you took greater offense to the survival tactics of Arbu than I did. Why is that?"

"Zombies eat the flesh of ponies. Because they are monsters."

The zebra nodded sagely. "I see."

We watched. And waited. They were far away, but I thought I could see Velvet Remedy lifting her hoof. There was, I had been told, an intercom that would allow her to speak to the guards on the island. If they were willing to listen.

SteelHooves moved up next to me and sat down. "Calamity, mind if I talk to Littlepip alone?"

Calamity looked at him for a moment, then nodded and flew off to where Xenith was cooking. I looked to SteelHooves nervously.

"Clearglass?" I asked slowly.

"You sent a merchant pony, an innocent, into a basement -- a place where he could be easily cornered -- even though you had left one of

the guards alive,” he responded. “Us as well. It was the sort of tactical error you wouldn’t have made if you were thinking clearly.” He looked at me. “That is how I knew you were not.”

I closed my eyes and looked away.

“Take the pain slowly,” he told me solemnly, “What you became last night is going to hurt you for the rest of your life.”

I nodded. Part of me wanted to cry, but I would not let myself because the tears would have been for me. And I didn’t deserve them. The ponies of Arbu didn’t deserve them either. As much as my actions horrified me, showing me the monster I could and briefly did become, there was no question that Arbu needed to be... purged. Just like any pit of raiders or band of slavers. If anypony deserved my tears, it was those whom I had saved. The night had cut a deep wound in me, an abscess carved in my soul by a blade of my own wielding. That great hollowness festered with despair and self-loathing, but I was slowly filling it with determination.

SteelHooves stared out over the harbor. “I need to thank you, Littlepip.”

“For what?”

“For failing,” SteelHooves said, surprising me. “All this time, you have been somepony to look up to. You have made me want to be a better pony. But at the same time... you were *too* good.” He looked at me. “You were an impossible standard. Tonight, you have made it easier for me to live with myself.”

I just stared. My heart twisted, unsure how to feel. A drop of rain hit my horn. Another splashed against my nose.

SteelHooves turned away, staring out across the harbor again as the rain began to fall. Eventually I did too. Raising my binoculars, I caught Pyrelight flying towards the island, carrying something. The ledger, I knew.



"Good evening!

"This is DJ Pon3, and have I got news for you! Major update on the situation at Arbu and Bucklyn Cross. My associate spent the last few hours talkin' with a merchant who was at Arbu and saw much of what went down.

"First and foremost, let me say hallelujah! Sounds like our Wasteland Savior hasn't fallen to the darkness after all. Maybe stumbled a bit, but listen t' this:

"The ponies of Arbu were cannibals, folks. That's right. They ate ponies! And as if that wasn't sick enough, they've been sellin' pony meat, claimin' it was radigator meat. Eaten a radigator kabob lately? You sure about that? Great Goddesses, and I thought I'd seen all the fucked-up shit this wasteland had to serve up.

"Well, turns out our Stable Dweller discovered the truth. Unfortunately, here's where things get sketchy. See, when our heroine showed the merchant what she had discovered, the good pony hightailed it out of there and didn't look back.

"But what the merchant could tell us is that before this shit went down, the ponies of Arbu were treating our heroine to a meal and a place to sleep, and yes children, you guessed what was on the menu. But before she knew the truth, our heroine tried to help the ponies of Arbu. She went to Bucklyn Cross to negotiate for clean, purified water for the town. And the Rangers on that broken bridge started firing on our heroine before she even got into shoutin' range. According to the merchant, it was quite the light show.

"I don't know about you, children, but that gives me new suspicions about what happened at Bucklyn Cross, and it puts some serious questions to the witness from Bucklyn Cross who first reported the events at Arbu.

"I'll let you know more as soon as I do, children. But for now, I think we can all breathe one hell of a sigh of relief.

"And now, it's Sweetie Belle, singing about that one great truth of the wasteland..."



It rained for the next two days straight. Water was still falling from the sky in sheets as we flew over the foothills that slowly climbed up towards the base of the mountains. Dark cliffs shot up abruptly to loom over the landscape. Somewhere up there, obfuscated by the rain, were the ruins of Canterlot, the former capital city of Equestria.

We were all soaked to the bone, but Calamity had suffered the most by far.

I shivered from the cold. My armored Stable utility barding was pasted to me like a second skin, the fur of my coat trapped between it and my real skin in a most unpleasant way. But still, I was better off than I had been in days. This morning was the first that I had been without headaches. For the first time in days, I felt I was actually thinking clearly.

Velvet Remedy proclaimed my concussion gone. But still wanted me to rest. I'd been doing nothing but resting since she had returned from Friendship Bridge. Alone, save for Pyrelight. Friendship City had proven good to its name and taken in the refugees from Arbu, and Cottage Cheese as well. They hadn't asked for any payment, any compensation. They just wanted to help. The way ponies were supposed to.

I had sent Pyrelight to them with one of the water talismans. Not as payment, but as a gift.

The other water talisman was now safely installed in Stable Twenty-Nine. Star Paladin Crossroads had been talking about rebooting the Crusader when we left. With the override codes, Cross was convinced they could rewrite the Crusader's programming, turning it into an obedient and beneficial custodian.

She still hadn't decided what to do about Bucklyn Cross. SteelHooves gave her some advice, but left the decision up to her. I believe his diplomatic failure had left him wanting to distance himself from that place.

I stared at my forehooves. As we approached Canterlot, a new concern had pushed its way into my mind: my PipBuck. We were supposed to take everything off before we entered. Our armor, our saddlebags... I was supposed to float it all.

But you couldn't float a PipBuck. Well, you could, but all you would have is a fancy radio. It had to be attached for the E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. to work, not to mention the medical assistance and automapping. I could take it off. I had the tools. But without it, I would be at a fraction of my usefulness in the most dangerous place we had ever set hoof into. Could I do that? Was it right to expose my friends to even more danger because I might otherwise be forever bonded with... well, with my cutie mark?

"Keep yer eyes peeled fer a safe place t' put down fer the night!" Calamity called back over the roar of the rain. To be honest, none of us were as concerned about safe as we were about dry.

We all moved to the windows. I lifted my binoculars, but they did little good. They just made the grey of the rain closer.

Suddenly, SteelHooves galloped to the front of the *Sky Bandit*. A moment later, he turned to me. "Littlepip, can you get me on the roof?"

"Can you stay on the roof?" Velvet asked, concerned. "Even with the mounting?"

"What's wrong?" I asked even as I kicked on my E.F.S. and answered my own question. With my targeting spell, I could recognize several hostile targets, at least a dozen, all airborne. And... three friendly ones on the ground. In the second it took me to count, one of the red marks passed over the one of the friendly lights and extinguished it. Now there were only two.

"Calamity!" I shouted as I drew out my sniper rifle. "Get us as close as you can! We need to see what we're shooting at!"

Floating up the sniper rifle, I slid into S.A.T.S. and took aim at a shadowy, flying figure I could not clearly see. The targeting spell,

however, didn't give a damn about the rain. And my E.F.S. was quick to identify the targets.

Bloodwings. A whole damn flock of them. Attacking two fleeing figures on the ground who, as best I could tell, were completely unarmed.

I opened fire, determined not to allow that number to drop any further.



"Hello out there? Anypony awake? It's time for a special late night edition of the news!"

I have with me, communicating over broadcaster, one Grandpa Rattle, long-time resident of Arbu and new citizen of Friendship City. And he's here to set the record straight. The whole pony about what went down three nights ago. So sit down and hold onto your hats, children, because this is going to be a hell of a story.

"But first, I have something that I have to say. And this goes out from me to that Heroine of the Wasteland, our little Bringer of Light:

"I'm sorry.

"When you've seen as much as I have, when you see as many heroes fail and fall... it's hard not to expect it. It's hard to keep believing. Even when you know there's somepony out there you should believe in.

"You didn't fail us, Stable Dweller. I failed you. And you have my deepest and sincerest...

"A particular toaster repair-pony once told me that she would always be tuned in, listenin' to my message of hope. Well, listen close, Stable Dweller, cuz this is the honest truth, straight from me to you:

"That message of hope? That's you. You are my message.

"Now then Grandpa Rattle, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and this book you want to share with us tonight?"

...

“Ain’t a book. It’s a ledger. A recordin’ of every sick thing the ponies in Arbu did. By the time I’m done readin’ two pages, I gare-un-tee every one of y’all will wish ya coulda been there to do what that little mare did fer ya...”

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



THE VERY STRANGE TALE OF MIDNIGHT SHOWER

“I got shit make you horny, make your mare horny, make you hard, make you happy, make you strong, make you smart... and, of course, I got THE drug, the shit that’ll make you FLY... Dash.”

BLAM!

The bloodwing screeched as the bullet from my sniper rifle tore through its abdomen. The dark shadow tucked in its wings, spiraling downward, disappearing in the storm.

Sheets of rain lashed across the *Sky Bandit*. I was relying more on S.A.T.S. than on my own vision. Above us, SteelHooves was doing the same. The rhythmic booming of his grenade machine gun and the shrieks of the bloodwings filled the air.

“Where the hell did they all come from?” Calamity shouted, firing the twin guns of his battle saddle as the dark form of one of the giant bats swooped up in front of us. There were far more than the dozen I had originally counted. It was a whole damned flock.

I heard the thud as one of them landed on SteelHooves above, biting at his armor in a futile effort to pierce it. Another swirled up out of the rain and slammed into the side of the *Sky Bandit*, rocking it, sending me tumbling backwards off the bench I had perched on. My sniper rifle clattered to the ground.

Green flame erupted across the side of the *Sky Bandit*, the burning bloodwing let out an ear-splitting screech of agony and fell away as the heavy rain washed away the flames. Pyrelight flashed through the air, piercing the air with a battle cry as she dove after it. I blinked, struck by the impression that the balefire phoenix had a vengeful hatred for the creatures.

Another bloodwing latched itself onto the opposite side of the passenger wagon, viciously thrusting its head into the windows, gnashing at us. Velvet Remedy's combat shotgun roared, and I was splattered with what had been inside the creature's head.

As Xenith knocked the body of the bloodwing away, I threw myself to my hooves, leaving the sniper rifle and drawing out Little Macintosh. We were in the thick of them now. And Applejack's trusty little revolver was the fastest and most powerful weapon I had. For a moment, I felt bad for our zebra; her fighting style was useless in this situation.

I leapt to the window, slipping into S.A.T.S. and taking aim at the first dark shadow I saw.

BLAM! BLAM!

The first shot went through the bloodwing's back. The second tore a hole in its left wing. It fell from the sky only for another to take its place, lunging towards my window.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The creature's momentum carried its body into the side of the *Sky Bandit* with a meaty thump. I heard the impact of meat on metal and a tearing sound. The black mass of two bloodwings tumbled into the

drenched air behind us, SteelHooves entangled between them as they fell, disappearing into the torrential downpour.

I cried out, throwing out a telekinetic net, but he was gone. And a second later several more bloodwings were swirling about us. One of them was engulfed in green flame from beneath.

A few yards back, Xenith kicked open the door to the passenger wagon, staring out at the black forms whipping about us in the blankets of rain. Before I realized what she was planning, the zebra leapt, soaring out into the air and landing on the back of one of the giant bats. She drove the spear of her hellhound helmet through the monster's head, then jumped from its falling corpse towards the nearest opponent.

And I had felt sorry for her, I thought, watching as she impacted the creature's wing and slashed it off with her hellhound-claw horn before falling into the darkness where more unsuspecting bloodwings awaited. I should feel sorry for her enemies.

A giant bat dove onto Calamity, its huge wings dwarfing his own. I spun, targeting, and fired.

BLAM! click click

Little Macintosh's remaining bullet tore into the monster. It squealed. Calamity tried to buck it off, but the bat sank its huge, razor-sharp fangs into the pegasus. Calamity screamed.

Velvet Remedy galloped past me, firing repeatedly with her combat shotgun, tearing the monster to pieces before it could drink. The *Sky Bandit* lurched in the air. Calamity was hurt badly, and the ripped corpse of the giant bat was still latched onto him. But he was not dead.

A moment later, I saw how horribly close he had come to dying. The *Sky Bandit* dropped, jolting with turbulence as Calamity fought to land. The ground came into view, and I could see the two figures we had rushed in to save. Two young zebras, no older than the young mare with the Arbu mark, Clearglass. As I reloaded, a Bloodwing dropped on one of the zebras, knocking her to the ground. I tried to move faster, but it took only a second. The monster plunged its fangs into the

zebra's side and drank. The zebra withered into a desiccated husk faster than her brain could die.

"No! Dammit no!"

I howled. Snapping Little Macintosh shut, I targeted the monster with S.A.T.S. as it cavorted over its kill. But the bloodwing was torn apart by a charging Xenith before I could pull the trigger.



"I do not understand," Xenith said. "Why were the three of you traveling such dangerous hills? And in such a storm?"

We were huddled under the glittering dome of Velvet Remedy's shield spell. I watched as barrels of rain cascaded down over the barrier of light, struck by the strange beauty of it.

The surviving young zebra had been dried by repeated use of Velvet's cleaning spell, as had we all, and was wrapped in a blanket from our supplies (which had needed similar de-drenching).

Xenith had built a fire and was sitting next to it, across from the other zebra, a pot of (purely vegetable!) soup beginning to bubble between them. The young zebra had just seen his two childhood friends die in a most horrible manner. He needed more than a blanket. I knew it wasn't much, but I had come to believe in the miraculous power of hugs.

Xenith, however, didn't hug. Xenith didn't touch unless it was to hurt something. Velvet Remedy was tending to Calamity's wounds, using her magic and Xenith's bleed-stopping goop to remove the fangs embedded in the pegasus' back safely before medical potions could be administered. None of us had seen any sign of our Applejack's Ranger. Getting up, I trotted over to the young zebra buck and lay down next to him.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "We... I should have been faster." I paused, unsure if suddenly embracing this strange zebra was the best thing for him after all. And, to my shame, a tiny part of my mind warned that I had been fooled into caring for evil folk before. I

mentally dropped an anvil on that part of me, and then banished it to the moon.

Instead, I put a tender hoof on one of his, holding it gently. Just a simple touch. He started, looking first surprised, then grateful.

"We had to," he said at last. "We were too old." Looking at Xenith, he questioned, "You are not from Glyphmark?"

"Glyphmark?" Xenith asked. The younger zebra nodded. "I am sad to say I do not know of this place. This is a zebra village?"

"Whaddya mean, too old?" Calamity asked, grunting. He gritted his teeth as Velvet Remedy pulled the second fang free and quickly applied a hoof covered in Xenith's mixture to the flowing wound.

The zebra looked at us strangely. "Who are you ponies?"

"Friends," I answered gently.

He looked at me with suspicion. Then sadness. "My friends are dead." He turned to Xenith. "Quothe and Zuna had been my friends since we could walk. We did everything together. We even... we even got our marks together." He choked, tears forming in his young eyes. "W-we got k-kicked out of the t-t-tribe together..."

Now I hugged him. I held him and let him sob into my side.



The downpour finally relented, leaving a light drizzle in its wake. I looked into the sky, turning my gaze towards the mountains. There, nestled in the open jaw of a cliff, were the darkened spires of the Canterlot Ruins. We could be there in hours. But we were going the other way.

Velvet Remedy's beautiful voice rang across the hilltops:

♪ *"No more living in this gilded cage, shackled to what is supposed to be. "I am ready to exit this stage; it is time for this bird to fly free."*

Calamity cut in with perfect timing, his voice a pleasant counterpoint to the luxurious voice of the unicorn mare:

♪ *"Ah've been blinded cuz Ah've closed muh eyes, seein' just what they told me t' see.*

"Time t' get up an' shake off the lies; break their rules, stretch muh wings and just leave!"

Together, they belted forth the chorus of their duet, their voices daring the slate grey sky and the ceaseless rain to even try to make the day gloomy.

I'd missed this.

We were trotting towards Glyphmark. Calamity flew alongside me, pulling the Sky Bandit no more than a pony's height above the ground. The mere idea of boarding the flying thing had driven the young zebra to panic. So we walked, escorting him towards his new home.

It was better this way anyway, I thought. I had been cooped up in that passenger wagon for days, recovering physically from my head trauma and psychologically from the most soul-destroying Worst Day Ever of my lifetime. Physically, I was healed. Mentally... I was capable of pushing on. What I had done would never heal.

The reality of that turned my thoughts to SteelHooves. Another reason for the walk. I had to trust he would find us. And when he did, it would be best if we were on the ground. Otherwise, he might shoot a missile to get our attention.

♪ *"Ah cannot hope to change things if Ah do not even try."*

"I cannot heal another if I lay down and die."

"There's a whole world beneath us,"

"And a whole sky above..."

As the voices of Velvet Remedy and Calamity joined forces once more for the last line of the verse and another rousing chorus, I turned to my zebra companion. Xenith trotted along beside me, the young one between us.

“Do you still wish to seek out the tribe itself?”

“There is no need,” Xenith intoned gravely. “My daughter is no longer with them.”

The young zebra had wept openly, unable to stop once he had started. He had blubbered, sobbing and mourning the loss of his friends. And in the spaces between his words, I began to construct a picture of what had happened.

The trio of friends had come from the tribe that Xenith’s daughter had been part of, the tribe that formed from those who were left behind when the slavers fell upon Xenith and her village. Zebra foals, all of them.

My parents and husband were slain in the fight, Xenith had told us. My daughter was too young for Stern’s slave pits and... she had no place in Red Eye’s schools. So Stern left her there, along with the other children.

An entire tribe of children. Living under the shared belief that being an adult meant being ripe for the slavers. That having adults in the tribe invited attack. And while the slavers would not take the children, that didn’t mean that they wouldn’t do much more horrible things to them.

“And jus’ how do they decide when a zebra is suddenly too old?” Calamity had asked. The answer was obvious. It wasn’t a matter of birthdays. It was a matter of maturity. You were too old when you got your mark.

Just like in Stable Two. When you got your cutie mark, you were an adult. And from that moment, you joined the work force. Only here, in this zebra tribe, it was a dreaded event.

I nodded to Xenith. She had suffered in the slave pits for many years since the attack on her village. Her daughter was young, but hardly an infant, and the zebra with us only vaguely recalled when the mare had herself been ostracized from the tribe.

“If she still lives, my daughter will be in Glyphmark.”



Glyphmark... sucked.

I looked down the hill at the rows of sad, dilapidated shacks with their sunken roofing leading up to a half-collapsed building in a yard of junk. The whole town was surrounded by a wall of scrap that couldn't keep a radhog out. The ground was dark and lifeless mud. The hoof-full of zebras looked battered and dejected, their eyes downcast, their heads low, their manes and tails tangled and unkempt.

It looked like a town just waiting to die.

I could make out letters spelling "ANGEL" on the front of the ruined building, the last remaining word of a forgotten name. Whatever angel had once watched over this town, it had fallen.

As we approached, the zebras looked up fearfully. I saw two of them nudge a third forward. The mare stepped towards us. "We surrender! Just... just don't kill us," she called out. "We don't have anything... but take whatever you want!"

I could feel my barely mended heart breaking.

"This... is Glyphmark?" Xenith asked in a tone of disbelief.

The young zebra buck with us nodded, rocking slightly on his hooves, looking sucker-bucked.

Velvet Remedy trotted forward. "Hello," she said gently, her voice calming. "Do not be afraid. We mean no harm. We are just travelers who happened across a newly-marked buck and offered to help him make his way here safely in all the rain."

Conflicting emotions swam across the faces of the zebras. I could tell how desperate they were for the approaching strangers to intend no malice, yet how hard it was for them to believe it.

"Having brought him here, we will depart at once if you wish. Although I would ask your indulgence. We have trotted far, and seek a safe place to rest."

"Safe?" the zebra mare asked, her voice cracking with a bitter laugh. "Pony lady, there is no safe here. We are all just waiting for the slavers

to come. The only question is whether the raiders or the monsters will have left any of us alive for them when they get here.”

She waved us into the town anyway. With every step, the town got worse. Bleaker. As if despair and hopelessness had sunk into the very planks of the shacks like the Cloud and was radiating out of it.

“How do you survive here?” Velvet asked, her voice almost a whimper. I knew what she was seeing. There were no crops here. No gardens. The zebras were armed with crude spears and small, badly-maintained pistols that were no match for creatures like bloodwings. These were not hunters. Trappers of small game at best.

The zebras were all emaciated. I could see the shadow of their bones through their coats. They were all starving.

When Velvet put words to her observations, the nearest zebra responded, “Nothing grows here. This town is just close enough to Canterlot that the Cloud has poisoned the ground.” At our looks of alarm, she added “But far enough away that it is not in the air anymore.”

The zebra mare who had ushered us into the town explained, “The building up there was a laboratory for veterinary medicine...”

I was surprised by how educated she sounded. The tribe of children was far better off than those who they kicked out. But I had to wonder how long that could last. Without adults, there would be no replenishing of the tribe. In a few more years, the tribe wouldn’t be a tribe anymore. Just one child telling another to go away.

“...There is an old hydroponics bay in the basement. Most of what they were growing down there is poisonous,” the zebra mare stared at the ground and shuddered heavily. “We learned that the hard way. But we’ve been surviving on what was not, and what was left in the vender machines. But even that is almost gone now. I’m sorry, but we have nothing to feed you.”

Velvet Remedy waved a hoof, “Banish the thought. We have some supplies. Let *us* feed *you*.”

I exchanged looks with Calamity, then nodded. Those supplies were meant to feed us while in Canterlot and on the trip back. But these zebras clearly needed them far more than we did. And, in comparison to me, they were far more deserving. None of them had slaughtered a whole town in a blind rage recently. And their suffering made mine look petty.

“Veterinary medicine?” Calamity questioned as we drew close to the building.

What had looked like scrap from a distance still looked like scrap up close. But it was clearly military scrap. Broken down military robots huddled around war chariots so rusted and decayed they were barely recognizable. Piles of empty ammo boxes littered one corner, as well as parts of several turret models. A much larger version of the flying contraption we had discovered in Old Olneigh was strewn across half the lot, upside down.

Stone pillars flanked the scant remains of a road leading into the yard around it. A cracked placard read “Angel Bunny Pharmaceuticals” -- the name was not so forgotten after all. I remembered Xenith’s claims that Fluttershy’s pet rabbit had created the combat drug Stampede, and found myself wondering if the rabbit had somehow built this company. Then I facehoofed at my own foalishness. Knowing what I did of Fluttershy, it was the most natural thing for the Ministry of Peace to have a branch dedicated solely to the welfare of animals. And of course she would have it named after her favorite pet.

“The military took over,” I surmised as I spotted the hulk of a sentinel robot. I wondered if part of this lab was repurposed for creating Stampede.

With a start, I realized that the poor zebras in this town were living under the shadow of Doom... bunny. The irony was so bitter I had to bite back a laugh.

“What about trade?” Calamity asked.

“No caravans stop here,” the zebra mare told us. “There is nothing here that any pony wants, and we have nothing to buy supplies with.”

Velvet Remedy gasped in horror as a zebra hobbled out of one of the shacks, teetering on only three legs. The remains of the fourth looked badly infected. "You... don't have a doctor either, do you?"

"Not anymore."

We made the full circle. There wasn't much of the town to see. Our host waved a forehoof. "Sleep wherever you want."

"Is this... all?" Xenith asked slowly as another zebra walked by, eyeing us curiously. I found myself staring; the zebra had used charcoal to outline her stripes so heavily that she looked like a black-coated zebra with white stripes rather than the reverse.

"Don't mind Gloom," our guide told us dismissively.

Xenith shook her head. "Are there no other zebras here?"

The zebra mare shook her head. The other zebra mare, Gloom, turned. "The Nightmare Moons took them. Six nights ago. They are all dead now. Wish I was."

"The... Nightmare Moons... took them?" I asked.

Our host nodded. "They came and took half of us. I do not know why. They have never paid any attention to us before."

Xenith looked pained. "Was one of the ones taken named Xephyr?"

The striped mare blinked at Xenith. "Yes." At Xenith's stricken expression, the other zebra turned away, looking instead to Velvet Remedy. "She was our doctor."

I pushed forward, catching the zebra mare's attention. "Which way did they go?"



"You do not have try to rescue them just because one of them is my daughter," Xenith said as I reloaded my guns. "Nor because you feel you need to make up for the cannibal town."

“No,” I agreed, slipping Little Macintosh back into its holder. “We need to do this because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Ayep,” Calamity agreed, trotting up next to us, clad in his Enclave armor minus the helmet. He’d spent a lot of his spare time since Old Olneigh juryrigging a way to fire the novasurge rifles without wearing the helmet. “Plus, Ah hate to say it, but this might be on us.”

I stopped. What? I stared at Calamity.

“Ah reckon the Goddess ain’t stupid,” Calamity responded. “She’s figured out she’s got a blind spot, and she’s... experimentin’.”

This... this had to do with the memories I had stolen from myself, didn’t it? “Well, if it wasn’t settled before...”

“I’m going to stay.”

I turned to Velvet in surprise. The unicorn shook her head. “These people need a doctor. Not when you come back with theirs, but now. It has been five days since the alicorns attacked Glyphmark, and that is five days too many.”

I could see it in her eyes. She believed that *she* had something to make up for. And she wasn’t going to turn away from another pony, or zebra, in need.

I stepped forward and gave her a hug. “Stay safe.”

“I should be telling you that,” she replied. Pyrelight landed on a rusty barrel next to us and hooted quizzically. Velvet gave the beautiful bird a nuzzle before saying, “Go with them, please, Pyrelight. Keep them safe.” The bird nodded, giving a little salute with one of her wings.

Looking to Calamity, Velvet demanded, “Bring them all back without any new holes.”

“Ah’ll do muh best,” he said, tipping his hat.

I released Velvet Remedy and turned towards Xenith and Calamity. “So, do either of you know anything about this place we’re headed,

Zebratown?" The answer from both of them was an unsurprising no. Once more, we were headed into the unknown.



It felt like it had been raining forever. I was panting as we ascended yet another hill, rethinking the wisdom of walking to Zebratown. Hearing that Zebratown was only an afternoon's trot away, Calamity had suggested we travel on hoof and I had agreed, suspecting the *Sky Bandit* would be too visible, and the alicorns would be looking for it.

Now I realized the idea of trotting back over these muddy hills with freed zebras in tow and possibly alicorns chasing us was just stupid.

I heard a whistle from the air above us. (Didn't help that Calamity wasn't exactly traveling on hoof.) Looking down, I saw another little valley with spots of asphalt indicating a nearly-vanished road. There was an ancient stone hut down there amongst collapsed sections of fence. The body of a dead bloodwing sprawled over the roof and a second was impaled on the iron struts of what, until recently, had been a windmill. A figure was galloping towards us from the door of the hut, clad in metal armor striped in Applejack red.

"Whole big ol' valley t' land in an' ya manage t' hit the *one* hut!" Calamity shouted to him, grinning.

I raced down the hill to meet him, Xenith following at a more reserved pace.

"Watch out," Calamity warned as I reached SteelHooves. "She's gotten huggy lately."

"I seem to recall it was you who hugged her," the Applejack's Ranger retorted, a welcome hint of good humor in his normally taciturn rumble.

Several minutes later, we stepped into the little two-room hut to get out of the continuing drizzle.

"Whoa," Calamity said, echoing my own sentiment as he came to a stop, rainwater dribbling off the brim of his black desperado hat.

I'd seen enough of the ravages of time and the scattered refuse that was left behind after generations of scavengers. This wasn't it. Pictures were slashed apart, furniture was smashed under hooves, small treasures were defiled.

I'd also seen the malicious destruction of raiders. The wreckage in the cottage was much closer to that, but this wreckage was old, bearing all the signs of predating the apocalypse. The torn pictures were so faded with age they were unintelligible. The furniture was rotting. The stuffing in the ripped pillows had turned to dust, presuming they were not stuffed with dust to begin with.

"It gets worse," SteelHooves warned. I stepped farther inside, and the turn of a corner revealed the collapsed remains of a skeleton on the floor beneath a hanging noose. Any physical clue as to whether the owner of that skeleton had hung himself or been lynched had been obliterated by the past.

Calamity kicked over a pile of broken chairs, then trotted into the kitchen to see if there was anything worth saddlebagging in the fridge. A minute later, I heard the pop and hiss of an opening cola bottle. Clearly, his search had born fruit.

I poked at a terminal laying amongst the rubble, its screen smashed in by a hoof. Then stopped, taking a closer look. It was one of those newer models I had been finding operational everywhere. And upon closer examination, the terminal was still running. Whoever destroyed it had fallen prey to the common yet silly misconception that breaking the screen had any effect on the device's spell matrix.

Calamity trotted back in, holding a Sunrise Sarsaparilla in his teeth and taking a swig.

I floated out a few tools and crouched next to the terminal.

SteelHooves regarded Calamity. "Are we on a date?"

Calamity spit his sarsaparilla, spraying it around the neck of the bottle as he choked. "What now?" he said, dropping the bottle, tears in his eyes.

I stopped what I was doing, stared, then collapsed in laughter. Served him right!

"I had assumed that you had seen the decoration on the roof and were coming to find me," SteelHooves noted, "But now I see you're all dressed up."

Beating at his armored chest with a hoof, the pegasus shook his head, coughing. Once he had his breath again, he answered, "Naw. We're headed on up t' Zebratown t' save a hoof-full of prisoners from alicorns." I noticed he didn't mention the prisoners were zebras. "So, ya with us, mighty alicorn hunter?"

I'd almost forgotten that title.

SteelHooves was strangely silent. I looked at him, wondering if I should be concerned. Was he thinking about Arbu again?

"Zebratown," SteelHooves voiced slowly.

"Ayep!"

"I would... rather not." There was an unpleasant tension in his voice. I looked at Xenith, who just shook her head sadly and walked back out into the rain.

"But I will." SteelHooves sounded greatly displeased. "It is what Applejack would have her Rangers do."

I nodded, feeling both sorrow and pride in our ghoul companion. I turned back to the terminal, connecting it to my PipBuck and running a quick diagnostic. My eyebrows shot up as I realized the terminal was safeguarded with some pretty heavy magical countermeasures. I was sure I could hack it, but the price of failure would be more than a simple lockout.

I turned away from the others and put my full focus on the terminal, hacking it through my PipBuck. After a few minutes, I had to back out and try again. I hadn't encountered a terminal with this level of security since the Ministry of Morale in Manehattan.

Now I was intensely curious. Why would the pony or zebra living in such a humble hut have need for a terminal with security that rivaled that of the Mare of the Ministry of Morale?

A few minutes later, I backed out again, just barely avoiding tripping the security spells embedded into the terminal. This was insane! The damn password was thirty characters long. The fuck!

I tried a third time. And a fourth. By my fifth try, I was beginning to suspect that the terminal only existed to frustrate the living hell out of me.

Xenith returned, several strips of leathery flesh from the bloodwings' wings dangling from her mouth. She shook, flinging water over the rest of us, then put the strips into her satchel, ignoring nasty looks from a dripping Calamity.

On my sixth attempt, I finally broke in. The password was "AstronomicalAstronomersAlmanac". I felt a brief flash of empathy with whoever put their hoof through the terminal screen. The terminal had not weathered the years well, far worse than most similar models, but that was to be expected with part of its innards exposed. Still, there were a number of files that I was able to download into my PipBuck, including several entries from a journal.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day One:

Today is the first day of my mission-imposed exile from the refined walls of Canterlot. I arrived in Zebratown at the stroke of eight, the royal guards dropping me and my bags off a small trot from the city limits. I did not blame them for not wishing to travel closer. And with Celestia's sun shining above and a cool breeze coming off the mountains, the day invited a walk. My levitation spell is enough to care for my possessions for such a short distance and prevent the walk from being a burden. Although I admit I was a little concerned for the safety of the priceless heirloom with which I have been entrusted.

I would say that this is a fair town by Equestria's standards, but Zebratown does not hold itself to such standards at all, now does it? Still, it is far better than the complete hovel I expected. I had heard that there was a town somewhere out in the dirtier parts of Equestria that the earth ponies had built in merely a year. Well, if that is true, then maybe there is a little earth pony in the zebras (and I do not mean that in an offensive or seditious manner), for in just a few years they have turned a poverty-riddled shantytown at the very foot of Canterlot into something rather impressive. Most impressive, I must say, is the elevated aqueduct that runs up the mountain and directly under Canterlot, catching the water which spills continuously from our glorious capital's moat and distributing it not only through the town but the farmland beyond.

And to think that this entire place was not even a concept not so long ago. But then, there was no real need for segregation until the zebras massacred our children at Little Horn. Not that I believe the zebras who are upstanding Equestrian citizens should all be moved here, mind you. There are plenty of zebras in Canterlot. I even have a friend who is a zebra. But in the more backward, bumpkin parts of the kingdom, with the increasing anti-zebra war sentiment, it simply isn't safe for them to be amongst normal ponies. It really is better this way.

That said, I was pleased to learn that the hut which Princess Luna has provided for the duration of my research here is actually a few miles outside of the town proper. As for the hut itself, it is... cozy. Far from the refinements and luxuries I have been accustomed to in the castle; but I am a scholar, not a noble, and so I have it in my blood to make do, being unburdened as I am with the nobility's allergy to anything plebeian.

I have spent this afternoon getting settled in, including the task of troubleshooting the new terminal. Why is it that any new piece of arcano-technology always seems to come with more headaches than the one that it replaces? Of course, a fair part of the difficulties may have arisen from the installation of the security spell sub-matrix, but considering the sensitive nature of my research, it would simply not do to have one of the striped with an unhealthy sense of curiosity go poking around in my affairs, now would it?

Tomorrow, I shall trot back up to Zebratown and try to get acquainted with the town and its citizenry. Being able to establish a degree of good relations will be critical before pursuing avenues of inquiry.



“What can you tell us about Zebratown?” I asked SteelHooves, having to shout to make my voice heard over the distant roar of rushing water

The Applejack Ranger’s response was, “Look up.”

I lifted my head, holding up a hoof to shield my eyes from the downpour. The drizzle of the last several hours had thickened, working towards another tempest.

Dark mountain cliffs rose sharply above us. As my gaze ascended, I saw Canterlot. The broken majesty of the castle and surrounding city jutted out of the mountainside almost directly above us. I had expected it to be shrouded in a haze of pink, but the rain painted the ornate ruins in the same palette of drab grays as the rest of Equestria. Multiple waterfalls, violently engorged by the rain, plunged down from above with the roar of a thousand manticores.

“Follow the largest of the waterfalls, and it will lead you to Zebratown,” SteelHooves informed us.

I watched the torrent plummeting downward parallel to the sheer cliffs until it met with a multi-arched structure (which reminded me oddly of the Fillydelphia roller coaster), washing over it with an unending, thunderous bellow. Although a few foothills still blocked our view of Zebratown itself, the village was very close now,

“What’s it like?” I asked.

The ghoul responded with a stereotypically laconic yet ominous, “Bad.”

“An’ here Ah expected him t’ say somethin’ even less helpful, like ‘wet’.”

SteelHooves didn’t rise to the bait. “You have been told what happened to Canterlot,” he said. “When the first missiles were inbound, the Princesses joined together to raise an alicorn shield over the entire city.

The shield was massive. It had to be. They weren't just protecting the castle. There is an entire city up there you can't easily see from below."

I nodded. The royal castle was only the most visible landmark from below. Ministry Walk was in Canterlot, as was Princess Celestia's

School for Gifted Unicorns and who knew how much more. I could spot fragments of a winding road, switchbacks carved into the mountainside for chariots and carriages to make the ascent.

I was picturing it now: the Princesses' potent shield being bombarded, awash with fire and shaken by explosions. I knew that alicorn shields hampered sound and vision, but still wondered what it must have been like for the ponies cringing inside.

"When the zebras' megaspell went off, the shield filled with the Pink Cloud, so thick you could not even see the shadow of the castle inside it."

In my mind's eye, I now saw Canterlot replaced on the cliff side by a solid pink bubble, like a gargantuan bubblegum-flavored candy jawbreaker.

"Their shield continued to trap the Pink Cloud for hours while the Steel Rangers and others attempted to evacuate the towns in these foothills. Zebratown lies directly beneath Canterlot. It was hit the hardest when the shield went down."

SteelHooves looked at me, "You may want to consider this a dry run for Canterlot itself."



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Two:

My first attempts to befriend the residents of Zebratown were met with suspicion and guarded politeness, but no hostility. And, considering the state of things here, I regard that as a small triumph on my part.

Aside from differences in architecture, and of course the glaring striped-ness of the inhabitants, I could almost have believed I was in some extremely poor backwater pony town. Ponyville perhaps. Of the two things that stood out to me the most, the reluctant geniality of the population was something I could expect to find in almost any hub of civilization that has not yet ascended to the heights of society where the thinness and chill of the air requires an extra coat of snobbery.

The other matter was altogether more telling and more jarring, and that was how the war has left its hoofprint on Zebratown. Aside, that is, from the mere existence of this place. First, I found none of the patriotic posters or billboards that are beginning to dominate Canterlot. I hardly expected signs reminding the residents how much better and more virtuous they are than zebras, nor encouragements to join the war effort, but I was surprised not to find a single poster relating to any of the Ministries. In fact, the only hoofprint of the Ministries in all of Zebraville is the occasional patriotic song belted out by one of those new sprite-bots. There are a few of them bobbing around town. And just like the ponies of Canterlot, the zebras pay them little attention. Honestly, a song that inspires patriotism the first one hundred times you hear it will inevitably stop doing so within the first one thousand.

The other hoofprint is the presence of soldier ponies here. This, I am given to understand, is a very new development. Ever since the assassination attempt on Princess Celestia, the residents of Zebratown have been subject to harassment from ponies in nearby towns. Princess Luna has put Her hoof down, stationing some of Equestria's Finest in Zebratown for the residents' protection and safety.



The road to Canterlot had become a raging river. Calamity held me as we flew over the muddy waves, my horn glowing. Behind us, SteelHooves and Xenith rode an arched stone bridge which floated through the air behind us, surrounded by the glow of my magic. Centuries of these storms had torn the bridge from its original moorings and washed it into the valley where I had found it half-buried in mud. Pyrelight flew along beneath it, taking advantage of the stone

canopy, her occasional breaths of fire reflected by the churning water below.

Seeing the river that the road had become, I again re-thought our decision to leave the *Sky Bandit* behind. The little bridge had become my compromise; it was large enough to carry the prisoners we intended to free as well. And if the streets of Zebratown were flooded, the stone bridge was less likely to float away while we busy rescuing than the passenger wagon.

Suddenly, my head began to pound. I felt a terrible tightness in my horn. Strange red tint flooded my vision. My magic wavered, threatening to implode. I tried to focus harder, but the throb in my head rose to a scream.

Pyrelight let out a screaming squawk.

I was barely able to hear SteelHooves shouting to Calamity, "Up! Get higher! Fast!" I felt the tug as Calamity grunted painfully, flapping his wings harder. I could hear Xenith let out an agonized moan.

Then, as quickly as the torment had come, it was gone. The screaming pain in my head was gone. My hearing cleared. I gasped, blinking away tears and the swimming redness. I wiped the tears from my eyes and then stared at my hoof, aghast at the smears of red quickly washing away in the rain. I had been bleeding from my eyes.

"W-what...?"

I felt Calamity relax, his flying shaky. Behind me, Xenith's voice seemed to shudder, "By the ballsacks of a thousand star-devils, who dropped the moon on us?"

Okay, that swear was just disturbing. Although her description was as apt as any.

"Broadcaster," SteelHooves said, his voice betraying no hints that he had suffered as we did. "There are probably several scattered about, washed out of Canterlot by the rain."

I glanced behind us at the river we had passed over. The broadcaster was somewhere under the waves. We couldn't have seen it; I couldn't even hear the static over the roar of the waterfalls. There had been no warning until the effect began to kill us.

I turned my stare forward again as we crested the last hill. Zebratown sprawled out before us. The ruins had been left undamaged by the war only to be slowly battered down by the hoof of time and constant floods. Most of the zebra huts had collapsed, leaving not even skeletons. A small maze of crumbling shops and zebra insulae lined the merchant roads, and a few larger buildings formed grey masses shrouded behind sheets of falling water.

The largest waterfall from Canterlot, engorged by the storm, crashed into the widening mountain cliff less than a quarter-mile from the edge of Zebratown, its roar filling the air. The pounded aqueduct stood under the onslaught, delivering part of the waterfall's payload directly into the town along an elevated canal. But the structure which had survived hundreds of years under the falls had collapsed at several points within town itself, the water now pouring into the streets instead of flowing out to the hills which had been the zebras' cropland.

As we flew over the streets of Zebratown, I saw veins of pink swirling in the water. The rain proved a double-edged sword, washing the Pink Cloud out of the air. We could remain outside safely, but we dared not set hoof in the shallow lakes that had once been streets.

At least we would be able to keep our armor on. I needed my PipBuck to locate the zebras.

I looked up at the Canterlot Ruins above us, wondering what the rain was doing to the city above. Clearly, rains like this had happened many times before, and the Pink Cloud always returned. SteelHooves would have told us if it were otherwise. But would entering Canterlot during a storm make our mission safer or more dangerous?



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Three:

I spent another day in Zebratown, acquainting myself with the proprietors of several of the businesses where I may make later inquiries, as well as presenting myself to the zebra constabulary within the Zebratown Police Station. The local law was quick to inform me that Zebratown operates under the same laws as the rest of Equestria and that the zebras are more than capable and willing to police their own. They offered to show me their vault of confiscated items and contraband if I doubted their efforts.

Believing I had gotten off on the wrong hoof, I swiftly assured them that I was not here on any matter of the Ministries or military, and that I was just conducting personal research for a thesis. I received even more suspicious looks at that, as well as a rather rude inquiry as to whether I was researching "inherent zebra inferiority". As if anypony would want or need to do such a thing! No, I reassured them, confiding instead that I was doing a study on zebra astrology.

To my dismay, this produced an even worse reaction than the notion I was researching zebra inferiority, and it took all my not-inconsiderable charisma and social graces to assure them that my studies were benign. Still, I left the encounter feeling a little shaken and slightly alarmed at the task before me.

The thoughts I find most particularly disquieting are the images my mind conjures of the locals' reaction should they learn the truth behind my research.



"So where d'ya expect the zebras are bein' held?" Calamity said as we flew over a large open area dominated on one end by a fountain with a statue in the form of Princess Celestia. Water pressure from the raging aqueduct was causing the fountain to blast streams of water from Celestia's eyes, wingtips and horn like they were pressurized hoses.

I had my E.F.S. up, but the only lights on my compass were my friends and the occasional pulse of red. I could never get a fix on the enemy (or enemies) that my E.F.S. was picking up before they vanished again. It was making me nervous.

"There are not many structures left to hold them in," Xenith said, the sight of the ruined zebra town having no apparent effect on her.

"I don't believe the alicorns would choose one of the smaller shops as a base," SteelHooves noted. "It doesn't fit their sense of ego." That narrowed down the search areas considerably. "On the other hoof, they could be using the Zebratown sewers." And that just widened it a lot.

"Sewers?" I moaned.

"Tha' would explain why the town ain't even more flooded than this," Calamity appraised. "Ah'm guessing they built 'em t' handle spring floodin'."

"Amongst other things."

My compass flared red again as we swept over the broken rooftops of a row of zebra insulae and flew out over what had once been the Zebratown Amphitheatre (and was now a large inner-city lake). Crumbling walls of columns and archways ringed the old amphitheatre; each column that still remained intact was crowned with stone-carved masks of alien and most unwelcoming designs. I cringed at the thought of attending a performance with those wicked-looking faces staring down at me from every column of the theatre.

Standing in one rain-shadowed archway was the near-black form of an alicorn. She saw us almost at the same moment we spotted her. Then she vanished with a flash.

Fuck. It was one of the teleporting ones!

"Expect company," SteelHooves warned.



We had to get out of the sky. We were too easy a target.

Calamity flew towards the largest intact structure, dropping me onto the cracked rooftop before setting down himself. Pyrelight darted out from under the stone bridge just before it slammed into the rooftop, spilling SteelHooves and Xenith. The Applejack's Ranger landed in a

graceless thud while the zebra somersaulted gymnastically, ending on all four hooves and turning to stare at the grumbling ghoul with a raised eyebrow and the slightest hint of a smirk.

“My fault!” I called out as SteelHooves pushed himself back up.

A loud groan rumbled through the roof underneath my hooves. I knew immediately that it was about to collapse. It had been on the verge of crumbling for decades, and our landing was the final insult.

Looking up at my companions, I whimpered, “I hate ceilings.” Ceilings, roofs, floors... anything that could tumble out from underneath me. In all the fucking wasteland, they were my greatest enemy. I started to focus, intent on levitating myself and my companions... and possibly laughing victoriously.

The roof caved in, sending plumes of pink gas upwards at us. My vision blurred, my head throbbed, my lungs fought for proper air. My spell imploded and I fell into the pink.



My body hit the floor in a chamber of thick pink gas. The Pink Cloud had seeped in through cracks in the ceiling and collected here. The medical assist spell in my PipBuck started flashing warnings across my E.F.S. as my internal organs began to suffer. My heart felt strained, my lungs struggled to take in enough air. I could feel something terribly unpleasant in my bowels.

There will be pockets where the Pink Cloud has settled and pooled, SteelHooves had warned us. Avoid them if you can, dash through them with all haste if you cannot. While still only a fraction of the potency of the original Cloud, such pockets will kill you in seconds.

I pulled up my PipBuck’s automap, checking my orientation towards the nearest door. “This way,” I tried to shout, my voice fighting for volume. “Follow me!” I charged for the door, praying that the room beyond was safe. If it was not, I would likely be dead before I could find another.

I hit the door, throwing it open. To my dismay, the hallway beyond was curtained with the same cloying pink. Half of the doors along the way were open, offering no salvation. The Pink Cloud would kill me before I reached the end of the hall.

Galloping to the first closed door, I screamed wretchedly as I found it locked. I was in no condition to pick a lock. I hurled myself at the next, my heart feeling like it was about to explode. My lungs were burning. My vision was getting dark.

The door opened. I tore into the next room, praising Celestia as the pink cleared, only to thud against a stone railing. My E.F.S. was still flashing warnings and the compass was all manner of red. I needed a health potion to reverse the damage the Pink Cloud had done, and fast before my organs started to fail.

With severe alarm, I realized that Velvet Remedy still had all our medical supplies.

My vision was dark but clearing. Calamity shot past me, hovering in the air just beyond the railing. As SteelHooves and Xenith galloped through the doorway behind me, I heard a crunching sound from beneath. Looking around, I realized we were on a semi-circular stone balcony overlooking a cavernous tiled room flooded in water. Much of the water was shallow enough to wade through, but there were sunken pockets where it was very deep. Streams of pink swam like ribbons all about the floor. The room below us had several small tiers, the steps between becoming waterfalls, and hosted many balconies and exits. A dozen zebras looked up at our appearance with hostile expressions and dead eyes.

"Lovely choice," Xenith intoned, sounding terribly weak. "If we wish to avoid the poisoned water, what better place than a bath house?"

The balcony shifted under our hooves. "Not again," I groaned, throwing my spell around myself and my companions as the tiled floor beneath us canted dangerously.

The semi-circle of stone tore from the wall, smashing down into the tiled floor below, shattering a hole in it. The four of us hovered over the bath house interior, surrounded by my magic.

“HA!” I yelled down at the ruins of the balcony, ignoring the odd looks I was getting from Calamity. “Ha, ha, ha!”

In response, a host of voices whinnied strangely from below. Several of the dead-looking zebras galloped towards the exits in room beneath us. Water had begun to gurgle down into the hole created by the fallen balcony.

The air filled with explosions as SteelHooves opened fire with his grenade machinegun, the grenades tearing the bodies of the zombie zebras apart. The room was filled with blasted water and flying chunks of tile and concrete.

At least three of the “dead” zebras had made it to an exit, but most died in the onslaught. Xenith cried out as one of the escapees came charging up the pink hallway and leapt out the still-open door behind us, waves of pink mist curling out after it as it soared through the air and impacted with SteelHooves, knocking them both out of my levitation field. The zombie zebra and the ghoul plunged into one of the pools below with a splash.

“Well, he could use a bath,” Xenith commented as we floated above the pool, watching the dark figures of the two hoof-fight under the water, neither of them able to drown.

“Y’all figure he needs any help?” Calamity asked. We both shook our heads.

“Where’s Pyrelight?” I asked, suddenly realizing we were down a party member.

Calamity scowled, blushing a little. “Still flyin’ ‘round outside, Ah reckon. Bird’s smart ‘nuff not t’ fall through a roof when she ‘as wings.” For Calamity’s sake, I tried not to smirk.

The floor around the pools was slowly draining. Casting about, I spotted a row of yellow medical boxes. Salvation! ...assuming there

were any health potions to be found inside. Telekinetically pulling myself from the others, I flew up to the medical boxes. The first was unlocked, yet still full of medical supplies. Zebratown had not suffered the looting that had emptied nearly every unlocked box in the wasteland. If this is what Zebratown was like, how about Canterlot? I suddenly understood SteelHooves' concerns about distractions.

My head was still throbbing. My breathing was painful, fast and shallow. My gut twisting inside me as something seemed to shift, burning in my bowels. I didn't need the medical assist spell to know I was on the verge of something inside me failing. And I was the first out of the Cloud; my friends had to be worse. I floated the healing potions I found inside up to Calamity and Xenith, planning to use the first one I found in the next box myself. The next was locked.

My vision slowly darkened further as I focused on the lock. A new red light sprung up on my E.F.S. compass. Turning, I saw a zombie zebra push through a doorway, its seemingly lifeless eyes fixing on me, flaring with unholy light.

I whipped out my zebra rifle, sending three bullets straight into its head. *Pfft. Pfft. Pfft.* I could see the flare of orange flame as the corpse's brain burned. The zebra thing stumbled and went down like a sack of flour.

Turning back to the medical box, I finally got it open. Celestia lick me like she loves me! There was a super restoration potion inside! I downed it quickly before my vision could fade entirely and I lost the ability to focus anymore.

At once, my vision started to clear, my breathing became easier, my heart started to beat more strongly in my breast. My ears filled with an unnatural, grating sound. I turned as the dead zebra was lifted back to its hooves in a swirl of unholy energy.

But... but I shot it in the head. With *fire!*

The "Canterlot" zebra proved just how much it didn't care as it struck out at me with a hoof. The impact bruised through my armor, sending my weightless body flying backwards. My head struck one of the

medical boxes, exploding in pain and stars as I collapsed into the water. I could hear Xenith splash down as my magic imploded. I felt a sticky warmth in my mane; the medical assist flashed warnings of head trauma.

Between my previous concussion and the weakening from the Cloud, I feared I may have suffered permanent damage. The fear washed away as I passed out.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Four:

Bearing in mind the extreme security on this terminal and the sensitive nature of the charts and documents already stored within, I have decided that it should be safe to record the particulars of my assignment and the discussion which led to my being thrust into the cultural wasteland. (And by that, of course, I mean anyplace that is not Canterlot.) I wish to do so now, while the words of the Princess are still fresh in my head, before time and events further mar the memory. I suppose I could have a memory orb treatment, but such objects are terrifyingly lacking in proper security. Any unicorn could get into them.

I should first note that I took this assignment willingly, even eagerly. There are some things that are simply more important to a pony than proper surroundings, proper meals and proper company. And for every pony, the foremost of those things is their special talent, as magically emblazoned on their flank by their cutie mark. Sadly, there are ponies whose only talent in life is to be a stuck-up bore, or a rock farmer, or something equally as awful. But I had the unique misfortune of having the cutie mark of an event that would never occur within my lifetime.

The last centennial meteor shower occurred over Ponyville ten years before I was even born, and the next is not scheduled to occur until decades after I am likely to have passed away. So the ability to not only see but actually touch that very thing my cutie mark represents, to hold it in my hooves, was too overwhelming a gift to possibly turn away.

Being the Royal Astronomer comes with many benefits, not the least of which is being within the same orbit as the Princesses. I have been in the position to observe Them in less than entirely formal company, and had even had occasion to speak to Princess Luna or Princess Celestia in years prior at Their beckoning. As such, I believe I have constructed a better assessment of the character of each of the Princesses than most anypony other than perhaps Their Royal Guard, each other and some of the castle staff.

For example, Princess Luna is the younger sister. She is also the smaller and the cuter sister. As a result of these traits, I have seen many ponies fall prey to the notion that She must also be the weaker and the more innocent of the two. It is a misconception I have seen the Princess Herself play to on more than one occasion, usually with devastating precision. If anything can be said of the Night Princess, it is that She is the darker of the two.

In my personal estimation, ponies are often inclined to suspect Princess Celestia is capable of acts that our benevolent Princess could never commit, and equally inclined to underestimate what Princess Luna is capable of.

It was with these things in mind that many within the castle were fearful of what was to come after the zebras attempted to assassinate Princess Celestia. For days, Princess Luna locked Herself away in Her chambers, refusing meetings with every pony save Her Sister. On the fourth day, She called Her cabinet to Her and the Six Mares met with the Princesses for most of that day and the fifth. After they left, I was summoned.

To my surprise, Princess Luna was neither wrathful nor cold nor overcome with remorse. She was, if I had to put a word to it, contemplative. She invited me in, offered refreshment, and made sure I was comfortable. (Which I was, aside from being dreadfully nervous.) And then She opened up to me, telling me things I do not believe She has likely shared with any other pony outside of Her inner circle, if only because it is a subject matter She chooses not to discuss.

I shall endeavor to transcribe the words of Her Majesty, Princess Luna, as best I can recall.

"If you were to listen to the old pony tales, they would have you believe that the conflict between Celestia and Myself happened over the course of an evening... which, after a

fashion, I suppose it did. But it was not a typical evening. The way it is told, one would think I threw a tantrum. Or that My Sister hurled me to a lunar prison at the climax of a breakfast squabble. Celestia did not choose to harness the most powerful magical energies in all of Equestria and turn them against Me either lightly or swiftly. In my insanity, I gave Her no other choice, and She still tried every avenue to reason with Me. Nor was the attack unexpected and unprepared for.

"What the history books gloss over and the myths leave out entirely is that the morning I rebelled lasted longer than what would normally be considered a week. There are also those who mistakenly believe that because Celestia raised and lowered My moon for a thousand years that She is more powerful and that Her banishment of Me was petty and unnecessary as She could have just taken control and lowered My moon Herself. That is not the case. She could only raise My moon all those centuries because I was not there, as I would be able to raise Her sun in Her absence. When it comes to the night, to use an ancient term, My power trumps Hers. I held my moon high and forced Her sun to stay down for over a week's time, and She could do nothing about it."

I cannot properly convey the sense of sorrow, bitterness and remorse that hid behind Princess Luna's voice. Yet regardless of how much private pain this revisiting inflicted, the Night Princess persevered.

"By the end of it, Equestria had entered a deep winter, the freezing cold was killing plants and wildlife alike, and ponies everywhere were suffering and facing death from cold or starvation. I did not care. I was in a great rage, and I wanted to punish.

"My wrath did not just spill out onto our lands. Before the end, both the griffins and the zebras had sent agents to assassinate me. But between my power and the protection of my armor, they stood no chance and I laid them low.

"Celestia did what She had to do. And even She could not break Me of My madness. Even My Sister was not powerful enough or pure enough of heart to save Me. It took others to do that. There is a... spark that is required to power the Elements of Harmony to their fullest, and it is hard to generate that spark if One is acting alone."

Words cannot express the depth of emotion I felt at these revelations. The wonder and the horror of them was beyond expression. Princess Luna gave me time to digest these things and finally to dare ask why She had chosen to confide them in such a lowly pony as myself. To be honest, there was a part of me that feared for my life. Such secrets were not for the likes of mere astronomers, royal or otherwise.

"I wish you to understand the context that I suspect surrounds the task I must ask you to undertake," She told me.

"You must understand two things. First, that the conflict between Celestia and Myself did not happen, dare I say it, 'overnight'. I had planned. Made preparations. I had anticipated that Celestia would use the Elements against Me eventually, and that others would try to stop me even sooner. So I had mystical armor fashioned for myself out of the rarest and most magically stalwart of all metals. What I did not foresee is that My Sister would banish Me. I had expected Her to attempt to strike Me down, and my defenses were designed around such an assumption. I had expected My Sister to be as cruel as I had become, and thus I lost."

With that she produced a small, plain lockbox. She used Her levitation, floating the box at a distance as if loathe to touch it. Setting the lockbox before me, She opened it with yet another spell, revealing a charred and twisted scrap of metal.

"This is a piece of Nightmare Moon's armor." She bade me to take it, examine it. The metal was light and cool to the touch, pale blue with an extraordinary sheen that put silver to shame. I asked Her where in Equestria had She found such metal.

"The metal is not native to Equestria. In fact, it is not native to this world at all. Every one hundred years, the skies of our world are graced with a meteor shower. There was one in the year Nightmare Moon was set free and I was saved... on the longest day of the one thousandth anniversary of my incarceration.

"I can see you have done the math. It is worth noting that on rare occasions, perhaps once every dozen showers, not all of the meteors burn up in the sky. There have been impacts. During the meteor shower which occurred in the year I was banished, there was one such impact in the Everfree Forest, not far from... the old castle.

"I believe the zebras' name for this is starmetal, and they have considerably more myths about it than we do. I want you to go to Zebratown... you may take this with you... and learn all you can of those myths.

"The zebras' reaction to My position has been more extreme than We had anticipated. For the sake of all of Equestria, I need to understand why."



Reading that passage while I recovered may have been a mistake. I had never envisioned what Nightmare Moon had done before. Never ever tried. Now that I did, the vision shook my soul with horror.

I was in a great rage, and I wanted to punish. I felt myself grow pale.

I thought of myself tearing through one of the shops in Arbu, telekinetically throwing the ponies inside up against the ceiling so I could see their Arbu marks. Then opening fire with the zebra rifle and releasing their burning, flailing bodies to fall to the floor.

There it was. I was Nightmare Moon in miniature.

But, if Nightmare Moon could become Princess Luna again, if She could lift herself from such abysmal depths of monstrosity to become the loving and love-worthy Goddess of our worship, then there really was hope for me. The words in the journal gave me the confidence that my hopes were more than just wishful thinking.

At the same time, they were a reminder that the stain of my fury-driven murders would never fade away. SteelHooves was right. Like Princess Luna, I would forever remember what I had done. And like the zebras remembered the actions of Nightmare Moon, there would be those to whom I could never be anything but that monster.

Xenith gave me the last of the healing potions. The third medical box had been locked as well, but it turns out lockpicking isn't required when one of your friends has a hellhound horn capable of slashing through metal with the ease of slicing an apple. I drank it, watching the medical assist warnings on my E.F.S. slowly die away.

“Next zombie zebra gets a missile up its kisser,” SteelHooves grumbled. I had gleaned that the battle in the pool had been frustrating, his armor refusing to allow him to fire his weapons underwater. The mental picture of two creatures who could not die from anything less than massive bodily harm being reduced to throwing hooves at each other underwater struck me as darkly amusing. I didn’t think SteelHooves would appreciate it if I snickered.

Soon, we were moving again. The bath house was not the prison we were looking for. The plethora of “Canterlot” zebras and the absence of alicorns told me that. But the basement of the bath house gave us an entrance into the sewers; and as much as I hated the idea of exposing ourselves to the water here, we couldn’t ignore one of the most likely places for the alicorns to be holding their captives. Fortunately, since both Xenith and I had both landed in the bath house water with no discernible ill effect, I suspected the concentration of pink in the rainwater was low enough to be reasonably safe. Or, at least, that is what I kept telling myself, as soon we were almost belly-deep in flowing rainwater, pushing our way through the huge, dark tunnels beneath Zebratown.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Seven:

Today, I availed myself of one of the more unique buildings in Zebratown. The zebras have made an interesting effort to blend their cultural heritage with a more proper Equestrian aesthetic. One of the results is the (in)famous bath houses of Zebratown. Water is piped in from the aqueduct, and several of the pools are boiler-heated. Patrons move between hot baths and cool as they mingle and discuss the matters of the day, or enjoy a poolside brunch at the provided tables. As utterly uncouth as bathing publicly is, I must admit that the experience provided by these bath houses is luxurious, both physically and socially.

I was astonished to discover there were ponies living in Zebratown. Only a hoof-full, I am told, but there are ponies

who have chosen to live their lives in this place. On purpose. I had the opportunity to converse with one such pony at the bath house, a delightful peasant mare named Daisy. It is Daisy's assertion that she chose to live here because the zebras need to be reminded that not all ponies are, in her words, "xenophobic bigots."

And on the matter of irrational fears, I found myself the subject of just such sentiments when a zebra mother screamed and pulled her foal from the bath (and soon the bath house entirely) upon the mere sight of me. When I endeavored to determine what I had done to provoke this rather extreme response, most of the zebras would not meet my eyes out of embarrassment. One finally explained, her face reddened with shame, that the mark of the three streaking meteors on my flank was the source of the zebra's terror. It would appear that the myths of the zebras have such a hold on the psyche of some that my cutie mark alone is cause for such reaction.

Upon leaving the bath house, I noticed several zebra colts quickly attempting to hide an inhaler, looking for all the land like they had been caught by their parents reading an issue of Wingboner Magazine. I am hardly a pony to know about such things, but I suspect they were using illegal zebra-imported pharmaceuticals. Perhaps the constables need to be keeping a better watch.



Whooooooooosh!

Twin missiles shot out from SteelHooves' armor-integrated battle saddle and barrelled down the sewer tunnel. More than enough firepower to kill even a Canterlot zombie-zebra.

The rockets exploded against the alicorn's shield with almost no effect.

Ahead of us, the cave-like tunnel continued beyond a gridwork of heavy iron bars which blocked our way. SteelHooves and Calamity tried to occupy the purple-coated alicorn as I hacked a wall-mounted terminal that controlled access to a heavy metal door inset in the side of the sewer tunnel. I worked as quickly as I could, hacking through the system, scanning strings of data for possible passwords.

The door clanged and slid open as I found and entered the correct passphrase: not_a_rainbow.

We charged blindly inside, SteelHooves hiding a proximity mine on the backside of the terminal before closing the door behind us and plunging us into darkness.

Several pairs of glowing white lights flickered in the darkness. My E.F.S. compass was showing four red lights. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and locked onto the first zombie zebra, aiming Little Macintosh right for the deadlights of its eyes.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

The powerful little revolver echoed in the metal chamber. SteelHooves' helmet spotlight burst to life, revealing a long, amateur laboratory filled with tables of ancient chemistry sets. The zombie zebra I had shot lay dead, most of its head removed. I really hoped it couldn't get back up from that. Three more stood about the lab, one of them holding a spear in its mouth.

SteelHooves opened fire, turning one corner of the lab into a blast zone, filling the room with smoke, heat and shattered glass. I quickly averted my eyes and bucked over a table, crouching behind from the backblast of SteelHooves' attack. Calamity and Xenith joined me.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Calamity yelled out, covering his hat with his forelegs.

SteelHooves, thank the Goddesses, stopped firing explosives. A second later, the spear struck into the table, the metal blade gleaming green as it pierced through the table, slashing my shoulder. I cried out, pressing a hoof to stop the bleeding. Calamity flew up, firing his novasurge rifles while Xenith pulled out healing bandages and treated my wound.

I heard another explosion, but this was from outside the door. The alicorn had tried to use the terminal and set off the mine. She wouldn't be getting in.

I felt a wave of dizziness. My fear of permanent damage to my head resurfaced. But then the dizziness was joined by a gut-wrenching feeling and I doubled over.

“Poison,” Xenith said simply. “Fear not. I know this brew. You will suffer, but only a little. Then you will be as good as new.”

As I doubled over in agonizing cramps, I found myself strongly disagreeing with Xenith’s definition of a little.

I heard the horrible, necromantic sound of the zombie zebra I had shot getting back up. Calamity fired again and I heard it liquefy.

The last zombie zebra leapt over the table, turning to face Xenith and me. I tried to focus, aiming Little Macintosh, but a tearing, twisting pain in my abdomen obliterated my concentration, leaving me gasping for air and praying for unconsciousness.

Xenith moved swiftly, striking at the zombie zebra with a hoof. I saw her eyes widen in fear as the monster failed to be paralyzed, taking advantage of her attack and sinking its teeth into her back just beneath one of her shoulderblades.

“Don’t touch me!” Xenith screamed, twisting away, her coat and flesh tearing bloodily as she pulled herself from the teeth of the monster. She whipped her head about, the hellhound horn slicing at the zombie zebra. Her attacker’s head tumbled from its body and rolled, stopping in front of my face, the deadlights in its eyes fading out as it stared lifelessly at me.

Xenith screamed again, pounding her hooves against the corpse. A moment later, she speared the dead zombie’s head with her hellhound horn and flung it across the room. It hit a box full of inhalers, knocking it over and spilling them across the floor.

Xenith collapsed next to me, trembling and breathing hard, blood flowing down her back.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirteen:

Inquiries are proceeding at an abysmal pace. Very few zebras seem to know much of their homeland's folklore. (And I have received more than one admonishment for using that phraseology, the zebras insisting that Equestria is their homeland.) It would seem that a large portion of the town's population are either unschooled in their heritage or have chosen to abandon anything that would tie them to the zebras we are fighting, including an adamantly feigned ignorance about any aspects of their homeland's culture and religion.

I cannot blame them. There have been a number of small incidents since I have arrived. These have mostly been spray-painting, broken flower pots, trampled gardens and other minor harassments. But I do understand that a constant air of intolerance, perpetrated by an insignificant few, can have an impact on the general psyche.

The soldiers who are charged with protecting the residents from such incursions are more worrisome than the hooligans themselves. I have come to learn that a few of the newly assigned mares and bucks served at Shattered Hoof Ridge. I will be writing a correspondence before the week is out, suggesting that perhaps it would be better to rotate out any member of our military recently involved in battle with the striped.



"Remember this place, little one," Xenith said softly as Calamity inexpertly applied Xenith's blood-stopping goop and the last of our bandages. "I will want to return here."

I nodded as I opened the laboratory's wall safe. I had hoped for more medicine, but instead found a revolver, ammo, a few decaying books and a recipe for making Dash. I gave the last to Xenith, taking the ammo for myself.

I took a moment to mark the lab on my PipBuck's autopap before trotting up to the wall terminal that operated the door on the opposite side of the labs. This one was a lot easier to hack. The door slid open.

Xenith moved slowly, letting the bandages mend her wound as best it could. The zombie zebra had gotten more flesh than meat; but she still needed a healing potion, and we had used all we had scavenged burning off the effects of the Pink Cloud. She edged up to an intact chemistry set and opened her satchel, pulling out jars of ingredients and strips of bloodwing leather.

Seeing that Xenith was preparing to brew, I turned to Calamity, “SteelHooves and I will scout ahead. You stay with here with Xenith.” The pegasus’ Enclave weapons had proven the best we had against zombie zebras in an enclosed space. There were two puddles of glowing goop on the floor that would never get up again.

I closed the door to the laboratory behind us. Now that I knew the passwords, access would be easy, and I didn’t want to give our enemies easy access. We moved forward. Water spilled into the tunnel through countless pipes and gutter holes. Thunder echoed through the sewers for long seconds after each crack from the sky outside. With all the noise, even SteelHooves was almost able to be stealthy.

We turned a corner and stopped, seeing the glittering wall of an alicorn shield covering the passage ahead. On the other side of the shield, the water level had built up until it filled the entire passage. Two dark green alicorns sat motionlessly in front of the shield, flanking the tunnel like guardian statuettes.

“What in the...?”

With a burst of light, the dark purple teleporter appeared between her two green sisters. She was bleeding from wounds caused by the terminal explosion. SteelHooves dropped into a battle stance. I pulled out my sniper rifle, kicking on my targeting spell, hoping I could get a shot off before she put up her shield.

“Gotcha!” she grinned wickedly, her horn flaring as she vanished in a flash, taking the two other alicorns with her. The shield spell disappeared and the wall of water came rushing at us.



I kicked, fighting to break the surface of the rushing river as it washed me violently through the Zebratown sewers. My head pushed above water, and I gasped for air in the moment before I was pulled under again, my body twisting about in the swift, churning water, my sense of direction torn away.

I felt my body slam into a set of iron bars. My head began to throb, a terrible pressure building in my horn, agony filling my ears. I tried to use the bars as a guide and push myself to the surface, lungs burning, desperate for air. Instead my horn hit the floor of the sewer, sending a spasming pain through my head. I gasped, drinking water into my lungs, beginning to drown.

In a panic, I reversed my direction and pushed myself up as hard as I could. My head burst through the water, the rushing underground river pressing me hard against the grating. I coughed up water, my head splitting in pain, my horn feeling like it was about to explode. My eyes were red with bloody tears.

Oh Goddesses! A broadcaster!

I was pinned. I couldn't swim away. Gasping, my mind crying in the most exquisite pain, I forced myself to dive back down. I opened my eyes, looking around in the murky, fast-moving water, and quickly spotted the skeletons of several ponies (or possibly zebras) who had washed up against the iron bars. One of them had a PipBuck on its foreleg. As swiftly as I could, my vision doubling as the pony in my head screamed, I tore the skeletal foreleg away, PipBuck and all, and twisted it, pushing it between the bars. The torrent washed the PipBuck and its corrupted broadcaster away.

I lurched back above the waves, coughing heavily, the pain in my head instantly gone save for a lingering headache. Through the iron bars, I could see the cold grey light of the stormy day, the water spilling out the end of the drainage tunnel I was trapped in. I panted harshly, letting the water pin me against the bars until the deluge lessened into a breast-high stream.

Something hard and metal dug into my rump. I moved and then felt in the water with my hooves. My sniper rifle.

A few minutes later, a single white light cut through the darkness of the tunnel behind me. At first, I thought it was a one-eyed zombie zebra. But then I recognized SteelHooves' helmet spotlight. My friend trotted towards me, splashing in the sewer river.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Three:

My research is beginning to bear fruit. Apparently, the most knowledgeable zebra in town regarding the old tales is currently being held prisoner in the Zebratown Police Station, although the shopkeeper I spoke to was either unable or unwilling to comment on the crimes for which he is being held. I will be attempting to gain an audience with the prisoner tomorrow.

Nearly a month into my exile and as much as I miss the castle, there is something about this strange, dirty little peasant town that is growing on me, albeit not in an altogether pleasant way. The shopkeepers no longer look at me with suspicion, and I enjoyed a crisp hay lunch with Daisy this afternoon.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that, despite the constables' insistence to the contrary, this town has a deeply embedded contraband problem. There have been three deaths in the outlying farmlands within the last three weeks that can be connected to a newly-banned drug called Dash. The deaths involve one overdose and two shootings, the latter both by the same individual who was high on the drug at the time she committed the murders. Combine this with a few of my own observations within the town, and I am becoming confident that Zebratown has its hooves deep in either the distribution or possibly even manufacturing of this dangerous substance.

On the way home, I noticed a couple ponies trying to sneak into town carrying what looked like bottles of liquor. Their behavior was suspicious enough that I stopped them and began asking their business in town loudly enough that one of the

nearby soldiers couldn't help but take note. Unsurprisingly, the ponies quickly remembered an appointment elsewhere.



No more exploring the sewers. At least, not until every other possibility had been exhausted. The alicorns had shown just how easily they could turn it into a deathtrap.

"Since when do alicorns say 'gotcha'?" I asked, standing shakily on the cobblestone street of Zebratown in a few inches of water. After what I had been through, I wasn't so concerned about getting wet anymore, no matter how many ribbons of pink I could see in the water.

Pyrelight circled overhead, seeming happy to see us again. We had managed to get separated from Xenith and Calamity, and I was dreading having to go back down to find them. No, better that I send SteelHooves to fetch them. He, at least, couldn't drown.

I looked around, realizing I had lost track of my metal-clad companion. The Applejack's Ranger had been standing right next to me a moment ago...

Turning, I spotted him standing at the edge of a side road, staring at his hooves silently. I trotted up, asking if he was all right.

"I died here," he said before falling into a long, strange silence.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Four:

I was on my way to meet with the local constabulary when I was forced to alter my normal approach due to several large, pony-drawn wagons blocking the street. Not being in a rush, I decided to take the scenic way around, taking the opportunity to locate and browse a store I had heard of, nestled in a back corner of Zebratown, which reputedly sells replica ceremonial zebra masks. I believe the proprietor of such a store would naturally possess a wealth of knowledge about zebra customs and, by extension, beliefs.

My plans for the afternoon were disrupted by a quickly muffled call for help. Apparently, a few of "Equestria's Finest" decided to have their way with a rather comely zebra mare. By the time I arrived on the scene, the bucks were on the ground, sprawling before their very angry commanding officer -- a sergeant by the name of Applesnack whom I later learned was one of the soldiers transferred here after Shattered Hoof Ridge.

From the way one of the soldier bucks held his ribs as he limped away, it was clear the sergeant had chosen a non-vocal means of intervening in the would-be assault, although he certainly had some choice words for them after he had bucked them flat.

What had the greatest impact on me, however, was what happened after. I was taking note of the sergeant's name with intention of recommending some manner of commendation when the zebra mare, shaken and sobbing, reached out a hoof to thank him. Sergeant Applesnack rounded, pushing her away and informing her that he stopped those bastards because they were a disgrace to Equestria and most emphatically not for the likes of her.

I feel another letter is in order, this time addressed directly to the Princess Herself.



SteelHooves' gaze was fixed on the stones of the road before him. In the cobblestones I saw four hoofprints. They looked like they had melted into the stones themselves. Slowly, SteelHooves stepped forward, placing a hoof into each of the indentations. I felt an odd shudder as I saw they matched him perfectly.

He looked upwards towards the spectre of Canterlot directly above us.

"I was here the day Equestria died," he said slowly. I stood still, listening.

"We knew the end was coming. Applejack and I were here evacuating every pony and zebra we could. Stable Three was locked behind the Princesses' shield, but there were others nearby." He turned to me, "You cannot imagine what it was like to look up and see the missiles

slamming into the shield around Canterlot, trying to break their way in and kill everypony inside.”

He looked away. “Then we got word that the zebras had wiped Cloudsdale out of the sky. Applejack excused herself and raced to Ponyville. I...” He gave a shuddering sigh. “I *never* blamed her for leaving. Or for ordering me to stay. There was no pony to blame but myself.”

From the timber in the stoic ghoul’s voice, I could tell my friend was actually crying. My heart went out to him, unable to bear hearing my stalwart Applejack’s Ranger finally unable to hide his hurt.

“We had been trying to repair our relationship ever since the night she had seen the darkness in me. I wanted to save us, but the damage was too deep. She could hardly look at me anymore. I didn’t understand *why* she was fighting to keep us together when I didn’t deserve her. ...But then, I didn’t know she was pregnant either.”

I wanted to hold him. To comfort him somehow. But I knew he wouldn’t be able to feel it. That armor of his separated him from the rest of us. All I could do was be somepony who was here and who would listen.

SteelHooves tried to shake off his sorrow. “I remained here. She left me in charge of the evacuation in her absence. I had been in Zebratown before; I knew the place. None of the other troops had that familiarity with Zebratown. I was the logical choice.”

He looked up, remembering as he spoke. My mind’s eye insisted on painting a picture from his words.

“The Princesses’ shield was huge,” he reminded me. “Several hundred yards above the city, the shield bisected the waterfalls that pour down into Canterlot. All that water came down and had no place to go. It pooled in the bottom of the shield as the missiles began impacting from above.

“Water absorbs the Pink Cloud all too readily. When the shield collapsed, that water fell down on Zebratown like a tidal wave from the

sky. Except the water was saturated pink. That wave washed over the town and everypony... everyone left inside it.”

He looked down again, stepping back from the indentations in the cobblestones, his voice carrying a pained nostalgia that told me just how much he didn't like being in this place. “I was standing right there.”



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Seven:

My correspondence to Princess Luna continue to go unanswered.

I took the starmetal into one of the town's jewelers for their appraisal, only to find myself kicked out of her shop and told never to return. This, from the same mare who swore not six days again that she neither knew nor cared a thing about the old zebra tales.

I was just leaving when a chariot raced by, drawn by a very familiar-looking pony as two others hurled burning bottles and shouted anti-zebra epitaphs too foul to sully myself repeating. One of the bottles crashed through the window of the jewelry shop, setting it ablaze. Doing what any good pony would have done, I tried to gallop to the shopkeeper's aid, but she fought me off, tossing a silver tea set at me before fleeing out a back entrance.

I suffered smoke inhalation and some minor burns, but nothing serious. The shopkeeper likewise was relatively unharmed. Not all were so lucky. A small zebra filly was caught in one of the fires and remains in the hospital, badly burned. The hospital here is poorly equipped and sparsely staffed, but they are doing what they can with healing poultices from zebra recipes you likely won't find in the books of the Athenaeums of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

The zebra filly shares the hospital with one of her attackers. Two of the ponies are being held in the Zebratown Police Station until a transfer wagon arrives. Again we have Sergeant SteelHooves to thank; the sergeant responded to the attack by drawing his sidearm and shooting the mare pulling the chariot in the leg.

I must take a moment to praise Zebratown's firefighting force who had the flames under control before the fires could spread to nearby buildings.

I spent most of the evening with the local constabulary, repeating endlessly my account of events. I attempted to use the opportunity to learn more about the zebra prisoner they have sealed in isolation, my efforts at gaining an actual audience having come to naught. This evening, one of the zebra constables deigned to inform me that the prisoner was charged with smuggling contraband into Equestria as well as another charge that I believe can best be translated as "heresy."

When I questioned whether the contraband was related to the increasing number of Dash-related incidents, the constable abruptly denied any connection between Zebratown and the local drug problem, proclaiming the influx of Dash was almost certainly coming from someone associated with the nearby veterinary pharmaceuticals company.

Instead, the constable insisted that the contraband, in this case, amounted to a book. When I asked if I might see the book in question, stating that it might shed some light on my research, the zebra informed me that he would be more than happy to oblige me were it not for the unfortunate fact that the Ministry of Image confiscated the book, removing it from their contraband vault a scant few days before.



Heresy. I had a very dark suspicion of what that meant. And what book had been taken from the zebras' contraband vault. We were headed into the Canterlot Ruins to get that Book, that very *black* Book, from Rarity's secret safe at the behest of the Trixie-Goddess. I did not know what my plans were from that point, but I had made it very clear to myself that getting The Black Book to Maripony was crucial.

Calamity and Xenith had rejoined us, and now we were crouched in the ruins of a nameless shop, staring across the cobblestone plaza at the Zebratown Police Station. Thanks to the journal of Midnight Shower, I had gotten the idea that this was the best place to look for the alicorns and their prisoners.

I heard a soft *ding* behind me as Calamity raided the store's bits register. I didn't even bother shaking my head.

I pulled out my binoculars, looking the Zebratown Police Station over. The aqueduct ran right behind the station, and part of it had collapsed, taking about a fourth of the building with it. The remains of the Zebratown Police Station stood in two separate sections connected only by the basement. I spotted an alicorn on the roof of the larger section. This was the place.

I looked at the front door and realized immediately that we would need another point of access. Not because of guards or a lock, but because the metal of the double-doors had warped, fusing into each other. I suspected that the collapsing aqueduct had poured a heavy amount of Pink Water into the police building, causing all manner of mischief.

"Which section do you believe they are holding my daughter in?"

"Oh, that's easy," Calamity answered for me. "Whichever section we don't try first."



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Eight:

My efforts to find the little shop that sells zebra ceremonial masks have again been thwarted by a combination of obscure local and conflicting directions. To an extent, I can understand and forgive the zebras for the aggravation. Any business steeped in the heritage of their native land would increase the negative perception of Equestrian zebras and likely become a magnet for attacks like the one yesterday.

I was able to encourage a young buck to speak with me in return for my discretion regarding a transaction between himself and several foals wherein inhalers were exchanged for bits. Not only do I have a possibly more accurate description of the store's locale, but the buck divulged a few slippery tenets of the striped's mindset regarding Princess Luna. For example, according to zebra folklore, the Princess Luna's madness and "depths of evil" could only be

explained by (and he said this in a derisive tone, clearly scoffing at such superstitions) "external forces".

When I queried him further, asking what he meant by "external forces", he laughed and responded, "The stars, you silly pony. The stars!"

In an attempt to engender camaraderie, I suggested that if he really wished to rebel against the foolishness of his elders, he could always get a star-shaped tattoo. To my surprise, he grew upset. His words, minus the unnecessary and rather crude epithets, amounted to "I mock their old religion because I am smarter than they are, not because I am stupid."

After that, I could get nothing further from him.

This brings to mind a tangentially related bit of local gossip. The mare who took a bullet to the leg died last night. The official statement claimed ill-defined "complications." If the rumor is true, she went into Dash withdrawal during surgery. In a small way, the attack was the zebras' own fault.

And on that topic, I passed Sergeant SteelHooves on my way to the markets. The stallion was busily scrubbing down his combat armor. Some pony had vandalized it most egregiously by painting stripes on the protective plates and scrawling "Zebra Lover" on one of the boots.

I offered my commiseration. It was completely unfair that he should be suffering ridicule for the stalwart performance of his duties, something I feel the majority of the soldiers here neglect more often than not.

Tossing the scrub brush, he spat and told me, "I hate this town and I'll be happy to leave it. Place like this makes it hard to simply hate zebras and love ponies." We conversed a short while, and during the course of the discussion, I found myself proclaiming the belief that these zebras were Equestrian citizens like any pony and deserved no less love and friendship. After all, it is not their fault that they were born with stripes. They had no choice in the matter. (If they did, I am sure they would have chosen to be ponies; it is not as if they are making a fashion statement.)

I have always been a very open-minded and egalitarian pony, after all.

He replied, "True. But I'm a soldier." He spoke as if it behooves a soldier to only think of zebras as the enemy and nothing more. Perhaps there is wisdom in that, but if so, it makes me thankful that I am not a military pony.

"This is the last you'll see of me. I've volunteered for a special assignment with the Ministry of Wartime Technology. My wagon pulls out this weekend, and I will never set hoof in this wretched town again. Equestria willing, I'll never have to play pleasant with a zebra again either."

Zebratown, I suspect, will be worse off for his absence.



I stopped reading, my ears perking at the sound of exploding missiles at least two blocks away. I whispered a quick prayer for SteelHooves. Surely, the Mighty Alicorn Hunter wouldn't have difficulty taking down one alicorn... I hoped. I quickly chided myself for worrying. SteelHooves was the most resilient ghou-pony-creature-thing in the entire damned Equestrian Wasteland. I should have more faith in my friends. But... still, I worried for their safety any time a plan called for anyone other than me to be the one taking risks alone.

Calamity would probably clop me upside the head if he knew what I was thinking. Hell, Homage would... well, actually, Homage would probably clop me someplace else and make me like it, and I really shouldn't be thinking about things like that at a time like this. Focus, Littlepip. Focus!

Calamity, Xenith and I pushed through what had once been an interior door in an upper floor of the Zebratown Police Station. The collapse had left the door exposed to the outside, giving us our point of ingress. Pyrelight flew in behind us silently. At this point, our efforts relied on stealth, so SteelHooves had volunteered to draw away the rooftop alicorn as we snuck inside.

I found myself struggling to both like and dislike Midnight Shower. I suppose it didn't matter either way. The pony was long dead. Maybe I cared because the royal astronomer had been given the amazing gift of enjoying the presence of Celestia and Luna personally. Or maybe it was

because this was somepony who had known SteelHooves at a rather difficult and important time of his life, and had made the effort to be at least cordial. However, the pony's civil bigotry continuously jarred me. And to think this was a member of the royal castle.

Before leaving him behind, I had asked SteelHooves about his first time in Zebratown, letting him know that the journals from the ravaged hut had mentioned his name.

"The attempted assassination of Princess Celestia and the heroic death of Big Macintosh struck deeply at everypony. Amongst those affected the worst were those of us in Big Macintosh's company. After the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge," SteelHooves had told me, "Princess Luna ordered all the soldiers involved to be stationed closer to the heart of Equestria and away from the front lines for at least half a year. A reprieve from the war, combined with the offer of counseling." His assignment had been in Zebratown, keeping the peace.

There were faint hints of pink in the room beyond. The effects were minimal, making me feel vaguely sick rather than the swift and cloying death that the concentrated pink we had experienced in the bath house. Still, we had to move swiftly. I prayed the alicorns weren't keeping the prisoners in a contaminated section. If so, the zebras we were here to rescue were probably already dead.

The first room opened into a narrow hallway. Calamity spread his wings only to have them hit the walls on either side. "Well, now that just ain't fair!" he grumped. "Stupid zebra architecture." He looked at Xenith apologetically. "No offense."

"None taken."

We crept forward, moving from one room to the next. Pyrelight and I took the lead, my self-levitation allowing me to clear away tripwires and disarm pressure plates that the alicorns had set up all over the upper floor. Again, the alicorns' tactics struck me as unusual.

I heard voices up ahead, the strangely majestic voices of the pseudo-goddesses. Only this time, the voices were strangely different. I couldn't

put my hoof on exactly why. I waved a hoof at those behind me, motioning them to stay back, and I slowly crept forward, listening.

"We have enough striped ponies, right?" one of them said. "We have..." she beat her hoof on the floor eight times. "That many."

"No, we have this many," another said, hoof-tapping seven times. "The scrawny one died when they went through the pink below, remember?"

"All the striped ponies are scrawny," the first complained. "Let us just take those we have and leave this Goddess-forsaken place."

There was something odd about the way they referred to themselves. Hell, the whole conversation was bizarre.

"We hate it here..." a third alicorn spoke up.

I froze, realizing a whole damn wing of the creatures was in the room right next to me. I started to back up, trying to think of another way around. We couldn't fight them, particularly not in such cramped quarters. We were thoroughly fucked.

"...This Goddess-forsaken place makes us remember things. I hate remembering things," the third voice continued, and all at once I realized why their voices sounded strange. I wasn't hearing them in my head. Just with my ears. "Last night, I remembered I used to be a buck."

Luna spank my withers! The Pink Cloud was messing with their telepathy! They were cut off from Goddess' influence here. No wonder Trixie needed *us* as her agents in Canterlot.

Then the other hoof fell. The Canterlot Ruins were supposed to be full of alicorns. And those alicorns didn't know we were supposed to be friendlies. We were all sorts of fucked.

I turned back, motioning the others back down the hall.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Nine:

Today was an amazing day.

After two more store owners refused to speak to me about the starmetal, I finally located the ceremonial mask shop and met with the proprietor. This time, I was cautious not to produce or even mention knowledge of the metal, instead asking about zebra legends surrounding the meteor showers, explaining away my curiosity with my cutie mark.

In return, the old zebra mare told me plenty, albeit in hushed tones and only after pulling me into a back room and closing up her store.

She spoke of how the zebras believe that the stars themselves are the visible avatars of unholy entities so unfathomable that our minds would crack should we perceive more than a notion of them. Beings of such primordial and loathsome will that all the evils of our world are no match for their vileness and cruelty.

Much of this I had heard before, but not in so chilling a fashion nor with such utter conviction.

Amongst the most interesting of her tales was the story thousands of years old, telling of one of the first zebra cities and how it was destroyed by several meteor impacts during the earliest recorded meteor shower. The city had been the zebra's hub of trade and politics, and its destruction plunged the nation into hundreds of years of tribal civil wars.

I do believe that the events of this tale, if true, represent the historical roots of what has become the dominant zebra mythology.

I had settled down on a park bench near the Celestia fountain (a zebra's rather hoof-forward way of saying "we're Equestrians too", I suspect) when one of those huge, new-model whirligigs -- a Griffinchaser V -- descended out of Canterlot, landing on the far side of the Zebratown commons. Now despite my position as Royal Astronomer, I had never actually seen one of the Ministry Mares. Today, I saw two. Fluttershy, Mare of the Ministry of Peace emerged from the passenger compartment along with eight other ponies, five of whom were carrying pink suitcases.

Pinkie Pie, Mare of the Ministry of Morale, stepped down from one of the six pedal positions, and ordered the heavily laden ponies to follow her as she marched through the front gate leading to one of the zebra huts, opened the door and went inside. Fluttershy politely requested the company of the remaining three and departed straight for the hospital.

Half an hour later, Pinkie Pie's five ponies emerged from the house, stowed their suitcases in the Griffinchaser, and began going door-to-door throughout the neighborhood. Not long after, Pinkie Pie herself emerged from the house, closing the door behind her, trotting up to the front gate, and planting something at the base of the gate underneath netting designed to look like dirt. Then kicked dirt onto it for good measure.

Then, the Mare of the Ministry of Morale proceeded to disguise herself as a trash can... with a fake beard. I must admit that it was amusing.

I will admit that I allowed my curiosity to get the better of me. I sat on that bench for over an hour, watching the bearded trash can watch the empty and apparently booby-trapped hut. My patience was rewarded when Fluttershy and her ponies returned, escorting a happily stunned zebra couple as their little filly dodged about their legs. I had not seen the filly until after she had been horribly burned, and it is doubtful that I would have recognized her even if I had, as zebras all tend to look alike. But it was not difficult to deduce who the filly must be.

Likewise, it became swiftly evident that the hut invaded by the Ministry of Morale earlier was her home. Even then, I was not ready for the explosion triggered when the little filly stepped onto Pinkie Pie's concealed pressure plate.

I suspect they will be cleaning up confetti from the Zebratown commons for weeks. Not to mention streamers from several of the rooftops. The little filly was utterly delighted... after she crawled out from behind her parents' hooves. (The blast of trumpets nearly had me cowering under the bench.)

Zebras poured out of nearby huts, although I was not sure how many did so on account of the invitation and how many were just trying to make sure the town wasn't being bombed. But the vast majority of them joined in the festivities regardless.

It all brought a smile to my face. Even if zebra fillies have a very different preference for party music than a proper Canterlot pony. The only one, in fact, who was not smiling was Pinkie Pie herself. But I suspect that may have been because she had thrown such an amazing party and didn't have the time to stay and enjoy it. The two Ministry Mares and their company were lifting into the air on that six-peddle-pony flyer before the filly had even gotten to cut the cake.



I crouched at the lock of the Zebratown Police Station's contraband vault, thinking as I worked:

Pinkie Pie took surprise parties to a whole new level.

I found myself thinking of the party trap on the roof of the G.R.H.A.S. building, wondering what sort of party she might have been setting up. A "welcome back, sorry the alligators bit your leg" party for one of the hatchery's staff, perhaps? Or merely a birthday party for somepony working there? Or maybe just a birthday party for one of the alligators? I shook my head. No, I couldn't imagine even Pinkie Pie throwing a party for an alligator. That would just be silly.

The tumblers moved into place, and the door opened. I stepped inside, turning on the light of my PipBuck and taking a deep breath as I enjoyed the stale but pink-free air inside.

My eyes fell on all the weapons and I stopped, stunned.

"Whoa! Nelly!" Calamity whispered. I could only nod. I was pretty sure the zebras were never supposed to have this kind of armament. If the ponies of Canterlot had ever had any idea that the striped Equestrian citizens just beneath them were stockpiling something like *this*...

"They was fixin' t' fend off an invasion," Calamity said softly.

Xenith nodded. "Most likely, they feared the ponies of Canterlot would eventually come for them."

"The guns are in real bad condition," Calamity said regretfully, "But Ah reckon Ah could fix up some right good ones out of the parts... maybe 'bout two dozen."

"Take them all," I said, suddenly getting an idea. I started unlocking one of the weapons lockers. "Everything you can repair into something good."

A moment later, I had the locker open and was staring at the... thing inside. "What is this?"

Xenith peeked over my shoulder and said simply, "Balefire Egg Launcher."

A *WHAT?* I rocked on my hooves.

Sure enough, one of the ammo boxes I unlocked later held several barefire eggs. Taking them, I floated up the B.E.L.

"I'll be right back," I told the others before creeping back into the pink. A few minutes later, I had made my way back to the hall doorway. The alicorns were still talking inside.

I stepped around the corner as S.A.T.S. activated, and was pleased to see one of the alicorns was a purple one with a recognizable set of wounds.

"Gotcha!"



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Two:

I received an official decree from Princess Luna today in response to my latest reports. By this document of authority, signed by the Princess Herself, the local constabulary is required to let me interview any prisoner in its custody.

I noticed an oddness about the town. It was as if the entire place was abandoned. All the stores were mysteriously closed. I proceeded directly to the Zebratown Police Station, only to find the doors shut and locked from the inside. It occurred

to me that today must be some zebra holiday. Considering the dark and ominous tones to most of their mythology, it does stand to reason that their holidays would be somber and fearful affairs. Although even then, the closing of the police offices seems exceptional. Ponies would never shut down vital services just because of a date on a calendar.



In my dream, I was Littlepip the zebra. I trotted about the zebra city... not Zebratown which attempted to blend zebra heritage with Equestrian aesthetics, but a real zebra city. A city formed in a hillside forest, the trees themselves molded into homes and buildings after their roots had been tended with the most ancient and sacred of magical brews. The homes were marked with masks of friendship and welcome. There were no fences. Just carvings blessing the home and warding off monsters. Gardens of vegetables and herbs stretched around each home, and flasks hung from the branches. I wasn't sure how I knew this is what a proper zebra city looked like (Be Smart!), but I *knew* it all the same.

I looked up at the bright starry night and smiled at the moon. My eyes caught a streak in the sky. I blinked, unsure of what I had seen.

But then there was another. One of the stars had fallen from the sky!

I heard gasps and murmurs from the other zebras around me. I had not been the only one to see it. Other zebras, my friends and neighbors, were staring up into the sky. Their eyes were wide as more stars fell, some of them streaking through the air towards us before winking out.

One particularly bright star fell from the heavens and did not wink out. Instead, it slammed into our forest village in a flash of light and sound and dirt, blasting apart homes and shaking the ground beneath us.

The stars were attacking us!

Another star fell from the sky, tearing a great fiery swath through the city, murdering dozens of my fellow zebras. Now there was panic. The streets were filled with my neighbors as they fled their huts, not knowing which way to run.

I felt the ground shake from another impact. The forest was burning now. I looked up, horrified, my hooves refusing to move as if I was glued to the ground. Another star, the brightest yet, tore from its rightful place in the night sky, shooting down right at me...



I awoke with a gasp!

I looked around at the rubble. Blowing up the three alicorns with a balefire egg was delicious overkill. One of them had even been fast enough to get her damned shield up before I could fire. Didn't help one damned bit.

But I had been unprepared for how big the explosion would be. I'd been cautious, aiming for the wall behind the alicorns. That wall was no longer there. Nor was the floor or ceiling. The room that the alicorns had occupied, as well as the rooms to each side, had become a gaping maw open to the rain.

I had fired and dived back behind the wall. That wall had blown into the hallway, collapsing, trapping me between it and the other. I checked the medical assist spell and was surprised to find that, while battered and bruised, nothing was broken. I was lucky that I wasn't a smear.

I looked around. The B.E.L. lay crushed under a chunk of wall. It was worthless now, although Calamity might be able to strip parts from it to repair another should we ever find one. I concentrated, wrapping the concrete chunk in a levitation field and lifting it away. I took the B.E.L., then used my levitation to make the broken wall weightless and pushed it away.

I was dragging myself out from under the floating rubble when Pyrelight landed next to me, Calamity and Xenith not far behind. Calamity was dragging a huge sack full of weapons.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Five:

This is no holiday. For three days, Zebratown has been like a ghost town for me. For three days I have sought audience with the constabulary, and for three days I have been denied.

I know there are zebras here. I can see their shadows moving behind their windows. I spotted one zebra mare pulling her welcome mat inside before slamming and locking the door at my approach. Another hurried her filly indoors, her expression aghast as the foal attempted to smile at me. The horror. The horror.

Enough is enough. I have an official decree from Princess Luna herself, and I am going to wait outside this door until I am recognized.



We waited at the bottom of the stairwell for Calamity. Our pegasus friend was using the gaping hole I had blown in the side of the police station to fly out and stash everything he and Xenith had taken from the vault.

Calamity had been right. The prisoners were not in this part of the Zebratown Police Station. I had scouted the rest of it with Pyrelight after assuring my friends that I was not as bad off as I looked. We found a few medical boxes in the station's bathrooms, and a few boxes of ammo, but no more alicorns and no zebra prisoners. They were in the other section. To get to them, we had to cross to the other section through the basement.

Xenith drank one of the three healing potions I had scavenged, letting it work on the zombie bite. She caught me watching her and smiled. "Fear not, little one. I will be fine. It is good that you cannot catch zombie from a bite, no?"

I nodded. Still, something in her expression felt off to me.

You do not have try to rescue them just because one of them is my daughter. Nor because you feel you need to make up for the cannibal town.

Wait, had she actually tried to talk me out of doing this? I turned to my zebra friend, asking cautiously, "Are you all right with us doing this?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, not following my train of thought.

"Rescuing your daughter," I said carefully. "You want to do this, right?"

Xenith glared at me a moment. But then her expression softened. "Yes, of course I do. I wish my daughter to be safe." Then, dropping her voice, she admitted, "I just do not know if I am ready to do this."

"What do you mean?" Okay, this place was bad. There were all manner of ways to die here. But this morning I had seen Xenith leap from a flying passenger wagon onto the back of a bloodwing in an effort to save people. It didn't seem like Xenith to be afraid of charging into danger with us.

"If I save her," Xenith said simply. "I am responsible for her again."

I remembered all those things I had dismissed as crazy zebra logic. But to my friend, they were not crazy at all. This was how things were in her world, and she was feeling cornered by impending responsibility that she didn't believe she deserved or could handle.

"Xenith, we have to." I explained lamely. "We can't let them die, even if rescuing them costs us something we aren't ready to give."

"I know that, little one. It does not make this any easier."

I nodded. "Then try to put it out of your mind for now. Focus on what we have to do, and we'll deal with the consequences when they come."

Calamity returned.

I unlocked the basement door and pushed it open with a hoof.

The basement was *full* of Pink Cloud.

"Crap."

I closed the door again, taking a few breaths. Then looked at Calamity, Xenith and Pyrelight. "Ready for this?"



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Six:

I waylaid one of the constables as she attempted to sneak home after her shift. Cornered, the zebra mare admitted that word had spread throughout town. Every zebra now knew that I was in possession of starmetal; worse, they had somehow surmised that it was a fragment of Nightmare Moon's armor which I had brought with me from Canterlot.

I was immediately anxious, knowing that the proliferation of this information would put the valuable heirloom entrusted to me in great danger of theft! The next words of the striped constable, however, revealed that the reverse was true. No zebra would be willing to venture close to the "accursed" chunk of meteor metal, nor would they abide my presence due to my association with the heirloom. Insanely, in the zebra mind, my "prolonged exposure" means that I am somehow contaminated, as if I have contracted a dangerously communicable disease. No stores will do business with me. I am unofficially but quite effectively shunned.

It is just a damned piece of metal!

Thrusting my papers into the zebra's face, I dragged her back to the station and demanded that she facilitate my access to the prisoner. I will admit to having been perhaps excessively loud and more physically forceful than is befitting a pony of breeding, but my efforts did provoke a response. Finally, the head of the constabulary opened the door, if only enough to poke out his head between the heavy chains that prevented me from forcing the door open farther. He took one look at my papers, agreed to the authority they provided me, but "regretfully" informed me that the prisoner had slain himself two nights before and would not be speaking with anyone, pony or zebra.

I was not satisfied. I demanded to see the body for myself. I suspected that the zebra was lying. Or worse, I suspected foul play to prevent me from speaking with the captive zebra.

To my surprise, the head of the constabulary capitulated. He withdrew and closed the door. I could hear the chains being removed. When he opened it again, all the constables had left

the room. I saw them watching from adjacent rooms like nervous foals peering into the darkness under their bed.

The head constable led me through the Zebratown Police Station, unlocking the door into the dimly lit stairwell. We descended, passing by the floor containing the normal cell blocks and plunging farther down until we were in a sub-basement where the iron behemoth of their boiler was held. Beyond it, across from the coal room, was a small room, no bigger than a closet, with a heavy iron door. Inset into the door was a small, barred window of thick glass through which I could look into the shadowed chamber.

I could see the prisoner. They zebras had not moved him. They had, I am inclined to assume, been unwilling to even open the door, much less share a space with the body of the striped inside. I could not make out the writing on the wall but I immediately knew he had painted the scrawling letters in his own blood. I recoiled as my gaze fell upon him, certain without doubt that the zebra had taken his own life in a fit of insanity. He had chewed through his own forehooves, continuing to gnaw, muzzle pressed into his own blood, until they were attached to his forelegs by only thin strips of meat. I have no idea what unholy drive allowed him to survive long enough to do the same to both of them.



The cell was midway through the basement. By the time we reached it, my heart was threatening to seize and my lungs refused to work. My head was being ripped apart and my flesh felt like it was trying to peel away from my meat. I couldn't make it to the far end and I couldn't make it back, but the cell was free of the pink. All I had to do was unlock it.

I fumbled, screaming in agony, and tried again. My companions pressed close, dying.

This time, the door opened. We all stumbled inside.

The torture melted away, but my E.F.S. was flashing all the worst messages. Without healing potions, we couldn't go back out. And we only had two left.

Two of us would have to stay behind, trapped in this cell until the others could get back with healing supplies.

"You two go ahead," Calamity rasped, waving a wing limply at Xenith and me. I opened my muzzle to argue, but he pushed it shut with his hoof. "It's yer mission more'n mine, an' it's only proper y'all should be the ones t' see it through. 'Sides, you two are the be best skilled fer jailbreakin' anyhow."

Xenith wobbled, looking stricken. "No, it..." Then she stopped, her eyes going horribly wide, all the remaining color draining from the skin beneath her coat. She wasn't staring at Calamity. Her eyes were locked on the wall behind him. I nudged past my pegasus friend and looked at the wall. There were words there, scrawled in the rusty color of blood. But the words were strange, the letters in no language I knew.

"Xenith, what is it?"

"A prophecy," she intoned softly. "In the old language of our people." Swallowing, she slowly read, a tremble in her voice:

By the light of Our stars, We illuminate your end,

And shine on the graves of all zebra kind.

A hundred thousand Nightmares will descend upon you,

The armies of Our Dark Child will fill the skies,

And foes from impenetrable cities will fall upon all your lands,

Shielded by armor crafted from their very souls.

Rejoice with Us. For every single one of you shall die.

I froze, transfixed to this spot, a slow bubble of horrified realization crawling up into my mind from the blackest abyss.

The prophecy was wrong. It was a *lie*.

But surely, as much as the zebras loathed anything they associated with the stars, surely a prophecy like this would have gotten back to the zebras' Caesar and the religious leaders of their land. I'd seen Four

Stars. I knew there were zebras loyal to the homeland and ponies loyal to their cause. This would have gotten back...

And when the zebras saw megaspells and alicorn shields, would they not have made the same assumption as Fluttershy did about how the spells could be used to protect entire cities?

When they learned The Black Book had fallen into Rarity's hooves, and even heard her suggest using soul jars to create invincible armor, would they be able to believe that she would abandon the project?

How about the new pegasi armor? And how would they react if they discovered what Twilight Sparkle was up to?

The prophecy was a tailor-made doomsday lie designed to drive the zebras to the worst possible extremes.

But... how did the zebra know? How could he predict, twisted and distorted, things that were not even set into motion until after his death? The acquisition of The Black Book, in fact, was set into motion by his capture.

How...? Okay, it wasn't impossible. I had seen precognition-level abilities before. Maybe the stars... or something... gave the zebra something equivalent to Pinkie Pie's unusual senses? Maybe it was some influence from The Black Book, or spells that had been woven into it after it was turned into a soul jar? Maybe the zebra had been on Mint-als... or something more potent than Mint-als. The zebras were the ones who created those drugs after all, right? Or maybe...

Maybe...

Maybe it didn't matter. No, not maybe. It *didn't* matter.

The constables here had been so terrified of this insane zebra they hadn't been willing to unlock the door to remove the body. I looked down; and sure enough, the skeleton was still here. Midnight Shower hadn't been able to see the entire prophecy from the window. Perhaps no one ever did. It was entirely possible that we were the very first people to see the writing on the wall.

And the worst part was, it didn't matter. Even if this prophecy never made it out of this room, the zebras didn't need it. The Ministry of Magic had cracked the zebras' Bypass magic just a few mere weeks before the end, and already they were using it to create shields that only specific individuals could get through. Twilight Sparkle was starting pony testing of the alicorn-creating I.M.P. formula the very day of the strikes. Once those advances happened, it was only a matter of time before Equestria had impenetrable defenses and an army of advanced alicorn fighters... and the zebras would lose.

The zebras had already lost. Equestria had won. It was only a matter of playing it out. Checkmate in a predictable number of moves. And if the zebras truly believed that there was no possibility of surviving a surrender, that they were facing annihilation or worse under Nightmare Moon... and they *did* truly believe that... then the only move left was to blow up the board.

The zebras didn't see any other choice.



From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Six, addendum:

I am almost finished packing. There is no point pursuing my research here. I will get no more cooperation from the zebras of Zebratown. To my dismay, not even Daisy will respond to my knocking, although I suppose she could legitimately be out of town. It does not matter.

I have sent a message ahead to Princess Luna, informing her of my failure and my imminent return. I have ordered a royal chariot to pick me up in just under two hours. That should be enough to pack up this terminal and the last of my possessions. I want to be rid of this place and back in my own bed before midnight.

And there is the knock on the door. It would appear my ride is early. Well, they will have to wait. But I will not make them wait long.

And now they have upgraded their knocking to banging. Now I worry that Princess Luna is disappointed with me and wishes to see me before I have time to pack. Or perhaps they have invitations to a soirée in Canterlot and fear I will make them unfashionably late. Doesn't matter. I've decided that I don't really need a lot of this junk anyway. I can always buy new things once I am back in the lap of a society of reasonable ponies. Actually, all I really need are those things already in my bags, as well as the heirloom's lockbox and this terminal. I will be ready to go as soon as I have finished writing this entry and I have shut...



Xenith and I gazed upwards. The entire stairwell on this side of the building had collapsed, taking a fair bit of each floor with it. We were at the nadir of a four-story pit, looking upwards through where ceilings and floors used to be. Three floors up, we could see a jail cell and the young adult zebras trapped inside... barely. The cell was behind a shield being generated by two familiar dark-green alicorns sitting in front of it like guards, unmoving, unblinking.

On the floor above, three more alicorns stood watch.

Well, at least the Pink Cloud hadn't seeped into this part of the building and become trapped here. I was still getting nasty medical warnings on my E.F.S., despite having found a couple more healing potions in the constable's locker room medical box and imbibed one. Xenith drank the other. I felt slightly bad for not saving it, but by the time the two of us made it out of the basement, we couldn't have rescued any zebras. If we hadn't found those two potions, we would be needing rescue ourselves.

I really hated the Pink Cloud.

Five alicorns. Fuck. I should have seen this coming. Alicorns normally work in groups of three. There were three in the other wing. One on the roof. That meant at least two more, and five made even more sense. How the hell were we supposed to do this? There was no way to sneak up to the cage. And we were hardly in prime fighting condition.

I was working on a brilliant plan. I almost had the start of one when I heard Xenith gasp softly.

“Xephyr!”

I eeped in surprise as Xenith’s teeth bit down on my mane and she threw me onto her back. The zebra charged into view of the alicorns, shouting a battle cry.

One after the other, the three alicorns ignited their shields and jumped down, swooping towards us.

Xenith turned and ran... but not far. “Hold on, little one!” I wrapped my forehooves around her tightly, wondering what she intended to do. She spun, lowering her horn, and started charging to meet the closest of the alicorns as it sped towards her.

“You’re... kidding, right?”

At the last moment, Xenith leapt. The zebra sailed through the air with me clinging to her back for dear life. Her hooves hit the alicorn’s shield and pushed off of it, keeping momentum, leaping to the next, then the third.

The zebra landed on the third floor in front of the two green alicorns; I was still hugging her tightly, looking back down at the three utterly surprised alicorns who had just been used as jumping platforms.

Xenith reared and slashed her head to one side then the other, slicing her hellhound horn through the throats of the two alicorns in front of her. The shield dropped.

“Open the door, little one!” she demanded. “Hurry.”

I blinked, still feeling stunned, and slid off her back. I reached out with my magic, picking the lock on the cell door with casual ease. The alicorns below us were shaking off their surprise and soaring back up towards us.

“Do you have any more of those memory orbs, little one?”

I nodded. “Yes, but they... won’t fall for the...” But these alicorns were cut off. They *might* just fall for the same trick! “Stand back,” I warned.

Xenith dove past me into the cell, pulling off her satchel and dumping its contents before the wide-eyed younger zebra bucks and mares. As I floated out all the memory orbs I had, I heard her say “The ones like this one... each of you take one and put it on. Swiftly.”

The alicorns were flying up at us. Staring down through the ruins at them, I flung the memory orbs into the abyss, yelling “Balefire eggs for every monster! Yay!”

The three alicorns scattered.

Behind me, I heard the young zebras suddenly start crying out in sharp pain! I spun around, turning my back to the chasm in alarm. “What...?”

I stopped, stunned yet again, not believing my eyes.

And some of the zebras have magic fetishes that can allow them to fly, Rarity’s voice chimed sweetly in the back of my mind, speaking to the three bucks harassing Rainbow Dash. If you think it’s impossible for an earth-bound mare to fly her way into Cloudsdale with the right magic, you have tragically short memories.”

All eight of the zebras in front of me, including Xenith herself, had grown large, bat-like wings.

“Wow... that’s... when did you?...” My gaze fell to the strange talisman hanging from Xenith’s neck, formed in part from an inhaler, and the identical ones worn by each of the other zebras, several of whom were still wiggling and writhing as their wings grew in. I realized what the bloodwing strips were for.

Xenith smiled at me with feigned innocence.

“You realize those are kinda creepy, right?” I finally said, smiling just a touch.



Once again, I was riding Xenith's back, this time with my forelegs wrapped about her neck as her wings flapped to either side of me. Rain cascaded over us, soaking us both. The seven other zebras were soaring behind us.

We had a slight head start. But none of this lot were anything more than the most novice of fliers. The same could not be said for the three alicorns pursuing us. They swooped up out of the Zebratown Police Station behind us, tossing up their shields as soon as they were airborne.

Bright light and thunder cracked the air, and one of the zebras screamed as an alicorn lightning spell struck him. He fell from the sky, trailing smoke. "No!" I lashed out with my magic, grasping him in a telekinetic net, and drawing him back towards us... but the young zebra was already dead.

Whooooooooosh!

Twin missiles launched from somewhere in the Zebratown ruins below, striking against one of the alicorn shields. The monster turned her attention to SteelHooves.

The Zebratown Police Station exploded.

The blast tore upwards through the larger half of the police station, rending the building apart. The force of the blast slammed into the three alicorns, causing their shields to fail and knocking the one diving towards SteelHooves out of the sky.

The shockwave hit us, and Xenith lost control. Behind us, I heard SteelHooves taking full advantage of the alicorns' moment of vulnerability. I threw my magic around Xenith, myself and the six surviving zebras, pulling up, trying to soften the crash.

We landed in the amphitheatre lake with a percussion of hard splashes.

I gasped, struggling to paddle my way to the surface, no better at swimming than Velvet Remedy. My head broke the surface once, barely. I sucked in a mixture of air and water as a wave hit across my muzzle.

The last thing I saw was a swirling burst of green and gold flashing in the sky over where the Zebratown Police Station used to be.



“You. Did. *WHAT?!*” Velvet Remedy shrieked.

The rain had finally stopped, leaving the wasteland cool, grey and wet. There were no rainbows, but the air had a fresh smell that was utterly pleasant.

It was our second day back. We had arrived late in the evening, just after the rainstorm ended. Our return was heralded with surprise and celebration amongst the zebras of Glyphmark, but we spent the night sleeping and the morning recovering and (metaphorically) licking our wounds. I had wanted a funeral for the two zebras that we failed to save, but the Glyphmark zebras didn’t want to spoil the first bright moment in their recent lives with thoughts of mourning. Instead, we turned our efforts to helping this town in the ways we could before we left. This time, I wasn’t helping those in need only to walk away.

Calamity looked up from the military robot he was repairing and tipped up his hat. “Ah blew up the big ol’ boiler they had in the basement.”

SteelHooves worked alongside Calamity, accessing the robot with his magically-powered armor through a PipBuck technician tool I had let him borrow. The Applejack’s Ranger was reprogramming each of the robots in the Angel lot that Calamity could get working right, turning them into guards for the town of Glyphmark.

Velvet Remedy stammered, looking utterly aghast.

“Hey, Ah knew Ah couldn’t make it t’ either o’ the exits, but Ah figured Ah could make it the three yards from the cell t’ the boiler, throw all the right switches and turn all the right knobs, and make it back t’ the cell before keelin’ over.” He grinned sheepishly, adding, “An’ y’know, open the furnace up so Pyrelight could fly inside.”

Pyrelight cooed happily. Of the lot of us, she was the best for wear, having been nicely incinerated in a fire of her own making.

“Why?”

“Well, Ah figured Li’lpip an’ Xenith had their saddles full as it was, an’ we didn’t want anypony gettin’ dead tryin’ t’ save us,” Calamity explained. “So Ah thought, hey, a boiler explosion is mostly steam, ain’t it? And we seen how the rain washes away the Pink Cloud, so Ah reckoned a steam explosion would clear the basement o’ Cloud right quick.”

“But... you could have been killed!”

“Well, the cell looked real sturdy. Ah figured it would hold.” Calamity grinned, blushing. “Course, we got a helluva bigger bang than Ah was expectin’. Good thing the blast mostly went straight up.”

“That’s INSANE!” Velvet Remedy stomped, trapped between relief that Calamity was alive and the desire to strangle him for enacting such a reckless plan.

The soft voice of Xephyr intoned, “That is the friend of yours whose name is *Calamity*, right?”

Xenith trotted past Calamity with Xephyr and several of the other town zebras in tow. Her daughter stared at the pegasus as they passed and Calamity tipped his hat forward and bowed. “Pleased t’ meetcha, Miss Xephyr!”

Xenith was leading the group of zebras down into the labs beneath Angel Bunny Pharmaceuticals. I wasn’t sure how I felt about Xenith teaching the town of Glyphmark how to manufacture Dash, but I had given in to her argument that the town needed something they could sell to merchants in exchange for food and supplies. This was her way of trying to be responsible for them.

We were losing Xenith, but only for a short while. She was going to stay behind in Glyphmark, spending some time with her daughter and helping the Glyphmark tribe while the rest of us tackled the Canterlot Ruins.

The Canterlot Ghoul paused in his work, looking up at Calamity. “How did you know the boiler would still work?”

“Kinda countin’ on it not workin’ right, actually. That’s kinda how ya get ‘em t’ explode.”

Velvet turned and hissed at Pyrelight, “I can’t believe you would take part in something so... so... *insane!*”

The balefire phoenix looked slightly abashed but no less proud of herself. Velvet Remedy tossed her mane back, stuck her nose in the air and harrumphed.

I listened to them, a smile on my face. Then turned back to the zebras standing in a line next to me. Each was wielding one of the firearms Calamity had rebuilt from the mess of weapons we had scavenged from the police station’s contraband vault. “Now watch closely,” I instructed, beginning their first lesson on marksmanship and firearm safety.

They looked at me intently, eager to learn how to defend themselves and their town. For the first time in the Goddesses knew how long, there was a sense of hope in Glyphmark.

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



THE SHADOW OF THE MINISTRIES

“Come here, Stable Dweller. There are things you should know.”

Finally!

At long last, I have reached this point in the story. And, at this point, I beg your permission to take a little liberty with the telling of it.

It had been a long and winding road getting to Canterlot, and I still have to tell of the difficulties and discoveries that faced us there. The most vital of those discoveries was the six memory orbs -- the final memory orbs -- which I found there. In those memories, the veils began to part, showing me my true place in this world, my purpose in life, and how everything was going to end.

I finally got my first glimpse of my own destiny.

That it took so long is probably exasperating, and you might wonder why I didn't skip to this part sooner. (In truth, I have skipped over a fair bit, trying to tell you only the parts of my adventures that were important or exciting enough to keep you reading.) I have told you

these things, I suppose, for the same reason that Princess Luna told Her story to Midnight Shower: context.

Only with the proper context can you see how meaningful those memories were, and how they set my hooves on the path that ended with me coming here and doing what I am about to do.

For all that, there was a long and brutal journey still ahead of me. I had only seen glimpses. I had not found my virtue. I did not understand my role in this world. And I was utterly unaware of the war about to descend on us all.

I did not view them until our time in Canterlot was over. And I feel it would be too much to tell of them all at once. Too much for me, at least, to try to relive them all in order like that. So with your indulgence, I will diverge from proper chronology and scatter my telling of those memories throughout the much longer story of our experiences in Canterlot.

Thank you for bearing with me on this.



"That's awfully fast," Calamity commented, staring at the light pink mist that was already filling the streets of Canterlot as we looked down on it from high above. The steady rain had washed the Pink Cloud out of the air in the days before, and yet the Cloud was dense enough to tint the air merely half a day later.

Most of the city was built from stone carved from the very mountain Canterlot embraced. Cobblestone streets had been lined with elegant structures formed from stone and mortar or magically molded rock. Most buildings of stone still stood, although cracked and crumbling from the weight of unnatural ages. As we flew by, a three-story tower, once an upscale inn, collapsed with a deep-throated rumble, sending up curling swirls of pink-tinted stone dust. Everything more susceptible to the entropy of the Cloud had been reduced to rust and rubble, smears and stains that once signified objects, and decrepit structures stained pink and falling apart at the seams.

Oddly, some of the most preserved things were those which had once been alive. The black and twisted forms of dead trees lined streets filled with dark, pink-rotted bones, many of which had partially sunk into the discolored cobblestones.

The only other place that looked eerily preserved was the cluster of buildings that had once formed the heart of Equestria, from a scattering of white-stoned towers to the royal castle itself.

And the colored mist had settled everywhere, faint in the air below us, thicker on the streets and between the still-standing structures.

"It will get worse with each passing hour," SteelHooves warned us. "By morning, the Pink Cloud will have returned to its full strength."

I pressed my lips together in determination before saying, "Won't be a problem. After Zebratown, I'm not going to spend any longer here than absolutely necessary."

One of the things our experiences in Zebratown had made very clear was that the threat posed by the Pink Cloud was directly proportional to its concentration. We had spent hours in the light haze of Cloud that persisted in the Zebratown Police Station with only minor health problems. Nothing that couldn't be remedied by a health potion and some time in fresh air. The places where the Pink Cloud pooled thickly, however, were lethal beyond even SteelHooves' descriptions of it.

"We're going to land right in front of the Ministry of Image, dash in and grab what we came for," I told my companions. "Then we gallop to the Ministry of Awesome, get what we need from it and go. With any luck, we'll be in and out in under an hour."

We had spent the earlier parts of the day helping Glyphmark. (Even now, Xenith was still down there imparting all she could about zebra stealth techniques to the young adult zebras... at least, in such a short amount of time.) Now the sun was setting, dipping below the clouds to paint the world in hues of fiery orange and bloody red. We hoped to take some advantage of the impending darkness.

“Are you sure this place wasn’t hit?” Velvet Remedy asked, observing the level of damage that was evident throughout the city. “Is all that just from age?”

“The entropic effect of the Pink Cloud speeds decay,” SteelHooves noted. “If the city were not made largely of stone, it would have crumbled to dust long ago. Only the mystically protected places are significantly intact.”

“Ah reckon a fair bit o’ damage was done by the explosion when the shield came down too,” Calamity commented as he circled at a safe height, drawing us over the outlying city and towards the castle itself.

“I thought the missiles had stopped striking after the Pink Cloud went off?”

“Ayep, that’s how Ah heard it too, but that ain’t the explosion Ah’m thinkin’ of,” Calamity explained. “Remember, the megaspell pumped enough o’ that Cloud inta Canterlot t’ make the air look solid pink. And it weren’t like the shield weren’t fulla air t’ begin with...”

Of course. The air pressure in Canterlot would have been... well, I’m not sure how high, but it would have been pretty high. No wonder the Pink Cloud seeped into every surface it touched to the extreme which it did.

“...Ah expect the moment the shield went down, there was one helluva... well, ya saw it, SteelHooves. Am Ah right?”

“I didn’t notice,” SteelHooves said with a morose defiance. “I was a little too focused on the falling wave of pink water.”

I reviewed what we had learned from our so-called “dry run for Canterlot” in Zebratown. (Beyond the fact that SteelHooves and I disagree on what “dry” means.)

The greatest danger we expected to face in Canterlot was the Pink Cloud itself, but the interior of the Zebratown Police Station wasn’t much different than Canterlot right now, and so I was highly confident that we would be fine so long as we minimized our exposure. Likewise, while we knew that the Pink Cloud had the potential to fuse objects to

flesh (or each other), that only seemed to be a concern while within the highest concentrations, at which point such fusions were the very least of our health concerns.

As such, I announced that I was going in wearing my armor and PipBuck.

“Ah’m gonna put on muh battle saddle the moment we touch down,” Calamity responded.

“That is a foolish choice,” SteelHooves retorted, pointing out, “If you insist on taking the risk of wearing armor, your Enclave Armor not only offers a much higher degree of protection, but its magical energy weapons are far more suitable for battling some of the dangers we are most likely to face.”

Our Canterlot Ghoul’s words reminded me of one of the more painful lessons from Zebratown: my combat skills were almost worthless here. The two enemies we were most likely to face were Canterlot “zombies” and alicorns. None of my weapons were worth a damn against the latter once they got up their shields, or against the former at all. In order to stop a Canterlot Ghoul, I’d not only have to take them down, but then run up and hack off their head somehow. Unfortunately, bullets don’t tend to decapitate.

“Yeah, Ah know that,” Calamity responded stubbornly, “But while Ah know the chances are mighty slim, Ah still ain’t takin’ the risk that Ah might be fused inta that damned thing.” He spat for emphasis.

Our other environmental concern was the broadcasters. SteelHooves warned that any broadcasting system, from PipBuck broadcasters to sprite-bots, were likely to have become twisted into lethal traps, even those inside. Fortunately, he also assured us that we should be normally able to *hear* the damn things before we got into their kill zones. Both of the broadcasters I had fallen victim to before had been underwater, preventing me from hearing them; and both times, I had been traveling swiftly enough that I had been thrust into their deadly area of effect before I could react. Hopefully, traveling cautiously would allow us to avoid such deathtraps while in Canterlot itself.

Returning to his previous observation, Calamity mused, “Still, that’s a lot o’ Pink Cloud coming back awful fast. Ya sure it’s just seepin’ back up outta the streets an’ such?”

“As opposed to what?” SteelHooves queried.

“As opposed t’, Ah dunno, bein’ fed somehow,” Calamity offered.

SteelHooves flicked his metal-shrouded tail. “You think... that the megaspell... might still be going?” I felt a chill.

“Ah can’t reckon how all the Pink Cloud ain’t been washed away if it ain’t.”

That was a deeply unpleasant thought.

Velvet Remedy spoke up, “But that would be insane. If the spell just kept going, it would eventually poison all of Equestria! The zebras couldn’t have wanted that!”

No... not even they would have...

I recalled the rumor SteelHooves had mentioned: *after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination.*

“It’s possible,” I offered, “That they might have designed it to function indefinitely just to ensure it would last as long as they needed it too. And because they expected it to be destroyed along with Canterlot shortly after the shield fell.” After it had done its job and murdered the Princesses.

Pyrelight let out a mournful note. We flew in silence a few moments more.



“No!” I said, telekinetically snatching the Fluttershy Orb away from Velvet Remedy as she brought it out of one of her medical boxes. She gasped as the orb floated away from her.

“Littlepip! Give that back,” she demanded, her voice lowering.

I frowned but shook my head. "You've been losing yourself in this too much, Velvet. It's really beginning to worry me."

I'd been letting this go for weeks. After all, her reliance on the Fluttershy Orb had seemed to wane after Pyrelight had joined us. But ever since the balefire phoenix had been injured and Velvet Remedy had neglected a dying pony to save her, my unicorn friend had been turning to the orb with even greater frequency than before.

"Excuse me?" Velvet huffed, telekinetically snatching it back. "I'm pretty sure I've spent nowhere near the amount of time lost in memory orbs that you have," she pointed out. "And I've been a lot smarter about when and where to do so."

Ouch. "Okay, true. But at least I'm not viewing the same one over and over and over," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "That can't be healthy."

Velvet frowned. "Because I like this one. No matter how bad it is out here, I can always find solace in Fluttershy." I cringed inside.

"And yes, it is escapism. So is reading a book," she challenged. "Would you be so concerned if I read the same book over and over? We all have our own little things that help us get through the day. And at least mine isn't self-destructive." I could feel her on the verge of bringing up Party-Time Mint-als, but Velvet Remedy reined herself in, not wishing to cut that deep.

Instead, she sighed, "This world is horrible, and I don't seem to be doing a whole lot to make it better. All my friends insist on risking death or dismemberment on a daily basis..."

"I don't," SteelHooves interjected.

"...Yes, well you're being an entirely different problem, aren't you?" Velvet snapped. "My old home was assaulted, those I knew slaughtered, and now we're about to dive into poison at the behest of a psychotic despot who would see the extinction of ponykind. So maybe a little escapism is in order just to keep my sanity."

SteelHooves turned towards me but said nothing. I knew my own reasons for wanting to curb her Fluttershy worship, but this clearly wasn't the way.

"What is that?" Velvet Remedy asked, changing the subject with a point of a hoof. I watched her tuck the orb away before turning to see what had caught her eye.

The setting sun was passing behind a tall, slender, white spire that rose up from the city, taller than the highest tower of the castle and flanked by a pair of marble "wings" easily three stories tall. The light of the sun seemed to ignite a nimbus around the spire as its shadow slashed across us the city below.

"The Celestian Monument," SteelHooves informed us. "Princess Luna had it constructed after Princess Celestia stepped down to honor Her and Her thousand years of peaceful rule."

"Of course. That would be why it's taller than the castle," Velvet Remedy nodded. "Luna was making it clear to everypony that She didn't see Herself as a *replacement* for Celestia."

Beyond the Celestian Monument stretched a lifeless field lined with ugly, dead trees that seemed to reach out of the dirt like grasping, skeletal claws. The field was bordered by broken cobblestone walkways. In the center sank a huge rectangular pool of pink-saturated water. Rising opposite the monument was the royal castle itself, a glorious mass of crumbling spires and cracked white stone.

The field was flanked by the silent sentinels of six preserved buildings standing across from each other like pieces on a chess board -- the Ministries, each now a shadow of their regal and impressive former selves. This was Ministry Walk.

"That there's a whole lotta alicorns," Calamity whistled, staring down at the dark forms which swarmed around the far end of Ministry Walk. We had been warned of alicorns in the Canterlot Ruins, but I had assumed they would be scattered about the city. Instead, they amassed in Ministry Walk. It was almost as if something about the castle drew the alicorns close like bugs around a lantern.

So much for setting down in Ministry Walk. They would be all over us before the *Sky Bandit* touched ground, and alicorns were yet another enemy that my skill with firearms was pretty much useless against... at least as soon as they got their damn shields up.

Alicorns were some of the most dangerous and powerful opponents in the Equestrian Wasteland, but at least they had been predictable. The encounter in Zebratown changed all that. In the pink, the alicorns lost their telepathy and their connection with the Goddess. Here, they were individuals, and their tactics and demeanor radically changed. Logically, I didn't have enough experience to be sure, but my instincts were telling me to expect these alicorns to be more clever than the ones I had fought in Appleloosa and Manehattan. Their individuality would allow for more creative tactical thinking. At the same time, they should be less coordinated.

And, if my suspicions bore out, less *magically* threatening. With the exception of what I had come to think of their breed powers, all alicorns seemed to possess the same spells. But the only spell the alicorns had used in Zebratown, aside from their shields, was a lightning bolt spell... and only one of them had used that. If all of them had possessed the full range of spells normal for alicorns, we should have been slaughtered. Instead, I had come to suspect that the alicorns were all tapping into a common pool of spell knowledge, one granted by the Goddess; and when they lost their connection to her, they lost most of their spells as well.

Too bad the damn shield spell seemed inherent.

"Okay, new plan," I announced. "We land in that cluster of buildings on the opposite side of the Celestian Monument and we sneak our way in, moving quickly from building to building until we reach our targets. SteelHooves, which of those buildings is the Ministry of Awesome?"

"The Ministry of Awesome is the smaller building made of glassy black stone, farthest up, right next to the castle and across from the Ministry of Morale," SteelHooves answered, adding for clarification, "The

Ministry of Morale is the one with the mooring tower for Pinkie Pie Balloons.”

Right next to the castle. Of course it was.



I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle as Calamity winged us back around the monument and started to look for a good place to land. Directly behind the monument stretched an assemblage of moderately-preserved structures adorned with golden rooftops. The buildings were littered over a generous expanse of space that I imagined must have been a park. A small river snaked through it, the water tainted by ribbons of pink, terminating at an inner-city lake.

“Here we go, everypony,” Calamity called out as he picked a spot and began to shed altitude. I was thankful for Calamity’s warning even though there really wasn’t anything to do to brace ourselves. Velvet Remedy took a deep breath, apparently intending to hold it while we dropped down through the Pink Cloud.

We dropped into the pink.

The tint of the sky transformed the sunset into something utterly alien, the red and orange hues shifting into sickly, malignant colors. “Yay.” Well, even with the change of plans, we should be in and out within just a few hours.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle flashed a location name sent from my PipBuck’s automapping spell: Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.

A cluster of lights flared up on my E.F.S. compass, none of them immediately hostile. I turned my attention in their direction as Calamity flew us down between the rooftops of the tallest buildings. The lights came from one of them. I urged Calamity to fly a little closer.

“Ivory Tower:” my E.F.S. proclaimed as we neared the elegant structure topped with a golden onion. “Graduate Studies.”

One of the uppermost floors of the Ivory Tower had boasted a beautiful multi-story window. During the megaspell attack, mounting air pressure had caused the window to implode, and the whole tower had filled with Pink Cloud. As we passed, I could see into what had once been a library, the books all long rotted away. The Ivory Tower had become a pooling place; I could see thick wisps of nearly solid pink floating up the stairs from the chamber below.

Several darkened, reptilian forms slouched about the library, occasionally flexing leathery wings. One of the creatures was curled up in the shattered bowl of what had once been a giant hourglass, snoozing soundly.

Dragons. Canterlot Ghoul-ized adolescent dragons. About Spike's age, I thought as I remembered being trapped in Spike's body, recalling the feel of his wings. They could be his siblings, I realized, trapped forever in under-developed bodies that could not grow and would not die. The sight struck a melancholy cord in my heart. A sad note that continued to play even as three of their corresponding lights shifted to red.

Three of the Canterlot Dragons rounded, watching as we passed, then spread out their wings and launched themselves after us.

SteelHooves reacted immediately, dashing towards the back window of the *Sky Bandit*.

"SteelHooves, wait!" I called out, unsure if my actions were wise, but unwilling to make the mistake of shooting first yet again. "Velvet, you're up!"

Letting out the breath she had been holding, Velvet Remedy jumped to her hooves, flashing me an odd expression as she passed. It was either her way of silently saying "about time" or she was still upset with me over trying to take the Fluttershy Orb.

Velvet's horn glowed softly as SteelHooves stepped aside, making way for her.

"Dragons of Canterlot," her voice boomed, magnified majestically. **"We are but little pony travelers, humbled to be in your**

magnificent presence. We beseech you to allow us passage through your territory. We promise our visit will be brief and we will be of no bother."

"Really?" SteelHooves rumbled, his tone making it clear Velvet Remedy's diplomacy couldn't possibly work.

"No," she whispered back. "Not really." She turned back to me, "Sorry about this, Littlepip..."

"FOOD!" one of the dragons bellowed. Great. They ate ponies! Of course they ate ponies. Mister Topaz had been planning a feast.

"Why yes, of course," Velvet Remedy replied. **"I wouldn't think of passing through your home without bringing something to pay the toll."**

With that, she floated out one of the dresses she had bought for me at Tenpony Tower. The only one, I noted, which had several pretty sapphires woven into the hems.

"I'm afraid I only have the one gift, so I do hope you don't mind sharing!" She tossed the garment out of the *Sky Bandit's* back window, and the three dragons immediately scrambled after the gemstone-studded dress.

Turning back around, Velvet Remedy smiled and suggested, "Let's get inside before they finish fighting each other."



I leapt from the *Sky Bandit* the moment it touched ground, levitating our supplies with us. We had left everything but the essentials back with Xenith at Glyphmark. Calamity released himself from the harness

"Hey, look," Calamity said, pointing between the nearby buildings at the rubble of *Clip-Clop's Clipboards* a few blocks away. "Maybe we should stop by there on our way back," he suggested as we all began to gallop towards the closest building. "Perfect place to get ablative armor for the *Sky Bandit!*"

“No getting sidetracked... wait, what?” I blinked at Calamity in confusion.

“Ayep! Ain’tcha noticed all the clipboards layin’ ‘bout everywhere?” Calamity asked, flying alongside us. “Darned things are nigh indestructible!”

I honestly hadn’t noticed. But then, I didn’t scavenge as relentlessly as Calamity did. Still, clipboards as armor? He had to be joking.

“Made out of pure, compressed Obstinatanium, they is!” Calamity continued. “Betcha not even Li’l Mac could punch a hole in one!”

Obstinatanium? There was no such thing as... oh! I got it now. “Well, sure, the new ones were. But only after they stopped making them out of layered Stubbornite.”

“Careful there,” SteelHooves grunted. “The Apple family had a monopoly on Stubbornite mines.”

Velvet Remedy chased behind us, a confused expression on her face. “I thought they were apple farmers,” she whispered to Pyrelight who was flying alongside her.

“Well, shucks,” Calamity said, “If some ponies hadn’t been hogging all the Stubbornite for ‘emselves, maybe they wouldn’t ‘ave run out like they did.”

“I’ll have you know that Applejack never once hogged Stubbornite,” SteelHooves countered. “She used every bit that she had.”

I blinked, mouth hanging open. Did SteelHooves just *make a joke* about Applejack? Wow.

The wave of pain blasted through my head as I reached the steps up to the building door, my E.F.S. flashing the name of the building amidst medical warnings. I felt like there was a vise tightening around my horn. My vision blurred and my ears began to ring.

I stumbled back and the pain immediately faded. “Whoa!” I called out, holding out a foreleg to stop the others behind me. I wasn’t fast

enough; Calamity didn't stop, flying right over me and slamming through the door.

As soon as the door was open, I could hear the static. Calamity was halfway into the lobby beyond when he landed, staggering, and spun around. I could see blood beginning to seep out of his ears and the corners of his eyes as he turned to look towards us, his face grimacing in pain. Then he looked up above us and bit at the air. I could see his bloodied eyes widen as he realized he wasn't wearing his battle saddle. Wobbling, he shouted out, pointing above the door. "Li'l pip! There!" He toppled to his knees.

I dashed inside, drawing Little Macintosh from its holder, ignoring the explosions of pain in my head and the sudden tint of red in my eyes. I spun around, instantly spotting the school's public address speaker built into the wall just above the bust of the Goddess Celestia that looked down at us from above the door.

BLAM!!

My first shot missed, digging a hole in the wall near the speaker. My vision was getting rapidly worse, and I couldn't use my targeting spell. It didn't recognize the speaker as a target; there was nothing for it to lock onto.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

My second shot shattered Celestia's face. The third hit the speaker, which exploded in a shower of sparks. The sound of static softened but still remained; the pain didn't go away. There was at least one more speaker in here! I looked around, but my vision was swimming in red. I couldn't see anything.

The ringing in my ears drowned out nearly everything else. I could barely hear the explosions all around me as I lost my equilibrium and fell onto my side, my vision fading to black.

My vision cleared again almost instantly, leaving my ears softly ringing and a comparatively minor headache beating my brain. The others had charged in after me, and from the smoke and debris, SteelHooves had

grenade-machinegunned the upper walls of the lobby until the static stopped.

I groaned and sat up slowly, wiping blood from my eyes.

"We have a new problem," Velvet Remedy informed me, her voice seeming strange and far away. I blinked at her, trying to clear my vision, then looked towards the entrance where she was pointing.

A shield spell had descended over the front of the door. Apparently, shooting up the lobby in Celestia's private school of magic triggered defenses.



We made it up to the third floor before finding that the stairwell to the next level had caved in, forcing us to cut through the classrooms to reach the stairwell on the opposite side. My plan to avoid detours was off to a bad start.

I pushed a door open, checking my E.F.S. for hostiles, then made my way into the classroom. The building was old, but mercifully free of the Pink Cloud, allowing us to proceed cautiously. We were operating under the assumption that the administrator's office on the top floor would have a terminal capable of shutting off the shields locking us inside. At least, that is what we assumed the large space at the top of the tower was meant to be based on a map which had decorated the lobby's back wall -- a map which had lost large chunks under SteelHooves' grenade barrage.

Even in its state of decay, the room was elevated by touches of class that set it apart from the buildings outside of Canterlot -- filigree in the walls and furniture, the tattered remains of rotting banners, the cracked marble tiles of a two-tone blue checkerboard floor.

I paused, staring at the globe tucked in the corner, the continents beginning to peel off its surface. Strangely, I had always considered Equestria to be flat. I looked around. The last lesson taught in this room was apparently astronomy, as the chalkboard still bore a diagram

of (if I was reading it correctly) the single path on which the sun and the moon circled our world.

This was not something the science classes in Stable Two had covered. We had learned instead about mechanics and robotics, arcane science and spellcraft. I had sometimes pondered where the sun went when Celestia put it away, imagining it was hidden underneath us, possibly taking a nap. If this diagram was true, then Celestia was sending it to another part of the world to make it day someplace else. I wondered if that was the far away land where the zebras lived? Or maybe the place where dragons originally came from? Did that mean Nightmare Moon had locked them in eternal day, slowly roasting them alive? And... how messed up did things have to be now in order for the pegasi to occasionally see the sun and the moon in the sky at the same time?

"Unbelievable," Velvet Remedy intoned.

I turned to see that I was not the only pony distracted by the contents of the room. Velvet had trotted up the steps that ran along the rising rows of chairs on the side of the room opposite the blackboard. At the top, near another doorway, were several posters. Velvet was staring at one which featured a very small filly magically projecting a shield around herself and her family as an evil-looking zebra lowered a stick of dynamite towards her with a fishing pole.

"They were actually teaching children to use their shield spells to protect themselves from a megaspell attack!" Velvet Remedy stomped. From the poster, I gleaned that the spell was one of the first taught to any unicorn who had the capacity to learn it. "They might as well have been telling them to hide under their desks."

"Uh, Remedy, there ain't any desks in this room," Calamity pointed out.

Velvet Remedy swung around and saw the rows of chairs and the lectern; there was not a desk in sight. She sighed, "Not the point."

"Maybe Celestia just didn't want them to be scared?" I offered. I had to imagine that telling the children a lie that allowed them to believe there

was something they could do was kinder than leaving them feeling helpless.

Or was my belief just born of corrupted kindness?

I grunted, hating Trixie.

Red lights started to pop up on my E.F.S. compass. Several of them, converging on the door next to Velvet Remedy.

“Velvet!” I hissed, motioning her towards me before pointing warningly at the door. Calamity, now wearing his battle saddle, flew into position covering the door. I whispered up a prayer to the Goddess Celestia that ended up becoming more of an apology for shooting Her in the face.

The door opened, and I felt myself go numb.

It was a small, Canterlot Ghoul-ized unicorn child, her schoolfilly uniform melted into her flesh. There were several more behind her, all colts and fillies, locked in the endless routine of going to and from their exams... until they spotted us and the air filled with a sound more horrifying than any I could imagine -- a wordless sound of unadulterated and monstrous aggression from a chorus of achingly childlike voices.

No. Celestia have mercy.

I was frozen. My eyes locked on the monster children. I... I couldn't *do* this.

Calamity fired, the twin bullets from his battle saddle tearing into the filly's head, blasting most of her brains onto the remember-your-shield poster. Turning to the rest of us, he yelled, “What're y'all waitin' fer!?”

I knew they weren't really children. I knew they were, at best, feral animals and that they would kill us if we didn't fight or run. But my body refused to do either.

Calamity fired again. Next to me, Velvet cast her anesthetic spell at a young colt only to moan as the spell had no apparent effect. Even SteelHooves seemed to have faltered a moment, but now I heard the ports of his missile launcher open.

Whooooosh-KRABOOM!!!

Two rockets fired at an upward angle and exploded against the ceiling, bringing large chunks of it raining down on the creatures (children!) below, along with half a row of chairs from the classroom above us. I stumbled back as two colts and a filly were crushed under the collapsing ceiling, the little pony in my head sickly wondering if that had killed them or just inconvenienced them even after their lights went out on my E.F.S. compass.

"Littlepip," SteelHooves commanded, "Get us up there." Up... there? I felt like I was thinking through sludge.

"NOW!" he bellowed, snapping me out of my stupor. Calamity swooped past me, firing again as another Canterlot zombie-colt galloped through the open door and leapt over the rubble towards us. The twin shot hit the monster child in the side, knocking him back into the chairs. I wrapped my levitation field around the rest of us and levitated us up through the ceiling.

Behind me, I heard the sinister warping sound that signaled one of the fallen Cloud children was rising back up, filled with necromantic life.



I poked my head out of the classroom, looking both ways down the corridor. I kept expecting the zombie children to appear, but there were no hostile lights on my E.F.S. compass. I couldn't tell if they were still trying to get up to this level, or if they had ceased pursuing us the moment they could no longer see or hear us -- literally out of sight, out of mind.

The hallway provided a new danger. The air was filled with a pink haze which grew thicker towards a ventilation grate in the ceiling. I could just make out the large metal fan behind the grate, warped and fused with the metal of the shaft itself. The dense patch didn't look particularly large, but it was slowly growing.

“SteelHooves,” I instructed, closing the door, “We need you to scout ahead. Find the shortest path into another Cloudless section of the building.”

The Steel Ranger Outcast nodded. I opened the door long enough for him to gallop through, then closed it again.

“Hey, Pip,” Calamity said, his voice almost a whisper. “Ah’m pretty sure one o’ the first Ministry buildin’s was the Ministry o’ Magic. Ah’m thinkin’ we should pop in there an’ grab ourselves some proper magical energy weapons, just in case we have t’ deal with a bunch more Canterlot Ghouls.”

“Here we go,” I sighed, groaning inside and forcing myself not to facehoof.

“Well, magical energy guns are a might better against Canterlot Ghouls than what we’re packin’, SteelHooves aside,” Calamity reasoned altogether too reasonably. “An’ we shouldn’t be relying on him t’ bring down the house every time we face more o’ the monsters.”

“And for that matter,” Velvet Remedy chimed in, “We really need to stop in the Ministry of Peace. It’s right across the way, and we could definitely use the medical supplies. Especially if you end up fighting against those alicorns.”

Of course we do.

I turned to them both. “Look, the more sightseeing we do, the longer and more dangerous this trip becomes. We’re already taking longer than I wanted just getting out of the first building.”

“All the more reason to get extra medical supplies while we can. You know the Ministry of Peace will have supplies somewhere.”

I nodded. “Somewhere. That’s the problem. You’re not talking about a brief stop, either of you. You’re talking about exploring those buildings.”

Velvet Remedy nodded. “I know that, and I know it’s dangerous. But I’m worried...”

“No, you just want to see Fluttershy’s Ministry.”

Velvet Remedy took a step back, feigning a wounded heart. My expression was unmoving. “Okay, fine. Yes I do. But I *am* also worried,” she insisted. “About SteelHooves.”

“SteelHooves?” Calamity echoed. “Why ya worried ‘bout him fer? The guy can survive anything. Up to an’ includin’ the apocalypse.”

Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes. “He’s immortal, not indestructible. That armor might repair itself, but how do we know he’s okay inside. The only things that heal ghouls are radiation and healing potions, and that suit of his is designed to self-administer. Now the last time he restocked his armor’s medicine dispensary was Stable Twenty-Nine. And since then he’s been shot through with anti-tank rounds, fallen a few hundred feet, and gone through whatever he was put through in Zebratown!”

“Look, Velvet, if SteelHooves was in trouble, he’d tell us,” Calamity said.

“Would he?” Velvet questioned. I found myself caught, unable to decide which of my friends’ flaws were at play here -- Velvet Remedy’s excessive worries or SteelHooves’ stubborn stoicism?

I suspected this was the “other problem” that Velvet had claimed SteelHooves was being. I couldn’t blame her for being concerned. Best case, she was a doctor who was being denied the ability to examine a patient. And the wasteland wasn’t in the habit of serving up best cases very often. I was beginning to kick myself for having taken SteelHooves’ durability for granted.

“Well, there was Gummy’s,” Calamity offered.

“But that was before he got shot,” Velvet Remedy reminded the pegasus. “Afterwards, you only came back long enough to pick us up.”

“Daymn,” Calamity rubbed his brow under his hat. “Ah reckon ya might be onta somethin’ there.” Turning to me, he suggested, “Li’lpip, maybe ya ought t’ run a diagnostic on his armor an’ see just what state

our friend is in. Fer all we know, he might be really torn up under all that steel.”

I looked at the door, wishing SteelHooves was back already. “Okay, Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Magic. But only the fastest looks and only until we find what we need. Targeted missions. No sightseeing.”

They both nodded.

Then Velvet Remedy added, “I was actually really hoping we could take a peek in the Goddesses’ castle too...”

I facehoofed. “No!”



I gasped, collapsing against the storage room shelving, the impact sending several boxes of cleaner toppling down onto my head as I fought for breath. My heart struggled in my chest.

Velvet Remedy slammed the door closed behind her, the last one in. She crashed into SteelHooves, bouncing between him and the workbench Calamity had curled up onto before falling to her knees. “I can’t believe you’ve done that to yourselves before!” she gasped wretchedly.

Velvet began passing around healing potions.

“Under the police station was much worse,” Calamity moaned, downing his potion. “Why d’ya think Ah saw blowin’ up the boiler as a better alternative.”

Velvet groaned shakily. “Forgiven.” She floated her own potion to her lips and drank greedily.

I drank the potion Velvet had passed to me and closed my eyes, waiting for the healing effects to begin to mend my Cloud-ravaged body. Velvet passed a second round of potions and I could see that the stop in the Ministry of Peace would truly be necessary after all.

Weakly, I slid myself across the floor towards SteelHooves. "Lay down, soldier," I demanded, hurting too much to perform the social dance that friendship and civility required.

SteelHooves obeyed without question, accidentally knocking over a row of plungers with his armored tail. I pulled a tool from my barding and jacked my PipBuck into his armor, running a diagnostic. SteelHooves' displeasure at this invasion of privacy was radiating off of him, but he didn't move or speak.

The little pony in my head began to panic when my PipBuck started flashing medical alerts across my E.F.S. I fought to keep my little pony calm as I worked to strip away the alarms that were probably false -- my PipBuck's medical assist spell was not calibrated towards ghouls, much less whatever physiology was normal for Canterlot Ghouls. I wished I had Velvet Remedy's understanding of medicine, although considering her reaction to ghouls that might not much help.

The one thing I could say for sure was that SteelHooves' armor was completely out of healing supplies, and apparently had been since partway through Zebratown. The stallion was keeping himself going on painkillers and combat drugs, most of which were also nearly depleted. What had he been planning to do when those ran out?

Hell, one of his legs was broken in multiple places. The armor was holding it together like a cast.

"Not okay," I told him sternly, feeling like I was wearing Velvet Remedy's horseshoes. He said nothing. "If you're in trouble like this, you need to tell us!"

"I'll be fine," he finally said. But I noticed he wouldn't look at me when he said it.

The damn thing was, he probably would be so long as he didn't get himself killed permanently before he could re-supply his armor. Between now and then, however, was a whole world of pain. The painkillers were handling a lot of it right now, but not all of it, and they would be gone soon.

This felt like self-punishment. Maybe for what happened on Bucklyn Bridge. Or maybe because of bad memories, wounds and regrets that coming here and to Zebratown had made fresh again.

I could point out that when the painkillers stopped, the pain might hamper him, putting us all at risk. That was the sort of argument I knew he would listen to and accept. But it was also cold and selfish. SteelHooves was our friend, and he deserved better than that. I needed something to say that would show him we cared and yet would still be persuasive in his ears.

I looked to Velvet Remedy for help, only to be reminded of our argument about the Fluttershy Orb. Velvet Remedy was escaping, SteelHooves was abusing himself... I looked up at Calamity and wondered if he was doing any better. Calamity seemed fine... but then, so had SteelHooves until I took a deeper look.

At least Xenith was okay, right? No... Xenith never really seemed okay. After what she had been through, I would be surprised if there was an “okay” in her world that even vaguely resembled the one in our own. Her freak-out at being bitten was still fresh in my mind. But at least she was getting better, I thought, rather than worse. Although... at the time we had left, Xenith had still not admitted to Xephyr that she was her mother. Was that just Xenith being a zebra? Or was it a warning sign, something else I had been missing?

SteelHooves pushed himself back up, disconnecting his armor from my PipBuck. “I should go.”

“Go where?”

“Out,” he replied. “To find the next room that is clear of the Cloud.”



Velvet Remedy tossed up her shield, the shimmering screen of magic filling the hallway just in time for the three baby dragons to slam into it. The little, wingless creatures growled and clawed at the shield, their eyes glowing, their faces distorted in rage.

“Oh, aren’t they cute?” Velvet cooed. She got a resounding *NO* from the rest of us.

“More trouble at our four,” Calamity warned. I spun around.

From the other end of the hall, several Canterlot colts and fillies emerged from the stairwell. The lead filly had another Cloud-ruined baby dragon on her back.

I stared at the filly, my eyes drawn to...

“Littlepip, what are you starting at?”

In black horror, I hissed, “Look at her cutie mark!” The schoolfilly’s tattered uniform gave a clear view of the blob of dark pink that emblazoned the Cloud child’s flank.

I reeled at the implications. The child had gotten her cutie mark after the megaspell, after she had “died”. That the Cloud had transformed the poor little filly into an undying monster was horrific enough, but somehow the idea that it had warped and corrupted her to the point that the Pink Cloud had stolen from her what should have made her special... and replaced that with *itself*... was somehow so much crueler, so much more abhorrent.

The child horror lowered her head, her horn glowing a violent pink. Thick wisps of Pink Cloud snaked out of the air around her glowing horn, swirling as it filled the corridor. The filly was actually conjuring Pink Cloud!

The baby dragon jumped from her back and began charging at us, its little claws tearing at the hallway carpeting.

The twin-shot from Calamity’s battle saddle echoed through the hallway; the baby dragon’s body ragdolled against the wall. A moment later, the tendrils of pink began to reach us. Immediately, my head swam, my headache spiking. I backpedaled, trying to get away, only to hit Velvet Remedy’s shield. The three baby dragons behind us gave little roars of anticipation and violent desire.

“What...” Calamity coughed, “Is with... the rest of you?” The pegasus dropped to the ground, unable to keep flying as the Pink Cloud began to eat at his insides. He fired blindly into the pink. “They’re... Not. Really children!”

I could hear the Cloud children galloping down the hall towards us. All I could see was pink and black, the edges of my vision beginning to go dark. My E.F.S. compass was showing nothing but a mass of blurry red. Every breath seemed to shrivel my lungs, making me fight harder to get half the air I could the breath before.

Velvet Remedy collapsed beside me, her shield going down. One of the baby monsters leapt at me, claws scratching at my barding and digging wet scratches in my flesh, its teeth sinking into my mane, trying to tear at the back of my neck.

SteelHooves opened fire on the hallway. I curled up as I was pelted with concussive waves and shrapnel from the close-quarters explosions. The blasts left my ears ringing, my sense of direction and balance shot to hell. But they also thinned the Cloud. My gut was twisting, my insides felt like they had begun to rot, but my headache cleared just enough that I could focus. I floated out Little Macintosh, aiming it at the small monster gnawing on my back, and fired.

I felt the creature drop from my back. The poor thing which should have been allowed to grow up, to be a dragon.

Velvet Remedy was curled into a ball, crying. The two other baby monsters were trying to eat her. Her body was a tapestry of shallow, bleeding scratches. I fired twice more, getting them off of her, and stumbled to my hooves. Somehow, dreadfully, it was easier for me to shoot these creatures than the monsters who took the form of children. As if the fact they had never grown old enough to talk or think like people made it more okay to treat them as rabid animals.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was flashing medical warnings. Even thinned, the Pink Cloud was killing me. I needed to get out before my internal organs started shutting down. Wrapping Velvet in my magic, I

galloped as fast as my legs and lungs would let me... a staggering trot... trying to get out of the pink.

Behind me, Calamity fired once more, then pivoted and followed, stumbling as he attempted to run. The air filled with that noisome, grating sound as the eyes of the baby dragon Calamity had shot began to glow and it began to growl.

“Get to the top,” our Applejack’s Ranger called back to us. “I’ll hold them here.” None shall pass.



“We’re down to the last of our healing potions,” Velvet Remedy warned softly, tears in her eyes. I groaned as I drank the potion she floated over to me. We hadn’t even gotten to Ministry Walk yet! “And I still haven’t had the chance to restock SteelHooves’ armor.”

I watched as the slashes of red that covered Velvet closed gently, mending themselves before my eyes, leaving her looking unmarred yet still covered in her own blood. The mare swayed despondently then curled up next to Calamity on the large bed in the center of the room.

The large, circular room had no windows, but both the fireplace and the chute provided means for the Pink Cloud to enter the room. Fortunately, a magical ventilation spell had prevented the Cloud from pooling here, leaving the air only the lightest shade of pink. Survivable levels of pink, so long as none of us fell asleep in here.

The administrator’s room had been lovely once, a solemn room of violets and blues with a mural of clouds drifting along the wall and a delicate ornateness to every feature and piece of furniture. Ghosts of that beauty remained in the greasy rot of the carpet, bed and tapestries. A golden, scroll-shaped stand leaned against one wall next to crumbling bookshelves filled with decayed books and the residue of dissolved scrolls. Next to the center bed was another golden stand, this one holding a terminal, its screen glowing softly.

The door into this room had been one of the hardest locks I had ever encountered. I expected no less difficulty from the terminal.

"It just isn't right," Velvet Remedy choked, leaning against Calamity. "All those children... those little baby dragons..." Calamity wrapped a wing around her as she began to sob again. "They didn't deserve this! It... it's so... *unfair!*"

It was worse than unfair. This was evil.

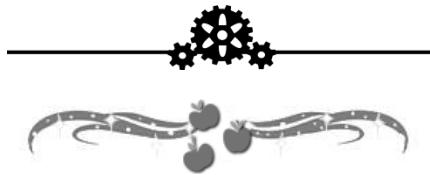
I felt a bubbling rage simmering in my beating heart. But there was no pony to be angry at. I couldn't be mad at the victims, and the zebras (and possibly ponies) who created and deployed the megaspell were long dead. No, I was furious with the *Pink Cloud itself*! How dare it!

I began to hack, trying to focus, not wanting to take out my frustrations on the terminal lest I make a mistake and get locked out.

"Littlepip..." Velvet said softly, "If... if the megaspell is still working here... still pouring out this poison..." Her eyes closed, her trembling voice finding determined steel. "We need to stop it."

I nodded.

The password was "apologies".



The Apple Orb

My host was checking his watch. The little hoof pointed to seven, the big one just a few minutes past the hour. It was either late morning, or less than an hour from midnight. I had no way of knowing -- the hallway was a cold, grey metal with no windows -- yet it felt like night.

A soft chime from behind drew my host's attention. He turned as the elevator doors opened, party music playing over the speaker in the room. The elevator seemed empty.

My host stepped away, watching cautiously. The elevator doors closed, cutting off the sound of music. I could barely hear the soft hum as the elevator began to descend.

My host looked to his left. Empty hallway, no doors, ending with the heavy steel door of a vault. He looked to his right. A magical field of blue light shimmered in front of an iron gate. The room beyond was filled with humming maneframes.

"I apologize for running late," an exotic voice said from the nothingness, sounding slightly muffled. First the head of the zebra appeared as she pulled her hood back, then the rest of her. "I did not mean to make you wait."

I felt my host press his lips together. "That's all right, Zecora. But you'll have to hurry. Security will cycle any minute now. When it does, we've arranged for the shield to drop, but it will only be down for four minutes. You'll have to get in, get the data, and get out." I saw my head turn away as I fished a key out of the pocket of my security uniform. "This will get you through the gate. You know which system you are looking for, right?"

Zecora nodded. A sad look formed on her face. "I ask if this is worth the cost? The lives of ponies will be lost."

I felt a frown etch across my host's muzzle. "We have to be willing to make sacrifices if we are going to end this war. Your success here will get you the Caesar's trust, and that will allow you to get close to him."

My host stepped back. "But, if it helps, I'm sure they will arrange for the weapons factories in those schematics to have minimal staff when the zebras hit them." My host's frown turned into a grimace. "Unfortunately, we've had a small complication."

Zecora raised an eyebrow.

“They’ve installed some sort of new gemstone detector. Something from the Ministry of Image, of all places. It is designed to detect zebra talismans like your cloak, and it’s not part of the normal security system, so we can’t shut it down without raising alarms. You’ll have to remove your cloak before going in.”

“I will not need it once in there, so I will leave it in your care.” Zecora slipped out of her cloak, now wearing only a satchel. She looked strangely naked without the jewelry I had seen her wearing before.

The shield of blue energy suddenly went down.

My host sucked in a breath. “Quickly. Strike me down. Hard!”

Zecora spun and bucked at my host. One hoof caught him squarely in the chest, cracking at least one rib. The other sank hard into the soft flesh of his neck.

Zecora’s eyes widen as I collapsed, choking, fighting for air. She had clearly not intended to land a possibly fatal blow.

My host waved her on, coughing and fighting to remain conscious. Zecora galloped down the hall. I heard her unlock the gate and pull it open, but my vision was blurring.

I sat there, fighting harder and harder, trying to breathe, air struggling to get through my throat and into my chest.

I heard the chime behind me. The door opened and an apple-green stallion in tuxedo barding stepped out, looking around. Applesnack.

The moment he saw me, his eyes widened. Then narrowed, taking in the discarded zebra cloak nearby. “Dammit! I knew something felt wrong!” He looked up, observing the open gate and the disabled magical shield. “Hold on, buck! I’ll get...”

Applesnack froze, his voice silencing abruptly, as Zecora rounded the maneframes, heading back.

“YOU!”

Applesnack stepped into a battle stance as Zecora stopped short.

"You!!" Applesnack called out, fury in his voice.

"Applesnack...?" Zecora said, failing to rhyme, her eyes growing wider.

"She trusted you! She let you into our house! And you betrayed her!" Applesnack was striding slowly forward. "I opened my heart to you because she wanted me to. I even began to trust you, to like you... a *zebra*! How could I have been. So. *Stupid!*"

"Ap... Apple..." my host wheezed, holding up a hoof. "Don't..." But there was almost no sound to my voice. I, we struggled to get up, but our hooves wouldn't work. I realized we really *were* dying.

"She thought you were a friend. You broke her heart!" Applesnack was roaring. I suddenly knew. This was what was hurting him. I remembered SteelHooves' denial when I told him the truth about Zecora, and the painful resignation that seemed to follow.

I would prefer she had killed these monsters with cold-blooded calculation, SteelHooves had told Calamity, regarding my rampage in Arbu. It wasn't the killing he thought was bad. It was the blind rage.

"And now, you come back, *tonight of all nights*, to hurt her again!?"

Zecora crouched down submissively. "You have caught me, I do not fight," she intoned. "I am your prisoner tonight."

Applesnack stooped, shaking. Then screamed, bellowing, "No! Zecora, that is not how you say *died. Resisting. Arrest!*"

No. Oh no, SteelHooves. Don't do this.

He charged, turning and bucking at Zecora. She didn't try to dodge. At least, not the first time. She did the second. And the third. And the fourth.

My host flailed as darkness began to seep into the edges of his vision. The fight for breath was getting harder, and he was losing. His whole body felt weak and distant. I didn't feel the hum of the elevator at all. But we heard the chime. As the doors slid open, an oddly familiar song floated into the hallway.

♪ "...How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?

When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding

And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

It was the song that had played in SteelHooves shack the morning I first really met him. The song he became strangely lost to.

My host struggled again, trying to get up, trying to make any part of his body work now. We weren't getting any air anymore.

Down the hall, I saw Zecora strike out, trying to defend herself. Applesnack ducked under the kick and brought up one of his own, striking her underneath and sending her body flying against the wall. Zecora hit the wall with a meaty smack, leaving a splash of blood as she fell to the floor.

From within the elevator came a horribly familiar voice. "Nuts n' shrews. Ah know the boy is plannin' on proposin' tonight, but if we're missin' our song cuz Sergeant SteelHooves has become Sergeant *Cold Hooves*..."

Oh no! Oh nononononononoNO!

Don't come out here Applejack! Don't see this! It will hurt you if you see this.

We had been trying to repair our relationship, SteelHooves had told me, *ever since the night she had seen the darkness in me*. Not learned about. Seen.

Applejack, wearing a little black dress that was clearly a Rarity original, stepped out of the elevator. She looked to her right, seeing an empty hall ending in a vault door. She looked left.

Her eyes widened, pupils dilating to pinpoints as she saw Applesnack, bloodied, his torso heaving with each breath, standing over the very bloody corpse of Zecora.





“There’s a secret passage from the basement of the examination building to the royal treasury?” SteelHooves asked in disbelief as we galloped towards the Celestian Monument, our weapons and most of our supplies floating in tow behind me.

“Ayep! Don’t make sense t’ me neither. Seems that would be the sort of place ya wouldn’t want secret ways inta,” Calamity responded, gliding along beside us. “But that’s what the map on that terminal said.

I was still reeling from the knowledge of whose office I had set hoof in, whose terminal I had managed to break into. Velvet and Calamity had laid down in Her bed!

After Her sister Luna had taken the throne... after Littlehorn... She had spent a lot more time at Her school than in the castle.

As we reached the monument, we slowed our pace. Most of the alicorns were on the far side of Ministry Walk, but my E.F.S. was picking up hostiles close enough to worry about, even in the ruddy, fading light of dusk. We needed stealth now.

The Celestian Monument was magnificent even after centuries of decay had taken bites out of its structure, leaving patches of framework bare. I stopped a moment to stare in awe, then bowed before it, sending up a prayer to the Goddess.

I heard the sound of static. It was growing steadily louder.

A sprite-bot was approaching from the front side of the monument, its speakers broadcasting white noise and necromantic death. My vision fuzzed, my head beginning to throb for what seemed the infinity-ith time that evening. We were just on the edge of the effect now and we started stepping back to keep from being engulfed.

I was useless against the ghouls and zombies created by the Pink Cloud, and nearly as helpless against alicorns, but this was a threat that I alone was equipped to handle. I was the only one with a ranged weapon that was *quiet*.

I floated out the Zebra Rifle, peering down its sights, tracking the approaching robot by its “friendly” light on my E.F.S. compass. Waiting for it to float into sight...

Pfft. Pfft. Pfft.

The sprite-bot dropped to the ground, internal circuitry burning, its broadcast dying with a pop of ozone. We trotted past it, ignoring the scrap.

Well, most of us did. Calamity picked it up and offered it to SteelHooves, remembering the ranger’s armor used scrap metal to repair itself.

The outside grounds of Celestia’s school had been blissfully vacant. Anypony outside had fled to the safety of the buildings when the Pink Cloud came. Not that the buildings had proven sufficiently safe.

As we rounded one of the mighty wings of the Celestian Monument, we saw that Ministry Walk had not fared so well. There were skeletons scattered all about the field, sticking out of the ground like black weeds. Ponies had filled the park when the Pink Cloud consumed it.

...a stallion whose bow tie and collar had become permanent parts of his neck...

...the twisted framework of a baby carriage with the skeleton of the baby pegasus pony welded into it, the infant’s mother laying half inside the cobblestones nearby...

...a mare who had been sitting on a park bench in a most peculiar fashion, her skeleton now melted into the bench itself, holding her to that pose forever...

...two ponies fused together in an eternal embrace, their skulls tilted up upwards in the direction that pink horror had descended upon them, snuffing out the twin flames of love and life...

“This is too much,” Velvet Remedy moaned. Then she gasped in horror, stopping dead, staring ahead of us.

The Ministry of Peace. The Canterlot Hub of Fluttershy's Ministry had been built into a grove of magically grown trees. Two hundred years ago, it would have been a heartwarming vision of natural beauty. But the Pink Cloud had murdered the trees, turning them into twisted, black terrors, the whole building looking like a haunted house.

Small objects littered the cobblestones and lifeless planters that circled the Ministry -- scissors, ashtrays, metal picture frames -- all objects sucked out of the rooms whose windows had shattered. Parts of a terminal lay smashed on the steps just outside the front doors. A ceramic butterfly had shattered into six pieces scattered across a row of dead hedges.

As we crept forward, Velvet Remedy hesitated. "I... I don't think I want to see anymore. I don't want to know what this poisoned place has done to Fluttershy."



Velvet Remedy paused to look at a corner diorama featuring Fluttershy sitting in a forested field, surrounded by gentle animals. I could guess she was struggling against the urge to shatter the display and steal the foal-sized Fluttershy for herself.

"Are you okay?"

"I... I just can't take her away from all her forest friends," Velvet whined softly.

The Ministry of Peace had suffered severe internal damage when the trees that formed most of its outer walls had twisted in their unnatural death throes. Pink Cloud had seeped into all but the most interior rooms. To our further dismay, the Canterlot Hub seemed to be less a place of healing and medical research than a public front and administrative center for the other MoP hubs. We were coming up empty-hooved in our search for medicine.

The only upside is that nothing in the Ministry of Peace had attacked us yet. Everything in this place was dead.

I approached a set of double-doors and nudged it open. Velvet Remedy, looking over my shoulder, whinnied in dismay.

A haze of deep pink filled the massive room which had once been an auditorium. Rows of rotting seats descended towards a dilapidated stage beneath the last dangling threads of Cloud-eaten curtains. The walls, formed from even more trees, were blackened and dead.

Velvet Remedy inexplicably pushed past me and galloped into the poisoned room.

“Velvet! Whatcha doin’, girl? Get yerself outta there!”

Velvet paid us no attention, charging up to the stage and jumping onto it. I saw her waver as she landed, the Pink Cloud beginning to get to her. I shouted for her to come back. Beside me, Pyrelight cried out, calling to her beloved Velvet.

“What in tarnation does she think she’s doin’?” Calamity demanded.

Velvet stumbled, turning and standing before the podium. She put a hoof on it, and it broke apart at her touch. I could hear her sob. The auditorium still had great acoustics.

Seeing her standing on that stage, wearing her yellow medical boxes, I suddenly realized this wasn’t just any auditorium. That wasn’t just any stage.

“um... h-hello?” Velvet Remedy said meekly, reciting from memory. “Can I have your attention, please? If you don’t mind?”

Oh Goddesses!

“Hold on, Li’lpip. Ah’m gonna grab ‘er!”

“Thank you,” Velvet was saying. “Now...um... I know everypony is really, really busy. So I’ll try not to take too much of your time.”

“Calamity, wait!” I said, holding up a hoof. Pyrelight fluttered at the edge of the pink, hooting in agitation.

“Wait?” he spun to me fiercely. “She’s gone plum off her rocker! She’ll die in there if we wait.”

I focused, wrapping Velvet Remedy in my magic. "I'll pull her out... just... I think maybe she needs to do this?" She was risking her life to do this, and I couldn't tell if she was on the road to catharsis or catatonia.

"Needs to do what?" Calamity demanded.

Pyrelight didn't wait. The balefire phoenix soared into the poison, flying to Velvet Remedy.

Below us, Velvet Remedy continued, her inflection perfectly matching Fluttershy's. "Princess Luna has given us... that is... she's allowed us to... We have a new project." Velvet paused, looking out over the crowd that only existed in her mind, as Pyrelight landed by her forehooves and rubbed against her, nudging her to move.

"This is bad," SteelHooves told me.

Velvet cringed slightly, "Please... it's okay. I know we're all overworked, and everypony has *so* much to do already... and you're all doing just wonderful." She gave a most beautiful smile.

"Oh what in the hay?" Calamity moaned.

Pyrelight began to cough. I extended my magic around her too, feeling increasingly anxious. Did she need this? Would she ever forgive me if I pulled her out, denied her this? Did it matter?

"But... this is really important. I've been talking with Princess Luna, and...." Velvet fell to her knees, coughing, her voice getting weaker as she struggled to breathe. "I really... really want to do this project. I'm behind it..." She coughed again. "...completely, and I really hope you will be too. This horrible, terrible war has gone on far, far too long and hurt so many people."

I could hear the sadness and hurt in Velvet's weakened voice. Sweet, merciful Celestia, I could see her tears!

"Enough of this!" Calamity growled. "Li'l pip, get her out of there now!"

I nodded, blinking back tears of my own. "From your lips to Celestia's ears," I whimpered as I levitated Velvet Remedy and pulled my friend from that gas chamber.



Velvet Remedy was barely in a condition to move, much less walk, even after I had fed her our last healing potion. We left her in the care of Pyrelight and SteelHooves.

"Mind tellin' me what the hell all that was about?" Calamity asked angrily as he flew along above the maze of office cubicles I was wading through.

"The Fluttershy Orb," I told him. I heard a crunch and felt a sharp pain in my left forehoof. Looking down, I saw that I had stepped on the skeletal remains of some small creature. I stopped, leaning against a cubical wall as I telekinetically pulled a thorn-shaped bit of broken bone from my hoof, which beaded with blood. There were other little skeletons all over this floor.

"That auditorium... that was the room where Fluttershy was talking to her Ministry ponies in the orb's memory. Velvet Remedy was reciting it... or reliving it... or something."

"An' that struck ya as somethin' we oughta let her keep doin'?" Calamity snapped.

"I... I don't know. Velvet is a performer. I don't think that was... I hope that was just her doing a performance. Her one chance to be on Fluttershy's stage. But..."

I turned to my pegasus friend, the first friend I had ever really had. "Fluttershy's Ministry created the megaspells, Calamity," I admitted to him.

"*WHOA!*" Calamity stopped in mid-air, hovering. "Say *what* now?"

"They were originally intended as mass healing spells. She never meant for them to be used as weapons of death."

Calamity groaned. "Velvet..."

"She doesn't know yet. But sooner or later she's going to find out. And when that happens, do you think it will be any easier if we had denied her the chance to do... whatever she was doing?"

"Fuck!" Calamity bucked one of the cubicle walls, punching his hoof through it.

We moved on, the offices quiet except for the background music of Calamity rummaging through desks and filing cabinets. The air in here was clear, if musty and old. Yet it felt like the Pink Cloud was all around us, eating at my friends, its corrosion seeping even into our friendships.

We made our way through the floor without talking again, past the cubicles and the smaller offices, until we reached a curving yellow hallway. On the inner curve was a simple wooden door, the frame around it covered in little birdhouses. Along the bottom of the door were several smaller doors, as if designed for little creatures to move in and out as they pleased.

Along the outer curve were two pairs of stately, arched double doors made of polished mahogany. These too had a little animal door built into them. The far set was open, but all I could see of the room was part of the wall. The curve of the hall prevented me from seeing the far end, but I didn't need to. Just beyond the open doors there was a sign mounted on the hallway ceiling, the glass plate reading "Elevators" still backlit by a slightly flickering light.

I checked my E.F.S. for any signs of hostility, but the whole floor was dead. Nudging Calamity, I suggested, "Let's finish this up. I want to get out of here. You take that door," I motioned towards the small, peculiar inner door. "I'll take these."

Calamity nickered unhappily, but flew ahead to the smaller door. I was wagering that an office designed to allow small animals was the less likely to have dangerous defenses. Not that I was expecting anything threatening from either room. The Ministry of Peace had been entirely, even eerily, peaceful.

I watched as Calamity opened the door to the inner office. It wasn't even locked. I then shifted to the closest set of mahogany double doors. Inside was a meeting room, dominated by a rich table crafted exquisitely from the same mahogany as the doors. Chairs were overturned, papers and folders were scattered. The opposite wall was dominated by a huge picture window that stared out over the pink-tainted Ministry Walk.

The room held a single skeleton: that of a mare whose body dangled from the window, a forehoof melded into the glass. There were imperfections radiating away from her hoof, cracks in the window which had fused back together before the pressure outside could grow enough to blow the window in. A once-beautiful saddle-purse hung rotting from her bones, the bottom having torn away, dumping its contents on the floor.

Was that... Fluttershy? My heart sank, a knot forming in my throat. I stepped closer, eyes fixed on the skeleton, only to run into the table. Somehow, part of me was sure that it was Fluttershy. That she had... no, wait. I felt a flood of relief as I realized it wasn't the kind yellow pegasus after all. It couldn't be! No wingbones, a horn... this was a unicorn. Probably a secretary or a nurse, possibly a caretaker of Fluttershy's animals while she was away. But not Fluttershy herself.

As I walked around the table to get a closer look, I spied the far wall where a chalkboard hung between two monitors. The meeting room had been designed for multi-media presentations. Amongst the strange diagrams, the chalkboard bore four words written in bold yellow chalk, save that the first letter of each word was pink.

Communally
Assured
Reciprocal
Existence

I felt weak. "Oh... oh poor Fluttershy..." I stumbled and sat in a chair. The chair promptly fell apart, dumping me onto the floor. Blinking, I found myself looking between the table's legs at the hindhooves of the

dangling skeleton and the collection of rubbish that had fallen from her purse.

Amongst the decayed garbage lay a statuette, still pristine, of a yellow pegasus pony surrounded by birds and butterflies, a small family of chipmunks and a white rabbit. She was smiling at them sweetly from behind the curtain of her pink mane, a look of gentle caring in her eyes.

I got up, walking closer until I could see...

Be Pleasant.

The final of the Ministry Mare statuettes. I now had a full set. Only I wasn't going to keep this one. I knew a unicorn who needed her more than I did. Besides, wouldn't it be wrong for *corrupted kindness* to be carrying around the statuette of the Bearer of the Element of Kindness? Wouldn't I be... dishonoring her somehow?

So it was with every intention of giving the Fluttershy statuette to Velvet Remedy that I wrapped it in my magic... and everything changed. I felt a surge of magic, much like with the others, but this time it was accompanied by something more. Something greater.

As I lifted the Fluttershy statuette before me, I knew that I was going to keep her. Not out of selfishness. Not because it was something *I* wanted or felt I deserved.

The statuettes wanted to be together. The Ministry Mares needed to be together. They were meant to be. Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Applejack. They were stronger when they were together, better. Separating them had been the worst thing anypony could have done to them. I knew that; and now that I had brought them together, I knew I couldn't separate them again.



Calamity dumped out the medical supplies he had found. "Ah found Fluttershy's personal office," he told Velvet Remedy. "An' no, before ya ask, she wasn't there. But she left us all this..."

Velvet Remedy's smile touched her eyes, making them sparkle. It was as if Fluttershy herself had left the supplies we would need just for us.

"Cabinet weren't even locked," Calamity commented.

Velvet began sorting through the medicine. Calamity had simply grabbed everything. I recognized super restoration potions and healing potions, enough to get us through three Canterlots with some to spare. Painkillers too. Most of the rest, however, were beyond my ken.

"Veterinary medicine," Velvet Remedy explained, dividing the pills for animals from the drugs for ponies. Then she took a few of the former pile, "For Pyrelight, just in case."

Pyrelight gave an exaggerated hacking sound and then shot Velvet a challenging look.

"Oh you'll take your medicine if I give it to you," Velvet shot back, eyes narrowing but smiling nonetheless. "I have enough problem patients with theses *ponies*."

"Fluttershy's office was more like an office fer a doctor than the head o' a whole branch o' the Equestrian government," Calamity mused. "There was even an eye chart on the wall, but with nuts." He placed a hoof over one of his eyes, mimicking, "Acorn, almond, walnut, cashew, peanut, another acorn..."

Velvet wrapped the healing potions in her magic and divided them amongst us. "Keep these with you. In a place like this, it makes no sense for only one pony to be carrying all the medical supplies." She then scooped the rest into her medical boxes, save for a selection that she had set aside for SteelHooves.

Turning to the outcast ranger, Velvet cautioned, "Now I'm giving you what I can, including about half the painkillers. But Fluttershy didn't stock up on combat drugs, so I'm afraid you'll have to do without Buck and Dash and whatever else you've been pumping into your body." She tisked. "And we still need to find you a radiation pit as soon as we can. Before you go tussling with anything too nasty."

SteelHooves nickered but said nothing, letting Velvet Remedy access the medical dispensary in his armor.

Calamity pulled out a few cans and boxes of food he had scavenged from a wall-mounted vender. I felt a rumble in my gut and realized I was starving. Two-hundred-year-old snack cakes didn't sound too appetizing, but what Calamity put before us was all we had. We had left all our provisions with Xenith and the starving zebras of Glyphmark.

"Y'all will be thrilled t' know that Fluttershy an' her Ministry were 'parently all vegetarians too," Calamity quipped.

Velvet Remedy shot him a look. "Calamity! I can't believe that even after Arbu you would still even think of *eating* meat!" She pointed a hoof at me. "Even Littlepip has learned better."

"Gee, thanks," I muttered.

Calamity shrugged. "Spoken like somepony who ain't never tasted bacon." Damn. I had to admit I was going to miss bacon. But after unwittingly eating another pony, I didn't think I could stomach it.

Velvet neighed, eyes narrowing as she stepped towards the pegasus, bringing them almost muzzle-to-muzzle. "You know, sometimes I think the reason you didn't have as much trouble with those cannibals as we did is because you like meat and you don't see eating ponies as very far removed from eating radhog."

Calamity whinnied back, eyes narrowing in return. "An' sometimes Ah think the reason ya Stable folk get all uppity 'bout eatin' meat is cuz you can't see it bein' more'n a step away from eatin' ponies."

So much for eating. I watched helplessly as the two lovers glared at each other.

"Ponies are supposed to be vegetarians. Eating meat is a perversion. Every time you do it, you let the wasteland win a little."

"Nonsense. It's survival," Calamity countered. "Hell, even eatin' ponies is a victimless crime. After all, they're dead. They don't care. It's only

when ponyfolk start killin' other ponies, like the bastards in Arbu did, that Ah reckon they've done anything wrong."

More glowering. The air between them was so tense I was waiting for something to explode, giving equal odds to them shooting each other or kissing.

Finally, Velvet Remedy suggested in a low voice, "Let's say we back away and just go to the next building before one of us says something he will regret."

"Ah reckon y'all will say somethin' you'll regret first."

"On the contrary..."

"*ENOUGH!*" I shouted, unable to take the tension. I magically scooped up the uneaten food and dumped it into my saddlebags. "Seriously, both of you!" I stomped.

"To the next building. Calamity, you're with me in front; Velvet, you're in the back." I grumped, floating up all our weapons and supplies, "Goddesses, I can't take you two anywhere."

Pyrelight landed on SteelHooves' battle saddle. I swear that bird was laughing.



We were halfway between the Ministry of Peace and the Ministry of Arcane Sciences when the alicorn spotted us. She was standing on the roof of Twilight's Ministry, staring down into the Walk below. At first, I had mistaken her for a carved statue; the whole Ministry building had a vaguely alicorn motif -- the knight on the Ministry Walk chessboard. The dark blue stone was probably meant to honor Luna. The wall that encompassed the base of the building was of smooth marble with silver inlays and embedded diamonds in the form of the constellations -- the sort of display that you would expect from a tastelessly ostentatious observatory or a really bad dress. Even with the red light on my E.F.S., I was legitimately surprised when what I thought was part of the

architecture launched itself into the air and swooped down towards us, her magical shield flickering to life around her.

KRAPOWW!!!

I collapsed, clutching my ringing ears, as the shot from Spitfire's Thunder pierced the alicorn's shield and tore through her neck, splattering her blood against the inside of her shield behind her. The shield flickered out as the alicorn plowed into the ground at our hooves.

Velvet Remedy moved to me, dipping her head to nip my barding, helping me back to my hooves. As soon as I was standing, she backed away, saying something, but I couldn't hear her over the ringing in my ears. Comprehending my blank expression, she pointed a hoof up the field of Ministry Walk.

I twisted, and my E.F.S. compass filled with red lights. The shot had brought a lot of attention. Alicorns were beginning to look this way, a few of them already taking flight.

SteelHooves galloped past us, ignoring the Ministry buildings completely, firing missiles and rapid-fire grenades at the clusters of alicorns. The field of Ministry Walk erupted in dirt, smoke and flame.

KRAPOWW!!!

KRAPOWW!!!

Calamity fired Spitfire's Thunder as quickly as the massive weapon would allow, taking aim at the shielded alicorns while SteelHooves dashed through the thick pink pool, tearing apart those too slow to react with his patented level of massive overkill.

One of the alicorns on the far side of the pink water reared up. "I'll bring the head of the pegasus to Nightseer myself!" She launched into the air, her shield sparkling to life around her.

"Yuf whaff naw?" Calamity asked indignantly, his muzzle still biting down on Spitfire's Thunder.

KRAPOWW!!! The shot passed through the heart of the flash of light where the alicorn had been an eyeblink before. At the same instant, the dark purple monster appeared in another flash right behind Calamity.

I charged, Velvet Remedy galloping beside me as I fired Little Macintosh, the bullets sparking as they ricocheted off the alicorn's shield. The alicorn's horn glowed. I slid to a stop, gasping as I watched blood from the crashed alicorn corpse beside Calamity float up, wrapped in the purple alicorn's magic, and begin to take shape.

Calamity spun around, but the alicorn was too close. The barrel of Spitfire's Thunder struck the shield, knocking it out of Calamity's teeth. Velvet Remedy skidded to a stop, pressing her glowing horn against the alicorn's shield as she cast her anesthetic spell. The ball of light manifesting just inside the shield and striking the alicorn.

The alicorn collapsed inside her shield, her body paralyzed but her magic still unhindered. The blood from the dead alicorn next to us solidified into a ruddy blade.

The bloodsword flew at Calamity. He reared back, the blade slicing past him, leaving a shallow cut below his neck that wept blood.

I could hear the whoosh of SteelHooves' rockets and the continuous thunder of his grenade machine-gun. From the sound, he had switched to high-explosive grenades in an effort to beat down an alicorn's shield.

The bloodsword circled around, diving for Calamity's face. My pegasus friend clamped down on the bit of his battle saddle, firing. The sword burst as he shot it out of the air.

"Y'all run ahead," Calamity shouted. "Ah've got this one." He kicked up Spitfire's Thunder and snatched the muzzle bit in his mouth.

The paralyzed alicorn looked up at him from inside her shield, eyes widening.

KRAPOWW!!!

Velvet Remedy urged me towards the Ministry of Arcane Sciences then began galloping towards it herself. I quickly followed, Calamity

covering our backs and SteelHooves... well, SteelHooves seemed to have forgotten the rest of us completely. He was just being the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, steel-armored scourge of monsters in the Equestrian Wasteland.

Calamity spun around as two more shielded alicorns dove out of the darkening pink sky. He lifted Spitfire's Thunder, taking aim.

<click>

"Ahf craph!" Calamity's eyes widened. Deciding there was no time to reload, the pegasus turned tail, flying after us.

The two alicorns swooped over the pool, their shields skimming the pink water. They swerved broadly around SteelHooves, giving him a wide berth. SteelHooves tried to turn towards them but he was far enough into Ministry Walk's reflective pool that the watery pink sludge was impeding his movement. The alicorns left him behind, chasing after Calamity.

I heard multiple cracks of thunder and the air lit up with bright flashes as several alicorns fired bolts of lightning into the reflective pool. SteelHooves let out a deep-throated scream as arcs of electricity lashed over his armor, then collapsed into the water, vanishing beneath it.

"Dammit!" I changed course, dropping our supplies behind me and running towards the water, dodging as I tried to make myself a difficult target. I searched for SteelHooves with my E.F.S., but there was no light. Either he was dead again, or the super-saturated pink water was impairing my PipBuck's targeting spell.

A wing of alicorns took flight, soaring over the violently sundered corpses of several of their sisters. A fourth cast another lightning bolt, the flash momentarily blinding. I could feel heat and smell ozone as the bolt ripped through the air less than a yard from my body.

I reached the edge of the pool and jumped, wrapping myself in magic and telekinetically flying over the pool, swerving as much as I could while keeping my head down, looking for any trace of our fallen metal

paladin. If I could just spot him, I could wrap him in a levitation field and...

My head exploded, my horn feeling like it had cracked apart! Even as I screamed, I knew there was a broadcaster hidden in the water...

I dropped, all four hooves splashing down into the thick pink sludge before I caught myself. My head was splitting open from the effort. My horn felt like it was trying to screw itself into my head; I was certain that the necromantic energies were somehow focusing on the source of my magic. I had to find the broadcaster and get rid of it! No! I had to go up! Get away!

I somehow noticed (Awareness!) that the alicorns were holding back. This was the same spot the others had veered around before. I had thought they were avoiding SteelHooves, but even as I screamed in agony, I realized (Be Smart!) that they had been avoiding the broadcaster.

I could feel a new agony, a terrible burning in my hooves and legs. My magic imploded and I dropped into the viscous pink pool with a splash. Now my whole body was burning!

I clamped my muzzle shut, thrashing involuntarily from the pain. If I drank it, even a little, I was surely dead. I forced myself to focus past all the pain. I no longer wanted to get myself away from the pink pool or the broadcaster; I could no longer comprehend moving. Now, in utter desperation, I tried to get *them* away from *me*. With all the concentration I could manage, I wrapped the entire pool in my magic and floated the water, the skeletons, everything that wasn't me *up* as high and as fast as I could.

The super-saturated pink water of the reflective pool flew into the air. I looked up, gasping as the pain in my horn and head receded. The burning faded, lingering most heavily around my right foreleg. I stood, shaking violently, flinging the pink water off my body until I almost felt dry. Then I dared to open my eyes.

The alicorns had flown back away from me and the suddenly flying pool of water overhead. They stared and murmured to each other in voices I could best describe as “concerned”.

I looked up. In the last rays of twilight, I could see hundreds of small coins and bottle caps glistening along the bottom of the water. I could see skeletons floating in it, many of them fused together. I spotted SteelHooves, his metal-shod tail dangling down out of the liquid pink.

I gingerly separated him from the liquid mass above me. I looked the way I had come. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight were all staring with expressions trapped between screaming and cheering. I tried to gallop towards them, taking SteelHooves with me, but searing agony shot up my right foreleg and I fell onto my face.

My body had been through too much. It didn't want to cooperate anymore. But even through the dull pounding in my head, I was able to focus enough to wrap myself in magic. The pain in my head spiked, the throbbing jumping an order of magnitude, but I slowly pushed myself back towards the edge of the pool and my friends, SteelHooves in tow, releasing more and more of the Cloud-saturated water as I went. The liquid pink poured down like a curtain behind me.

I felt myself starting to pass out. The effort of self-levitation was too taxing, and my body was screaming from abuse. Suddenly, I felt warm forelegs wrap around me. Calamity had flown out underneath the floating lake of pink and was taking me to safety. He soared over the edge of the pool just as my spell collapsed completely. I heard SteelHooves drop onto the field with a metallic thump. Velvet turned and galloped towards him, her horn glowing.

Calamity didn't stop, flying towards the entrance of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. “Hold on, Pip!” he encouraged as he flew through the front doors...

...and was gone. I felt a moment of freefall. I think I even felt myself hit the floor. Then blackness.





The Butterfly Orb

The yellow carpeted floor raced under my feet. I could feel my nerves on edge. I found myself trapped in a small, utterly alien body as it darted between the hooves of scrambling, panicking ponies. A constant rumbling thunder filled the air, mingling with cries and shouts from the ponies I was scampering through as I raced down the aisles between a city of cubicles. A magenta pony spilled a shower of papers in front of me as she fled the room. One of the sheets slapped me in the face as I barreled through them.

I made it through the offices and found myself charging down a huge, curving hallway, my little heart pounding in my chest. I heard a mare screaming from beyond a set of mahogany double doors. The voice was filled with rage and tears.

“HOW COULD THEY?! HOW COULD THEY DO THIS?!”

I dashed for the little door built into the bottom of the larger one, a little door just my size.

“TH-THEY’VE RUINED EVERYTHING! THEY’VE K-K-KILLED EVERYONE!”

The meeting room looked like it had been hit by a tornado. And it really had, a yellow and pink tornado in the form of Fluttershy. I burst into the room just in time to see her hurl a terminal through the glass of the seemingly gigantic picture window, shattering a large hole in it. The sound of impossible thunder amplified. Outside the window, I could see the sky shimmering and rippling with explosions as zebra missiles pounded against the Princesses’ shield. Each impact brought a flash of fiery light splashing against the shield, the surface rippling outward like water around a dropped rock.

Fluttershy stood on the table, shaking, stomping, her face streamed with tears and contorted in rage. She looked around for something else to throw, something else to break.

"I... I GAVE THEM LIFE! AND... AND THEY... And they..."

I knew this room. I had just been here.

The window had already begun to repair itself, the shattered hole growing smaller as the spiderweb of cracks thinned and shrunk. Ministry magic. The building was alive. It healed.

I leapt up onto a chair, and from there onto the table, rushing to Fluttershy's side.

"They... I..." The poor pegasus sobbed horribly, trembling on the verge of collapse.

"I did this! This is all MY fault!"

I reached Fluttershy, wrapping myself around a forehoof, hugging her tight, trying to comfort her.

"Oh!" She looked down at me and I felt her tears splash onto my forehead. "Oh... oh Angel, what have I done? Everypony... all the helpless little critters... *they're all going to die. And it's ALL. MY. FAULT!*"

Fluttershy toppled onto the table, burying her face, wailing.

Beyond her, I saw that fateful writing:

Communally

Assured

Reciprocal

Existence.

I held Fluttershy, stroking her anxiously, trying to help, feeling terrible. She didn't deserve this. This *wasn't* her fault.

Outside, the pounding thunder and violent lightshow continued.

With a bang, the second set of mahogany doors at the front of the meeting room slammed open as a white unicorn burst into the room. Her gorgeous purple mane and tail looked frazzled, and a beautiful saddle-purse hung next to the three diamonds of her cutie mark.

“Fluttershy!” Rarity called out, looking around and spotting the crumpled, weeping pegasus. “Oh... oh goodness.”

Rarity trotted up hurriedly. “Fluttershy, darling, we have to go!” She prodded at the sobbing, broken pegasus. “We only have half an hour before they’re supposed to seal up Stable One. We need to get inside!”

I couldn’t tell her that it was probably already too late.

“Leave m-me,” Fluttershy whimpered. “You g-g-go, Rarity. Save yourself. I... I d-deserve to die!”

“Rubbish!” Rarity put her forehooves under Fluttershy’s head, lifting her tear-streaked face. “You deserve to live. Probably more than most of us. I won’t let you die here.”

“R-rare?”

A tear dripped down one of Rarity’s cheeks. “I love you, Fluttershy. And I am not going to let you stay.” Rarity smiled softly but her voice brooked no argument. “Now pull yourself up and come with me, or I’ll drag you all the way with my teeth.”

I looked between Fluttershy and Rarity, one paw still petting the yellow pegasus gently.

FHWOOOOMP!

All three of us turned towards the window. It had almost repaired itself, the hole now the size of a baseball. Outside, the shield continued to fluctuate under the massive, fiery barrage.

Then we saw it. A thick pink mist rolling over the city. It consumed block after block, flooding down alleys and boiling over the tops of buildings. Rarity let out a gasp as the thick pink mist splashed against the towering Ministry of Image, breaking around it as the same wave of pink rolled over the Ministry of Arcane Technology, drowning it

completely. I blinked, and the Ministries on the opposite end of Ministry Walk were gone.

Then the trees were gone. The pink cloud washed over the grassy park, the reflecting pool and all the panicked, terrified ponies below.

The wall of pink rushed at us. The park was gone.

Rarity gasped again, this time spotting the hole in the window. She threw herself towards it.

The trees were gone.

Rarity slammed a forehoof over the hole.

The wall of pink hit the Ministry of Peace. There was nothing outside the window anymore. The cracks that remained in the window began to warp and melt, fusing together. Rarity groaned in pain, but she held her hoof firm against the hole, not letting the Cloud get inside.

“R-rare?”

Rarity’s eyes opened wide. She gazed at the window, whispering with a low tone of comprehension. “This... is necromantic.”

Rarity turned to Fluttershy, who was staring at the window in horror. “Forget Stable One, Fluttershy. I’m getting you to safety!” With that, she focused, her horn glowing. A flash of light burst around Fluttershy and the yellow pegasus was gone.

I felt the worry and anger etch across my face. I scampered up to Rarity and kicked at her.

She looked down at me, her horn glowing again as she opened her saddle-purse. “Don’t worry, Angel. I’ve sent her someplace safe.”

I kicked at her impatiently.

“Ow. Okay, I have sent her to Zecora’s old hut in the Everfree Forest. Well, at least I got her very close to it. The zebras are attacking pony population centers. There are no ponies in that forest, so it is the only place I am sure they will not attack.” She smiled as she drew out a

memory orb. “Don’t worry, Angel. I will send you to her. But first, I need to leave a message for Twilight...”

Rarity stared down at me. “Twilight, darling, I’ve sent Fluttershy away. And if I can, I’ll be going too. I don’t want you teleporting around town, looking for... ugh! Oh... oh this is bad...” Rarity faltered. I could see even this small contact with the Pink Cloud was beginning to kill her.

“...Don’t look for us. Don’t stay in Canterlot. But... but there is... oooooough!” Rarity thudded against the window weakly. Her hoof would have dropped away, but it couldn’t anymore. It had become part of the glass. “Listen, Twilight. In my desk, in my office, there is a very special Book. It’s hidden in a secret compartment. You may have to tear the desk apart to get it, but... AAAAGH! ...but don’t worry. I won’t mind. Twilight, it’s a spell book. And...” Rarity began to cough violently.

“...and I believe it has a spell that can be used to... to defeat this necromancy! You... you must get that Book...”

Rarity leaned against the glass, her hoof supporting her weight now. Still, she floated the memory orb close to me. I realized suddenly why she had been talking to me like I was Twilight Sparkle. My memory was going to be the message.

Her horn glowed. “Don’t worry, Angel. This won’t hurt. And as soon as I’m done, I’ll send you to Flu...”



I groaned.

My whole body hated me for still being alive. My headache had ratcheted up to the point where it was hard to think straight. My right foreleg itched horribly beneath my PipBuck. Everything else just hurt.

Too much physical trauma in too short a period of time. My body was crying out for me to stop. I'd lost count of how many times I'd been shot, beaten, poisoned. Wounds that would normally take weeks or months to heal. Instead I drowned myself in potions of magical healing, letting them mend everything and then throwing myself back into the fray. Pain had become as much a companion for me as my friends.

But these things, the broadcasters and the Pink Cloud, were so much worse. They tore me apart in ways a bullet never could, attacking everywhere at once, attacking my magic, attacking my brain. Even with potions of healing and restoration, I couldn't help but feel that deep and permanent damage was being done. I wasn't going to live to a ripe old age. One day everything I had been putting my body through would catch up to me and I would die young.

Part of me wanted to want to quit while I was ahead. But every part of me knew that I could never quit. Quitting was surrender. I couldn't even rest, as much as I knew I should. Every day I rested was a day that others whom I could have saved would die. If I had rested even an extra hour, the young zebra would have been slain by those bloodwings. If I had rested an hour less, I would have been able to save his friends as well.

Pain I could handle, as long as I was alive and still able to make a difference. I wondered if this was how SteelHooves felt.

I'd saved him. He hadn't been moving, but I knew he couldn't be dead. The lightning may have rendered him unconscious or knocked his armor's spell matrix offline. Either way, if I hadn't gotten to him, the alicorns would have. The broadcaster wouldn't have saved him, although it definitely bought him time.

Thank the Goddesses I had at least managed to levitate the liquid pink sludge away before I had inhaled any of it. Thank Celestia and Luna that I'd drunk healing potions minutes earlier and didn't fall into that pool with open wounds from those Canterlot dragon hatchlings.

I couldn't tell if I had been supremely lucky or supremely unlucky.

And, now that I thought of it, I'd come out of it with a new weapon against the alicorns. Granted, one that was indiscriminately lethal. But it had to be possible to use the broadcasters to my advantage.

But first I needed to...

...where the hell was I?

"Calamity? Velvet Remedy?" I was alone.

"SteelHooves?"

"...Pyrelight?" Completely alone.

I was laying on a soft, cushioned bed. I tried to sit up, and a thunderclap went off in my pounding head, knocking me back down and leaving tears in my eyes. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, not remembering turning it off, and scanned the medical warnings. I needed to drink a super restoration potion, possibly several. And painkillers. I needed painkillers.

I didn't have any. I didn't have *anything*! No weapons. No supplies. I vaguely remembered dropping our weapons and supply packs when I went chasing after SteelHooves. I groaned at the thought of Little Macintosh laying abandoned out in that field. I felt like I'd lost a friend.

Hopefully, Velvet Remedy grabbed everything before following us. But doing so would have been taxing for her limited telekinesis. And I couldn't imagine her prioritizing weapons when she had SteelHooves to care for.

But I wasn't wearing my utility barding either. And I definitely didn't strip down before my unintentional swim. I felt truly naked as I realized I didn't even have my hacking tools.

Looking around, I was in a library. No, an athenaeum. And a big one, bigger even than Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum in Tenpony Tower. I remembered the recording that Homage had played for me, Rarity talking to Twilight:

"I've just heard my Ministry is about to purge the Ponyville Library of ideologically incompatible books, and I knew right away that you'd want to keep them for yourself... I know the Ministry of Magic on Ministry Walk has a much bigger library, but we can't get away with diverting these wagons to Canterlot, now can we?"

If only I could spare the time to just sit and read.

"Ah, you're awake." The voice startled me. It was urbane, the voice of a gentlestallion. I quickly looked around, wincing as the pain in my head amplified from the sudden movement, blurring my vision. "Good morning, ma'am."

Morning? Oh Goddesses, I'd been asleep all night? And nopony had found me? This was unspeakably bad.

"Who are you?" I asked the mysterious stranger. "Where am I?"

"Wordsworth at your service, ma'am. You are in Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum, ma'am."

I blinked away tears, turning my head more slowly as I began to mentally hone in on the source of the voice. There he was... or it, rather. A mechanical owl. A much fancier version of the one I'd seen following the merchant who had set up in the remains of Trixie's Cottage. I remembered fighting owls similar to this one in the Ministry of Morale hub in Manehattan too. But this one looked more sophisticated. And more lovingly crafted, down to the bronze filigree of feathers.

"Who... what are you?" At least this mechanical owl didn't seem hostile.

"Wordsworth, ma'am. Twilight Sparkle's junior, junior, junior assistant."

"How did I get here?"

"Well, ma'am," the owl said, sounding embarrassed, "When a mare and a stallion love each other, or have made certain binding contracts..."

I interrupted quickly, “Into this room, I mean?” The pony in the back of my head was blinking. Certain binding contracts? But then, this was Canterlot, home of royalty and nobility.

“You were teleported here, ma’am. Security protocols. The Ministry is under lockdown. All visitors and staff are teleported to their proper areas, and intruders are remanded to secure containment areas.”

Cells, he meant. The itching under my PipBuck was driving me crazy.

Further questions revealed that the lockdown had been running constantly since the “environmental catastrophe” over two hundred years ago. Furthermore, all the teleportation zones were inside the Ministry building, but Wordsworth couldn’t tell me where any of the others had been sent. Neither could the owl give a satisfactory explanation of how I had rated teleportation into Twilight Sparkle’s private library. I got the sense that the security system wasn’t functioning quite the way it was supposed to. It had degraded under centuries of continuous operation. I was probably lucky I hadn’t been teleported into a bookshelf or a wall.

“And what about my clothing?”

“All foreign objects bearing trace amounts of toxins were teleported to sanitation.” I really hoped that didn’t mean incineration!

“I would like them back, please.”

“Certainly, ma’am,” Wordsworth responded pleasantly. “Sanitation has been completed. They will be returned to the wardrobe immediately.”

Another fear shot through me. If this magical security system stripped me of my armor, then would it try to strip SteelHooves’ armor off of him? Or would it recognize something melded to him as integral? That was, assuming Velvet Remedy was able to get him to the safety of the Ministry building. My mind conjured the alarming image of Velvet running into the Ministry, levitating SteelHooves behind her, only to be teleported away, leaving SteelHooves helpless outside on the doorstep.

If he was inside, and still alive (for those definitions of alive that include Canterlot Ghouls), then he was separated like the rest of us. My friends could be anywhere in the building. Again, I remembered that they had all night to try to find me. The fact they hadn't most likely meant they were in bad shape.

I moaned and tried to sit up again. My E.F.S. was still flashing health alerts at me. I lifted my PipBuck to check the automap, wishing all my friends wore PipBucks so I could just locate their tags. Of course, that's exactly the problem that got me into this whole mess a month and a half ago, wasn't it?

I looked at my foreleg and stopped breathing.

I wasn't *wearing* my PipBuck anymore. Where the metal device should stop and my flesh should start, they didn't. Instead, they melded seamlessly into one another. I felt sick looking at it.

I had been so casual to dismiss the possible danger before, but now that it had actually happened, I felt a sense of violation and loss that I couldn't explain. I just... I wasn't me anymore.

I dropped back onto the bed, curled up and cried.

"Wordsworth," I whimpered several minutes later as I tried to fight back the hollow feeling in my heart. "I need medical supplies. Any painkiller, healing and restoration potions you can give me."

"You would not prefer to use the autonomous healing booth, ma'am?"

The what now? "Okay, yes... where is the healing booth?"



Never again.

I felt better, physically, than I had in weeks. Psychologically, I was shaken to the point of collapse. The healing "booth" was a solid metal tube barely bigger than a pony. Stepping into it had been like stepping into my own coffin.

The air had been stifling even before the door slid closed behind me, plunging me into darkness. I had never felt claustrophobic before (if anything, I was prone to sudden onsets of agoraphobia). But in that metal casket, in the absolute darkness, with the *sounds* that horrible thing made...

And then I had started to feel the magical energies probing me, washing over me like some sort of slimy, alien massage from an invisible and horrible creature!

Never, ever again. Even though my body felt better, I knew I would have nightmares for weeks. I could already anticipate waking in cold sweat, feeling the dream terror of being trapped endlessly in that "autonomous healing station".

It had worked perfectly as it was supposed to, and yet manticores couldn't drag me back into one if I was at the edge of death. I shuddered to imagine the horror one of those things could inflict if it wasn't functioning properly, if it malfunctioned or suffered degradation from the Cloud.

I felt myself shiver.

The walls were covered in a soft, velvety cloth -- burgundy in color with sparkling accents -- that gave the hallway a rich, luxurious feel. Oil paintings hung on the walls. I passed a spot where a large oval of darker cloth betrayed the removal of what had probably been a portrait. Ahead of me, the hallway ended at the door marked "spell testing". Somepony had scrawled the words "*Spell in a Box*" on the door in what looked like dried blood. From the end of the "x", the blood streaked down to meet a dark stain on the floor.

"Not a good sign," I muttered to myself. I was appropriately creeped out.

As I approached, I could faintly hear the hissing sound coming from behind it, like a hundred dying snakes. I stopped, psyching myself up, taking deep breaths, and opening the door from a distance with my magic. Through it, I could see another door at the far end of a laboratory. One more deep breath, and I broke into a run.

I galloped through the doorway and into the lab, my ears filling with the sound of static. The headache that the healing station had rid me of returned with a passion, accompanied by a familiar pressure in my horn. I didn't have a firearm. No way to take out the speaker. I just had to get through the lab and out of its range before it could kill me.

Blood began to tint my vision as I reached the opposite door. It was locked.

I telekinetically fumbled at the lock, the pain in my horn escalating, the deadly effect of the broadcaster tearing at my brain. I had spent nearly an hour in the healing station, and for the first time since leaving Tenpony, I had actually felt healthy. I had been allowed to enjoy that sensation for less than forty minutes.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping out of the lab and outside of the speaker's kill zone. I panted, leaning against a railing, blinking away blood and tears. Then I looked down into a grand hall lined with sweeping staircases. Below me was a fountain similar to the one in Homage's foyer. Only the statue here was of two identical unicorn mares frolicking. On the walls to each side were oil paintings, including a royal portrait of a smiling, green-coated unicorn mare with a darker green mane. Hanging opposite was what appeared to be the same mare, only with the colors of her coat and mane swapped.

"Velvet?" I called out. "Calamity? Anypony home?" My voice echoed in the stately and empty corridor.

At the end of the grand hall, in the crux of multiple stairwells that spread out like butterfly wings, was a very important-looking, high-arched set of double doors flanked by unicorn busts. I was unsurprised that they were locked.

I was very surprised when the moment I started to pick the locks two magical-energy turrets dropped down and started shooting at me. I was immediately thankful that my armored utility barding had been returned as I spun and dove over the railing of the nearest stairwell, catching myself with levitation as soon as I was behind cover.

I supposed I should consider myself lucky that my barding hadn't been submerged in the pink pool long enough to fuse to my body. And that my hacking and repair tools had likewise not been fused together or otherwise warped into uselessness. Having my PipBuck melted onto my arm was a brutal enough blow, and I had never wanted to take it off.

Yeah, that would have made my relationship with Homage really difficult, my little pony teased. I shushed her, annoyed, and turned my focus to unlocking the door from safety.

It was proving a tough lock, but I had faced one tougher already today. I saw a purple flash from above me and heard a crackle -- this door had magical defenses beyond just the turrets. If I had been trying this with my trusty screwdriver and a bobby pin, I would be in a bad state.

Click. Yes!

I eased myself to the floor, turning my focus to the fountain. The glow of my magic washed over the pooled water. I lifted the water into the air using it to shield me overhead as I galloped back up the stairs. The magical energy turrets spotted me and started to fire, each shot evaporating part of my shield in a puff of steam. By the time I got through the door, there was barely enough left to fill a wastebasket.

I was so thankful there weren't more turrets waiting inside. Instead, I found myself in what I quickly deduced was the head researchers' office. Bookshelves, filing cabinets, tapestries, arcane spellwork tables. The room was laid out symmetrically around a carpet with an intricate star pattern of alternating colors. Two rather impressive desks faced each other, with oil paintings of the same green ponies hung on the walls behind them -- not portraits this time, but full paintings which allowed me to see their matching cutie marks: spiraling magical sparks intertwined with each other. On each desk sat a terminal next to a glass placard with a name sealed inside, made out of sparkling glitter.

Gestalt and Mosaic.

Trotting around the desks, I spotted a weapon display case and several ammo boxes. Inside the display case was a magical plasma rifle and a multi-gem magical energy shotgun. The latter reminded me of Gawd's

gun. It took me less than a minute to make them mine. I was tempted to run back upstairs and shoot the damn death-speaker. I wasn't very good with magical energy weapons, but I was sure I could take out a stationary target at close range.

Moving to Mosaic's terminal, I drew out my tools and began to hack into it. Mercifully, the pink-saturated water that bound my PipBuck to me did not seem to impair its functioning. Stable-Tec didn't fool around when they made PipBucks; the devices had a durability somewhere between SteelHooves and a soul jar.



"Velvet?" I asked as I pushed open the door I had just unlocked. The chamber inside was pitch black, and my voice echoed off walls both far and strange.

"Littlepip?" a voice called back from the darkness, sounding weak and relieved.

A light flared, illuminating Velvet Remedy's horn, then her eyes, mane and tail. Her charcoal coat seemed to blend into the void around her.

"Over here." I lit up my own horn, guiding her to me. She got up shakily, and trotted quickly towards me.

"Thank the Goddesses," she whispered as she reached me, nuzzling my face. "I... I was trapped in here for so long. Alone. Trapped." She'd said that twice. I didn't need explanation. My lovely songbird friend had once again found herself caged and alone. She was trembling.

"It's okay, Velvet. I'm... I'm sorry it took so long to find you."

"What happened? Where am I? Is Calamity okay? Is Pyrelight? What happened to SteelHooves? I had him right with me..."

I lifted a hoof to her muzzle, quieting the flood of questions. Then wrapped her in an embrace. I wasn't surprised by how she folded into it. I was surprised how quickly she regained her composure, pushing me away.

“Thank you, Littlepip, but the others are who are important now.”

I nodded and began to fill her in. Thanks to the terminals of Mosaic and Gestalt, I had a pretty good idea of where everypony was now. Velvet Remedy had been trapped in one of the megaspell casting chambers that filled this entire floor. SteelHooves was somewhere in the Arcane Technologies research labs two floors below us. Calamity was somewhere in the basement which included prisoner containment, Ministry Security, high-security storage and (incongruously) the Ministry’s kitchens. Pyrelight had never been registered as entering the building. Either she never got inside or the security system had a phoenix-sized hole.

Something had apparently gone seriously wrong in the basement. All the security systems had been rerouted to the terminals of Mosaic and Gestalt and communication with the basement had been severed.

The unicorn twins had not only been the head researchers for the Ministry of Arcane Sciences in this hub but for the Ministry as a whole. It appeared they were regularly left in command of the Canterlot hub, particularly while Twilight Sparkle was away at the Ministry hub in Manehattan. As best I could tell, they weren’t actually in the Ministry when the lockdown started, but I was able to lift it by issuing simultaneous commands from both their terminals. Thank you again, telekinesis.

As I finished telling Velvet Remedy what I knew, she looked at me curiously. “Why didn’t you have Wordsworth send you all of our equipment?”

I blinked. Then facehoofed. “Because I am not a clever pony.” We had to find sanitation as well. Dammit, this just got worse and worse.

“Well, why don’t we run up and ask him to before heading down farther?”

Oh. Yeah, that would be easier, wouldn’t it?



I dropped everything I was floating except the two magical weapons and dashed into the lab, the static doom of several broadcasters ripping apart my head and driving spikes into my horn. It was a repeat of three floors above, only this time I had a magical shotgun. I spun, looking around for speakers, radios of skeletons with broadcasters attached to their civilian-model PipBucks.

FVZASSHT!

I fired at the PipBuck-clad foreleg of a unicorn skeleton. The short-range multi-blast of magical energy turned bone and broadcaster to slag.

FVZASSHT! FVZASSHT!

One shot missed the table radio completely, hitting a chemistry set three tables over, causing an explosion of glass and colored steam. The second slagged the radio, killing its lethal output.

Still: static. One more. My vision was red, I could feel blood trickling down my ears. Grenades were going off inside my head. I spotted the second broadcaster and lifted the multi-gem magical shotgun, pulling the trigger.

Nothing. The damn thing was recharging.

In a panic, I fled to the far side of the lab. I pressed myself into the corner, breathing a sigh of relief as the vices crushing my horn and skull vanished. That last yard of space was outside the danger zone. I floated up the magical energy rifle, took careful aim, and fired. And continued to fire, reloading twice, until I finally hit the little fucker.

“Safe now!” I called out. Velvet Remedy entered the lab and began to search it as I slumped in the corner and waited for the headache to die down more. She was wearing her medical boxes again, and started gathering supplies from the identical yellow medical boxes on one wall.

“So...” I gasped. “What exactly were you trying to do down in that auditorium?”

Velvet nickered. "I already got this lecture from Calamity." She floated bottles and vials out of a medical box, pausing as she lifted out a multi-tubed injector. "Rage? Why would this be down here. Rage is a zebra-made combat drug."

"Not a lecture, Velvet. I just... I want to understand. You scared the hell out of us."

"Calamity said that too. Although louder."

I hadn't been present for that particular argument. Calamity had flown ahead of me, rushing back to Velvet and SteelHooves after raiding Fluttershy's office. They had been given plenty of time to argue too. I had been lost in thought, contemplating the Ministry Mares, and had managed to get lost in the cubicles.

"Please, Velvet," I sighed, fighting to keep my voice gentle even with the throbbing of my head. I floated out another painkiller syringe and gave myself the shot. Almost immediately, the throbbing dulled to an ignorable level. I worried that I was seriously risking addiction to painkiller.

As if to drive home the worry, Velvet Remedy floated a tin of Mint-als out of the last medicine cabinet, opened it, flipped it upside down so the pills fell to the floor like heavy snow, and then began stomping them to powder.

She turn to me with an exasperated stare. "Fluttershy was right there, Littlepip. She had stood right at that spot, saying those very words. Right on that stage, Fluttershy had tried to stop the war, stop the bloodshed and horror that ended up ruining the entire country..." Her voice hitched. "...the entire *world!*"

She turned away from me. "You wouldn't understand."



"Alpha Technologies" the sign claimed. The heavy metal door slid back, revealing the most secure laboratories in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

“SteelHooves!”

Velvet Remedy and I dashed inside. Our friend was laying on a circular platform, surrounded by a magical shield. At our entrance, he stood up. I think I even detected a whinny of relief.

Velvet stopped just outside the shield, looking it over before asking him if he was okay. Clearly, the alicorns’ attack had knocked him unconscious after all, but he had regained it hours ago. Five-point-three hours ago, according to SteelHooves who had nothing better to do than watch the timekeeper on his visor’s E.F.S. count away. Even if his weapons could disable the shields, the explosions would have torn him apart in that confined space. Not even SteelHooves could survive dismemberment.

I found the terminal which controlled the magical field and began to trick my way through the security. Soon, I was looking at the control system for the lab’s several layers of security, as well as a series of project reports.

I turned off the field, smiling to SteelHooves. “Welcome back!” Velvet Remedy gave him a hug that I knew he couldn’t feel but somehow made him look uncomfortable anyway.

“I’ve collected some more medicine for your dispensary,” she chimed, and immediately he looked less uncomfortable. I chuckled and directed my attention to the terminal screen, perusing the reports, starting with those which had been subdivided into a category called “Ghost”.

Report 347

Mosaic (or was it Gestalt?) passed down a new project for Alpha today. Apparently, after over three years of pure failure from the mares up in spellcrafting, the Ministry Mare has given up on the Ministry’s effort to reverse-engineer zebra invisibility magic into spell form. Given our success with the StealthBuck, she’s passed the project onto us, requesting that we design a sustainable magical device capable of indefinite invisibility: our own version of the zebra’s stealth cloak.

This new project comes right on top of losing a member of the Alpha Herd; although from what I understand, that may make things easier on us. Officially, all I know is that Beaker has been suspended without pay. Unofficially, word had leaked down that Beaker is under investigation for accepting "contributions" from somepony within the Ministry of Technology in exchange for hampering the development of magical energy weapons. Sounds to me like there's a pony or two in the building next door who is more concerned with Ironshod Firearm's market dominance than what's best for all the good ponies of Equestria.

Report 397

Another day, another pointless daily report that nopony ever reads.

The shipment of drugs finally arrived from the Ministry of Morale, three weeks late and accompanied by two of their pink suitcase ponies who insisted on monitoring how the restricted drugs were used. I hear there were some hard words between one of the magic twins and the Morale officials. (You'd think, after all the work we put in on talismans for their ridiculous balloons, they'd be more cooperative!) End result: even though the shipment is actually in the building, we are going to have to wait at least three days while administration pushes through new paperwork before the drugs will be cleared and we can finally start the next round of tests on our prototype Steel Ranger medical dispenser.

Continued efforts in improving the design and duration of StealthBucks seems to have hit a wall. The MG StealthBuck II is the most advanced design we have managed, taking advantage of the same recharging magical properties we have introduced into some of the newer lines of magical energy weapons and possessing four times the duration of our original design. However, recharging takes hours, and the duration still falls far short of our goal marks.

Gestalt (or was it Mosaic?) visited Alpha today to review our progress. After explaining our difficulties, she suggested we pursue a new avenue of experimentation: a stealth suit which takes advantage of a multiple StealthBuck array. While one StealthBuck was providing invisibility, the others could be recharging.

I've passed her idea on to the rest of the Alpha Herd, and we've started some preliminary sketches. This looks promising.

Report 444

Today was a good day to be in Alpha Labs. Or, more precisely, to not be two floors above. Somehow, the Mare of the Ministry of Peace got wind of the sorts of megaspell ritual chambers the ponies in spellcrafting have been designing. For such a soft-spoken and pleasant old girl, she's apparently a right terror when she gets angry. And there aren't enough bits in the royal treasury to make it worth facing an angry Ministry Mare.

After spending a month calibrating the new array, the Ghostmare Suit is ready for its first live test. As well as the test turrets, I've brought Wonder into the office today. I figure, if the Ghostmare Suit can get by my cat, we have a winner.

Twinkle and Daybreak have been particularly snippy with each other again today for no apparent reason. I suspect those two bucks are having an affair. If so, I hope they keep it quiet. Personally, I think they would make a cute couple. But we have fraternization rules for a reason, and the last thing I want is to lose one of them because the magic twins decide to put them on separate floors.

Report 445

Wonder was a big hit in the office. Every member of Alpha Herd gathered around and utterly spoiled her with attention. A few are even insisting that I bring her back again. I'll run it past the magic twins. Maybe I can spin having a lab cat as being good for morale.

Sadly, the Ghostmare Suit was not as impressive. Not only did the suit fail to pass the "Wonder test" but we discovered that the array was draining power from all the StealthBucks while just one of them was running. The latter is technical design problem, I'm sure of it. The former is more worrying. We ran three members of the Herd through the test gauntlet with just StealthBucks alone, and Wonder didn't catch any of

them. Something in the suit, or maybe something in the array, is weakening the invisibility spell somehow.

Fortunately, we have time to try to fix this before the next review. Nobody is paying attention to us down here with that big mess upstairs. Apparently, Fluttershy went to Twilight Sparkle, and now the magic twins are cleaning house. I don't get the politics involved here, but I do get that two dozen unicorns have been fired already, and this is just the first day. Another dozen have actually quit, taking up an offer from the Ministry of Peace.

I have even heard rumors that they might be planning to dismantle some of the chambers, or redesign them for purely defensive spells like the Ministry of Peace is demanding. But I don't put any stock in that gossip. Equestria isn't going to disarm itself in the middle of a war. Especially not after the zebras successfully tested a megaspell of their own last week.

Report 489

Thanks to Wonder, we have finally gotten insight into the one of the issues plaguing the Ghostmare Suit Project. Apparently, the magic of zebra stealth cloaks is also designed to mitigate sound and smell. During the development of the StealthBuck, we had noticed the difference in the muffling effect between the zebra's artifacts and our own devices. We had written this off as it an acceptable loss, particularly since the cloaks' original sound dampening effect was relatively minor to begin with.

We had not, however, noticed the olfactory effect. This was apparently of greater concern to the zebras, possibly on account of the plethora of dangerous wildlife rumored to exist in their homeland. (Further proof that the zebras are innately crazy. Could you imagine living in Equestria if it was full of roaming monsters?)

While the original StealthBuck still retains at least a fraction of this effect, the MG StealthBuck II does not. Or, more precisely, does not after its first use. For reasons still a mystery to us, this element of the spell refuses to function after the StealthBuck II recharges.

Twinkle let something slip today about he and Daybreak getting a cat. I made a seemingly off-hoofed comment about

cats having a tendency to reveal things that should be kept secret. I hope he got the hint.

Report 512

The Ghostmare Suit Project suffered another setback today. I am amazed at how something so simple in concept can be so resistant to proper execution. I spent all last month solving the mutual-depletion problem only to find that the new array can't pass the stress tests. The Ghostmare Suit isn't worth anything if it can't sustain invisibility after a one-yard fall.

A few of the other researchers in the Alpha Herd have begun referring to this as Project Frustration. With other projects beginning to pile up, I'm going to have to take most of my ponies off of this one, down-prioritizing it until things look a little more promising.

Fortunately, Gestalt and Mosaic are out of Canterlot today, having an on-site meeting with Twilight Sparkle at a new facility out in Splendid Valley. (Honestly, I breathe a little easier when they aren't around. I personally find the magic twins a little creepy, particularly the way they finish each other's sentences. Doesn't anypony else get the shivers when they do that? It's as if Mosaic and Gestalt always know exactly what the other sister is thinking -- like they are not so much twins as one mare stuck in two bodies.)

Okay, no more reading Ghosts, Goblins and Ghoulish Figures on my breaktime.

Report 550

Twilight Sparkle paid a surprise visit to the Alpha Lab today. To my dismay, she asked for an update on the Ghostmare Suit Project. She had apparently hoped we were much further along, and had wanted to bring in Rarity, the Mare of the Ministry of Image (what the hell?), for a consultation on the suit's aesthetic design. Seriously, the suit's supposed to be invisible. Who the hell cares what it looks like?

Twilight Sparkle asked me to put up with the nuisance anyway and give Rarity our full attention and respect. Afterwards, Daybreak suggested Twilight Sparkle was looking for a way to cheer up her friend, saying something afterwards about Rarity having been a dressmaker. Honestly, I have no idea how

dumping more work on somepony in that position, particularly if it is pointless work, could possibly cheer a pony up. On the other hoof, the idea that one of the Ministry Mares might be suffering Wartime Stress Disorder is terrifying, so I told Daybreak to keep that opinion carefully under wraps.

While Twilight Sparkle was clearly disappointed with our progress on that particular project, at least she was understanding. And she was considerably more pleased with our other projects, such as the multi-gem heavy infantry battle saddle. Alpha Labs has continued to show a great deal of success in other projects, so I don't think we'll face any serious repercussions.

She did, however, ask if there was anypony I believed we could spare to join the spellcrafting lab above us. Apparently, they are researching something called a "Bypass Spell" and have reached the point where they need a fresh mind. I told her I would get back to her on that. Tomorrow, I'm going to have a talk with Daybreak and Twinkle. I'd prefer to keep both of them as they are excellent members of the Herd. But if I'm going to end up losing one of them, I would rather it be done this way.

I stopped skimming the reports. There were dozens more in "Ghost" alone and half a dozen other categories. Getting up, I looked around at the lab, opening locked storage containers and equipment lockers.

Oh, Calamity would be sorry he was missing this. There were tools in here I couldn't even guess the purpose of. I checked to make sure Velvet was still busy with SteelHooves, reasoning that it wasn't "sightseeing" if I had to wait anyway, then levitated a duffle bag from under one of the tables. Pulling it open and dumping out the empty cat carrier inside, I started scooping random tools and equipment into a duffle bag.

"Ready to go, Littlepip?" Velvet called out.

"Just one minute," I called back, cutting my scavenging short. But there was still one storage container that I wanted to raid before we descended into the basement -- the one where I had spotted the prototype Ghostmare Suit. Or, at least, parts of it. The project had clearly never been completed, and was abandoned in the middle of a

complete overhaul. Now, digging back through the container, I found something that was worth taking: one MG StealthBuck II.



With a grunt, SteelHooves forced open the elevator doors and the three of us looked down the dark shaft. Midway down, a field of blue energy cut horizontally across the shaft, blocking our way down. I sighed, unsurprised. We'd tried the stairwell to the basement already, only to find a thick metal door had slid into place, cutting off access. The entire basement was locked down tight. The only way in was to be teleported there by the Ministry building's security, and I had yet to find a way out.

"Look at the cables," Velvet whispered. "They go right down through the shield."

I nodded. I had figured that the shield had just closed around them, although it was a little surprising that they hadn't been severed. "What are you thinking?"

"Bypass spell," she responded.

"For the cables?"

"For the whole elevator," she suggested. "I know that's a long shot, but..."

SteelHooves nickered disbelievingly, "You think they put a security barrier in the elevator shaft that the *elevator* could go through?"

I bit my lower lip in thought. "Actually, that's not as silly as it sounds. The elevator would be programmed to move to the bottom when the basement was locked down, but they wouldn't want to trap anypony, so they set the barrier to allow the elevator through. That way, the barrier can activate instantly while the elevator has time to deposit any passengers on the floors above." I was talking out my tail-side, but it made at least some sense. "Once the elevator reaches the bottom, power is cut to the whole system, and the elevator is locked into position."

"So what good does that do us?" SteelHooves asked.

Velvet almost purred. “They weren’t planning on Littlepip, now were they?” I knew what she was getting at. Levitate the elevator up to us, get on, and down we go. Only one problem.

“I need schematics of the elevator’s mechanical system,” I told them.

Velvet looked at me oddly. “Why?”

“The locking mechanism is at the bottom where I can’t see it.” She continued to look at me blankly. I sighed. “Look, I need to know what I’m doing before I can do it.”

I looked at them. Of course they didn’t understand. SteelHooves had no clue about magic at all, and Velvet Remedy’s levitation magic was comparatively foalish.

“It’s the same reason I can telekinetically fire a gun or pull the power supply from a turret even if I can’t see it, but I can’t use my magic to squeeze somepony’s heart or build a rifle while blindfolded. If I can’t see what I’m doing, I need to be able to picture it in my mind with a fair amount of accuracy or the magic won’t manifest,” I explained, hoping I didn’t sound patronizing.

“I at least need a place to start if I have any chance of doing this. Like with the star-spawn. Until Pyrelight set part of it on fire, I didn’t have any place to begin. In this case, since I have no idea what kind of locking mechanism I might be not-seeing, I need the schematics.”

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves both nodded.

“One schematics for the elevator coming right up.”



“Oh Goddesses,” Velvet Remedy whimpered. “Littlepip!”

I was studying the elevator schematics SteelHooves had found on my PipBuck. Velvet had been watching me, and I realized what she had just seen.

I looked at her, then looked away and nodded. I didn’t have anything to say.

SteelHooves whinnied. I put up a hoof, signaling for him to say nothing. I didn't know if his words would be an I-told-you-so or a guilt-laden apology, but I didn't think I could handle either. I had saved him. It had cost me a bit of my pony-ness. What was done was done. I couldn't say I didn't regret it, but I could say I would do it again, even knowing the outcome.

"Really," I said, feeling a hitch in my throat. "It's not that bad. I hardly notice the itch anymore."

I shifted my attention to the shaft and the elevator below. I focused, reaching out, attempting to manifest my magic on the far side of the shield. This was a bit of a new trick, but there was no reason it shouldn't work. I remembered the super-alicorn from the Fillydelphia Crater whose shield was so powerful she couldn't manifest magic through it. This shield was nothing compared to that one. I thought of Velvet Remedy casting her anesthetic spell inside the alicorn's shield.

I could do this.

I was satisfied to see the glow of my magic surround the elevator car. I focused on the thick yet simple clamps beneath, rotating the screws that held them together until I heard them fall apart.

Concentrating, I slowly lifted the elevator car upwards, pulling it towards the energy shield. I held my breath as the top of the car reached the field of blue light. Moment of truth. Was Velvet right?

The car continued to lift, gliding through the field as if it was nothing but a film of water. I exhaled gratefully. In moments, it was hovering in front of us. I pushed the car's clattering gate open.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," I announced with a sweeping bow, "Your chariot awaits!"



As I floated the elevator car down towards the basement, Velvet Remedy and I rode alone.

The three of us had barely gotten onto the elevator when we realized the problem. With SteelHooves' extra bulk, there was barely enough room for the three of us. There was no way we would be able to fit Calamity in too. Or maneuver, as SteelHooves pointed out, if there was a turret waiting for us at the bottom.

Instead, we had left our Steel Ranger Outcast standing guard over Calamity's packs, the duffle bag and most of our weapons. Calamity would just have to wait to put on his battle saddle again.

I tapped my forehooves together tentatively. I stared at the floor of the elevator. Finally, I asked Velvet, "Little Macintosh?"

Velvet Remedy hissed, "Wrong question." I was startled by the vehemence in her voice.

"You should have asked about Pyrelight!"

Oh. I felt a twinge of guilt. "Pyrelight's not in the building according to the security system. She never got trapped in..." I stopped, feeling a sinking sensation that chilled my heart and stole my breath. The elevator car stopped moving with a jolt as my eyes widened. If Pyrelight never made it inside, that meant she was still out in the pink. A whole night in the Cloud meant death.

"I asked her to get our things as I brought SteelHooves inside," Velvet said morosely. "But I got magically thrown in that prison... that chamber... before I could prop the door open for her."

Velvet looked at me with a heartbreaking expression. "I have to imagine she gathered Little Macintosh and all your precious weapons, hoarded them someplace, then sat outside and waited for me." I cringed, a whimper strangling in my throat. But Velvet shook her head.

"Pyrelight's a smart bird. She's a survivor. I have to believe that she wouldn't wait too long. That she'd fly out of the Cloud, out of Canterlot. Maybe all the way back to Glyphmark and Xenith." She turned away, but I saw the drops fall from her, making damp spots on the floor. "As long as the Pink Cloud didn't get worse too quickly. As long as she wasn't taken by surprise. I have to believe that."

Speaking with confidence I didn't really have, I assured her that she was right.

I started the elevator downward again.



"Tell me where it is!" the mare's voice called out, grating across my brain.

My ears had popped.

Clank. "NO!" the Trixie-like second voice echoed in my head.

The air shimmered around us. My lungs fought for breath.

Clink-clank. "UNCHAIN US! YOUR GODDESS DEMANDS IT!"

Velvet Remedy and I slithered across the tiled basement floor, pushing aside toppled boxes of grain and shattered plates, dropped kitchen knives and leaking packages of flour. At first, we had crouched to be stealthy. But now we did it just to breathe.

"No. If I unchain us, you'll kill us both."

"YOU ARE TRYING TO KILL ME ALREADY. BETTER WE BOTH SHOULD PERISH!"

Clink-clank-clink.

I coughed, my abused lungs struggling for air. The sound was high and tight, not like a pony's cough at all, and that worried me. I coughed again, and Velvet Remedy did the same, her coughs more like a newborn's squeak-toy than any noise which should come from Velvet's throat.

We both froze, ears perking and swiveling, as we prayed the kitchen's other occupant hadn't heard us.

"We must throw the party! Our Goddess demands it!"

The alicorn hadn't heard us. She was too busy arguing with... as far as I could tell... *herself.*

I reached the end of the counter and peeked around it cautiously. The forest green alicorn was wrapped in heavy chains that bound her to a thick set of pipes in the ceiling. She stood there, looking around frantically, searching for something, a frightened but intelligent look in her eyes.

Suddenly, her demeanor changed, her eyes locking forward with a glare and her face contorting in rage. She lunged, throwing herself against the chains that bound her. *Clank-clank-clink!*

“I AM YOUR GODDESS!” the Trixie-like voice raged. It wasn’t the actual voice of the Goddess, but some strange, pale imitation that echoed through my head. I realized her mouth wasn’t moving. Everything I was hearing was in my head. All of it.

But how was that possible? The Pink Cloud hindered the alicorns’ telepathy. I was sure of it. It cut them off from their Goddess, allowed them to regain some of their individuality again. Granted, while the kitchens were full of some sort of gas, it wasn’t Pink Cloud. But there was Pink Cloud all around this building.

Even as I thought that, my eyes drifted to the alicorn’s flank and caught there. The alicorn had a cutie mark! It looked odd, like maybe a mist of stars, but I couldn’t be sure. The mere fact that the alicorn had one at all shook my conceptions. The alicorn’s flanks quivered with effort as she lunged again, the chains pulling taut, holding her back.

I followed her gaze. It looked like she was trying to get to the ovens.

“I HELPED YOU! I WAS THERE FOR YOU WHEN SHE WAS SILENT. I WHISPERED TO YOU WHEN YOU COULDN’T BEAR THE SILENCE IN YOUR HEAD. I CODDLED YOU. ME! NOT HER!” the not-Trixie voice ranted. “AND YOU BETRAY ME! I WILL KILL YOU FOR THAT!”

Without the Goddess, I had surmised that the alicorns were cut off from their collective pool of magic. That they were left with just their inherent magics, the alicorn shields, and maybe a spell or two. I had to revise that theory.

Or not. Purple alicorns teleport. Blue ones turn invisible. The green ones do that weird statue thing. But what if that was part of a broader gift? The green alicorns were the telepaths! Even cut off from the Goddess, they still had their gift. If anything, the Goddess probably borrowed that magical talent from them.

I felt Velvet Remedy slide past me, slipping ahead. I looked back at the alicorn.

"This was our mission." The original voice was back. The alicorn stopped struggling and resumed her search. I froze again as she looked right past me and missed me. The alicorn was showing raider-tier obliviousness.

"We are so close. I will not fail now!" I watched her muzzle, but her mouth never moved. This whole argument was taking place in her head... and by extension, in ours.

Then I saw something that rocked me. The alicorn's cutie mark had faded away, reminding me of a filly in my class back in Stable Two who tried to have her father conjure up her cutie mark early using magic. Each time, a new mark would appear, only to fade away, just like this.

Only the alicorn's cutie mark didn't just fade away. A cutie mark of a flask with bubbling green liquid replaced it. The alicorn's new cutie mark struck a chord of déjà vu. I'd seen it before.

A moment later, the alicorn's demeanor changed again, and as I watched, the bubbling flask cutie mark faded and the starry mist resumed its place. "WHY? WHY GO BACK TO HER? I'M BETTER. I'M HERE ONLY FOR YOU. ALWAYS."

Clank-clank-clink-clink-clank-clink!

I began to crawl away, shaken and a little freaked by what I had seen. Your cutie mark is an integral part of you, a symbol of your special talent. How could it change like that? Even when you were depressed, even when you were at your worst, you were still you. Your cutie mark never abandoned you.

“AND I’M BETTER AT MAGIC TOO! SHE SAID IT COULDN’T BE DONE. ‘NO SMALL RODENTS OF ANY KIND,’ SHE SAID. BUT I DID IT! I’M THE ONE WHO FOUND THE SPELL! I’M THE ONE WHO CAST IT WHILE YOU WHIMPERED IN A CORNER...”



Calamity was curled up in the far corner of a small cell behind both a magical shield and a locked gate. I had to hold my breath while I hacked the security terminal that dropped the shield. At even a yard up, the air became impossible to breathe.

Cracking the computer took me several tries. It was difficult to concentrate, especially with the alicorn’s telepathic argument being broadcast non-stop into my head.

The moment the shield vanished, Velvet and I scrambled on our bellies to his cell. Velvet reached her hooves between the bars, touching them to his as he slid close.

“Don’t!” he squeaked, seeing me eye the lock.

I froze, not from his warning but the high-pitched, squeaky voice that had come out of his muzzle.

“Hydrogen,” he squeaky-warned. “The air is full o’ it. One spark, from yer gun or yer horn, an’ we all roast.”

It was like listing to a small woodland creature. Only cuter and sillier. I snorted, trying to hold in a laugh. I tried to distract myself with the seriousness of our situation. *You’d think*, the terminal entry had said, *after all the work we put in on talismans for their ridiculous balloons, they’d be more cooperative.* The Ministry of Magic had created hydrogen talismans for the Ministry of Morale. There was probably one in “high security storage” down here. And it had been activated.

But if I couldn’t use magic or weapons, how was I going to get Calamity’s cell open?

“Better figure out somethin’ fast, Li’lpip,” the woodland-critter voice coming from Calamity insisted. “This place is gonna become unbreathable give it another hour. Ah reckon the only reason it took this long is cuz this place is *huge*.”

I covered my muzzle with both forehooves, tears in my eyes.

“Ah caught mention of there bein’ a hangar down here,” he added squeakily.

That did it. I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Despite my difficulty breathing, I found myself laughing so hard I was rolling on the floor. The high-pitched sounds of my own laughter just made me guffaw harder.

“Yeah, yuk it up, why don’tcha?” Calamity glowered at me. And now even Velvet was laughing. “But would one o’ y’all kindly get the damn key and get me outta here? B’fore that alicorn drives *me* crazy?” He was hilarious. I stomped a hoof on the floor, dying.

“Sing something first,” Velvet Remedy suggested, her own voice even higher. Calamity snorted.



“Thank y’all” Calamity said as he slipped something pink into his pack. I blinked, realizing he’d managed to pilfer something even under these conditions.

“Now let’s get outta here before the crazy lady downstairs manages t’ blow this buildin’ up t’ the Enclave,” Calamity suggested urgently as he shrugged on his battle saddle, his voice almost back to normal.

Velvet Remedy looked fretfully back at the empty elevator shaft. “I... I wish I had a way to help her,” she said softly.

“What? Help the crazy alicorn? Why?”

Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a stern look. “She’s obviously suffering. Can you imagine having someone in your head as a constant

companion for lifetimes and then suddenly losing her? I saw her cutie marks..."

"Marks?" Calamity asked. "As in, plural?"

Velvet nodded. "One of them was from one of the ponies on those videos the Goddess showed us. "I believe that alicorn was one of the first. She's had the Goddess in her mind for centuries." Velvet looked back to the elevator again. "Then... to come here and suddenly lose that? I'm not surprised she was traumatized. I'm surprised more aren't."

Calamity raised his eyebrows. "So the Pink Cloud is makin' alicorn's insane? That settles it. We need t' go t' the castle."

"What?"

"I'll explain later. Let's get outta here." Within minutes, we were galloping through the lobby.

Panting, I stopped and looked out at the wall of Pink Cloud. It wasn't lethally thick yet, not like the places where it pooled, but it was bad enough to filter out most of the light. It was past dawn and it looked like it was past dusk.

"Was there anything you could have said, maybe?" I wondered, seeing how distraught Velvet was beginning to look. Pyrelight was nowhere in sight (which was a good thing, realistically, but it had to be feeding her distress).

The pretty unicorn mare shook her head, her white mane with its colored stripes whipping about. "No, Littlepip. The only way to help the poor thing now is with years of therapy," she said, looking at me sadly. "You can't heal true psychological trauma with a super restoration potion, or with a quick conversation of pretty words and psychobabble."

"Ah was right," Calamity announced. "Ah hate t' say Ah told ya so... naw, after that singin' bit, Ah'm downright happy t' say Ah told ya so." He landed at the front doors to the Ministry of Arcane Sciences and stared at us. "So... Ah told ya so!"

"Told us what?" Velvet asked politely as we trotted up to him.

"What singing?" SteelHooves questioned. I found myself snickering again.

Calamity nickered, rolling his eyes. "The zebras' megaspell. It's still goin'... sorta."

I stopped snickering. "Where is it?"

"What do you mean, sort of?" Velvet questioned.

"We should leave this building," SteelHooves reminded us.

Calamity nodded to him. "Right. Ah'll tell ya when we get next door." It was morning. We'd lost a good chunk of a day, and the Pink Cloud was going to be thick enough that we wanted to take the rest of the journey in small bites. Next door to the Ministry of Technology, then across to the Ministry of Image. Finally, from there to the Ministry of Awesome. Hopefully, the rest of the Ministry buildings would be more like the Ministry of Peace than this one.

We opened the door and charged into the Pink Cloud.

The distance we had to cross was less than a city block. I was sure we could make it easily. No distractions.

"Look!" Velvet shouted, pointing to one of the garbage bins alongside the building. There was a smear on it that looked like a flame. I groaned inwardly, rolling my eyes, and trotted over to it. Calamity was faster and already had it open by the time I got there.

Inside were our weapons and gear. Pyrelight had stashed them in the bin and marked it. With birdshit. Not wanting to risk leaving anything behind, I floated the contents of the garbage bin out and carried it with us, refuse and all.

The alicorns were on us, their shields up, before we made it halfway. SteelHooves turned and opened fire. But Spitfire's Thunder was somewhere in a mass of rotten rubbish floating behind me, and none of the weapons we had at the ready could penetrate those shields.

So we ran, panting, galloping for the doors of the Ministry of Technology as fast as we could. The doors were glass; the entire front façade of the Ministry was glass, a matrix of clear panes that rose three stories high. The rest of the building had an elegant simplicity -- stately, functional, with an almost masculine grace. The king on the chessboard. I hoped the glass was enforced somehow. Otherwise, the alicorns would just plow through it.

The steps up to the Ministry building were piled with the skeletons of long-dead ponies. I raced by a unicorn stallion whose hooves had sunken into the concrete steps, and jumped the body of a younger mare whose bones had taken on the pattern of the dress she had been wearing on the day of the Pink Cloud.

I noticed the jumble of skeletons blanketing the marble floor inside the Ministry's grand foyer as well, but I didn't think anything of it until I telekinetically pulled open the glass doors and charged into a flood of static. I screamed as fresh but familiar agony skewered my brain. I stumbled and turned towards the exit, only to see my friends race into the room and all but SteelHooves get slammed to the floor. Outside, the alicorns landed, closing the doors and stood there, holding them closed with their shields.

We had been herded into a trap!

I looked around, dropping the garbage I was carrying onto the skeletons of several dead ponies as I frantically searched. I almost immediately spotted three, and before I could focus enough to pull up a weapon, I'd spotted two more.

"There... are dozens!" Velvet Remedy squealed, clutching her head, blood running out of her eyes and ears. Lashing out with my magic, I tried to wrap all of the skeletons, intending to toss the whole contents of the room up onto one of the mezzanines above. Excruciating torture ripped through my horn, blackening my vision.

Somewhere, I heard a voice shouting, "Shut them down!" Then, for the second time in half a day, I passed out.



The Star Orb

I was locked into what seemed like the longest, most boring memory ever. My host was skimming over sheets of paperwork: non-disclosure contracts, agreements to drug and loyalty testing, acceptance of possible mandatory relocation, and so on. Each sheet bore an emblem of a large star ringed by smaller ones and circumscribed by a horn and wings. Each had the header of an official Ministry of Arcane Technologies document.

My host was either a speed reader or she wasn't really reading that closely. Occasionally, she would look up, glancing sheepishly at the bored mare sitting behind her desk, or watching the door beside the desk. The first time she did so, I realized I knew where we were by the fanciful design of the door and the ornate lighting. This was Tenpony Tower. My host never looked up long though before returning to the clipboard filled with paperwork.

Every so often, she would levitate a quill, dipping it in ink, and sign her name.

Trixie.

We looked up, Trixie and I, when the door opened and a smiling Twilight Sparkle stepped out. "Trixie, I'm very happy you could make it!"

"I... I wouldn't have missed this opportunity." We quickly signed the last page and floated the clipboard to the mare at the desk (who was now sitting at the sort of alert attention that only comes from ponies who were slacking just before their boss walked in).

“Please, come in,” Twilight said, standing aside. Slowly, almost humbly, Trixie stepped through the doorway.

Inside was a nice office, not ostentatious in the slightest, mostly filled with shelves holding books and various knick-knacks of magical or personal importance. As Trixie’s eyes wandered over the room, I spotted a jar with several delicate purple-spotted lavender shards floating in preserving liquid. The jar was labeled “Spike’s Egg”.

Twilight Sparkle walked in behind us, closing the door, and moved around to sit at her desk. She looked over her desk with a slight frown and, apparently deciding it seemed too formal, walked back around the desk and sat on a floor cushion, offering another to Trixie.

“Miss Sparkle...” Trixie began. I could feel her nervousness.

“Oh please, call me Twilight,” she beamed. “So, tell me, been working on any new tricks lately?”

I felt my host stammer a moment, then draw herself up, breathing deeply. With a prideful voice, she boasted, “Why yes! In fact, just the other day, I invented an invisibility spell! Would you like to see?”

Twilight Sparkle blinked. “You. Invented. An invisibility spell?”

“Indeed! Have you ever known another unicorn who could do this?” I felt the surge of magic as my host cast her spell. Twilight Sparkle gasped.

“You... Trixie, you’re actually invisible!” Twilight reached out, prodding us with a hoof, making sure we were actually still there and hadn’t teleported away. “That’s... amazing!”

I felt the spell ebb then collapse. It clearly wasn’t long lasting. Still, Trixie sat up, smiling broadly. “See? Am I not still the Great and Powerful Trixie?”

Twilight gazed at her. As seconds ticked by, I could feel sweat bead on my host’s forehead. “And you invented this spell yourself?”

“Why yes! I...” All at once, Trixie seemed to deflate. “No.” She stared at the floor, scuffing it with her hoof. “I mean, yes, I created the spell.

But only after I got ahold of one of those new StealthBucks and figured out how to cast the magic myself.”

Twilight’s expression softened. “Thank you for being honest with me.”

Trixie nodded. “I’ll... see myself out.”

“No!” Twilight said swiftly. “No... it’s all right. I’m still *really* impressed. Those StealthBucks were created by my Ministry...”

Trixie winced.

“...and we reverse-engineered them from zebra magic. But none of my unicorns have been able to re-create it in spell form. I have a whole division in Canterlot who have spent years trying to do what you just did and failing.”

Trixie looked up again, surprised. I felt a burning in her eyes. She was holding back tears.

“What you have done is incredible. You *should* be proud. And don’t be nervous. You’ve already got the job,” Twilight Sparkle smiled. “That is, if you still want it. I hope all that out there didn’t put you off.”

“Oh no! Not at all,” Trixie said hurriedly. “I really want to work for the Ministry, *your* Ministry.” Then in a softer voice, “And I need this job.”

“Oh dear.” Twilight’s eyes widened. “Trixie, what happened?”

“Well... you know...” She sighed. “Things did not go well for me after Ponyville. I’d lost my home. Word spread about how you defeated that Ursa Minor and how I...” She shook her head. “I was a laughingstock, only I was too proud and blind to see it. My shows starting bringing jeers instead of cheers. And then they stopped bringing anypony at all. Money ran out. No pony would hire the ‘Great and Powerful’ Trixie. I had to take... unpleasant jobs...”

Trixie looked aside. “Things actually got better for me when the war started. Ponies stopped caring about my reputation. It was long enough ago, and they had other things to hate.”

“Oh... oh Trixie, I never knew.”

Trixie looked into Twilight's concerned expression, then at the floor. "Honestly, I'm surprised you would want me here."

Twilight smiled. "Well, I remember you as a skilled and talented unicorn with an impressive repertoire of spells. And I'm happy to have you with us. I have a new project, and I need volunteers." She paused. "There is one thing. You will have to allow us to record one of your memories."

Trixie's eyes widened. "You... you want to see my memories?"

Twilight Sparkle shook her head. "Just one of them. And the memory of this meeting will do just fine."

Trixie looked askance, "This one? Well... that's not so bad then. But...why?"

"This war," Twilight Sparkle explained, "Will be won by the side with superior magic. We're working on a potion that will transform a normal pony into..."

She paused, then spit it out, "Into an alicorn."

Trixie gasped.

"And no, I'm not joking. We're ready to test it. And I wanted to ask you to be the first." Twilight Sparkle looked nervous. She understood the gravity of what she was asking of my host, even if Trixie really did not.

"An... alicorn? You mean like Princess Celestia?"

"And Princess Luna, yes." Twilight's tone was very serious. "This is transformation magic of the highest order. We need a memory of yours for comparison. Before and after. We don't think that being changed into an alicorn will affect your psyche, but we can't be sure."

With that, she put a gently hoof on Trixie. "We've taken every precaution. I wouldn't ask anypony to do this if I wasn't absolutely sure it would work and that it would be safe. But still... I know it is asking a lot. Too much. This potion would change who you are. What you are."

Trixie gulped.

"If you don't want to do this, you can back out at any time." Twilight Sparkle smiled. "And I promise you'll still have a job with the Ministry. I'll make sure of it."

Trixie was silent for a long time. I could feel a tremor pass through her. But then, slowly and softly, she said, "I'll do it. I don't mind being changed. I'm not the greatest fan of who I am anymore. Haven't been for a long time. Maybe... this way I'll actually be able to be who I thought I was."

Twilight Sparkle's eyes danced with joy. "Then welcome to the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, Trixie! If you don't mind, I'd like to get started right away." Twilight Sparkle stood up abruptly, moving towards the door.

"Are you free for the rest of the weekend? I'd like you to come out to Maripony with me. I've got a couple ponies who I really want you to meet." She let out a little squeal. "Oh, I can't wait to see their faces when you turn invisible!"

"Who?" Trixie asked as my host got up, trotting after her.

Twilight turned back with a smile. "Gestalt and Mosaic. They're my head researchers. Twins and some of the most amazing spellcasters you'll ever meet." With a sheepish grin, "Next to you and I, of course. I normally leave them in charge at my Ministry Hub in Canterlot, but they're at Maripony now, overseeing final preparations.

"You'll like them. They have a cute way of finishing each other's sentences," Twilight grinned. "And you want to hear something really impressive? I've seen them finish each other's *spells* too!"

Finish each other's thoughts and each other's spells. The foundations for telepathy and spell-sharing. An epiphany washed over me. I suddenly understood why there were three breeds of alicorn, why they had the abilities they did... even why all the alicorns were female!

Dozens of ponies were absorbed into what became the Goddess, but it was Trixie's mind which became dominant. The behavior of my host

wasn't much like that of the Goddess, but there were shadows of her there. The Goddess was lurking in some part of her psyche, waiting to be tapped.

But, it wasn't just Trixie who held power. There were four ponies within the amalgam that formed the Goddess who were powerful enough to exert influence over the alicorn creation process.

Blue is invisibility. Purple can teleport. The greens are telepathic and can work together to create greater effects with their shields.

Four ponies, all mares.

I wondered, if the Goddess consumed me, would a new breed of alicorns begin with extra-powerful telekinetics?

Would Red Eye only be able to create alicorn stallions?

My thoughts were interrupted as Trixie stopped, asking nervously. "And... they'll be impressed... with me?"

"Oh, I guarantee it!"



I kept my eyes closed, holding to the peace of rest just a little while longer. I was alive, and I felt uninjured. Even the headaches had gone away. I wanted to stay like that just a little while longer. Because waking up meant returning to my life, and that meant pain.

It also meant friends. I had no desire to stay asleep forever. Just a little while longer. A few minutes. That was all I wanted.

The noises around me were strange. Gravelly voices, the clapping of hoofsteps, and the high-pitched whine that had been ever present throughout my childhood.

The alicorns had set a trap. A scarily clever one. When I had fallen into the reflecting pool, the alicorns had observed how I dealt with traps by

using my telekinesis, and this time they had not only anticipated it, but used it against me with a trap that attacked me faster through my magic. The realization was terrifying. I had no idea why it didn't work. They should have killed us all.

My eyes opened to the overly familiar sight of a Stable clinic ceiling.

Wait. What?

"Welcome to Stable City," rumbled the voice of a stallion standing nearby. His eyes glowed as his rotted body shambled towards me, the filthy evening cloak on his back having melted into his skin. I looked around. The architecture hit all the familiar Stable notes, but everypony around me was a Canterlot Ghoul.

The ghoul stallion stomped, drawing my attention. "Now we have treated you and your friends. Consider that on the house for the show your party put on yesterday. We in Stable City are willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to anypony that those monsters hate so much."

He reached up a fetid hoof and tapped my horn warningly. I could see he wore a PipBuck; it was melted to his flesh like mine. Only his had a broadcaster attached, one that had been mercifully switched off. "But only so far. The broadcasters out in the foyer keep those monsters outside. Most of us have taken to wearing them as well, in case we need to step out."

He saw my eyes widen. "Don't worry. None of us keep them on while we're inside, the static is highly annoying – unless we are on guard patrol. Or unless you give us reason to. One wrong step, and every citizen of Stable City becomes walking death to you living folk. So you and your breather friends behave now. Clear?"

I nodded. Very clear.

"Now, I believe there is someone who has been waiting..." the ghoul stallion began, only to be cut off by the sound of a squeal from Velvet Remedy somewhere nearby.

"...ah. It seems to have found your other unicorn first." The ghoul concluded, but I had already jumped down and was racing through the

clinic, dodging between ghouls. I slid to a stop as I spotted Velvet. Then trotted forward, feeling a warm smile break across my muzzle. She was sitting up in a medical bed, her face full of joy, with Pyrelight dancing gleefully through the air around her.



“Good day, gentle ghouls of Stable City (you miserable, rotting slabs of ambulatory meat!)” the floating robot called out, greeting random citizens of Stable City as they passed it in the hall.

Calamity walked beside me, having found the hallway of the Stable too confining to fly in. The ghouls gave us odd and curious looks as they passed.

“...Li’lpip, ya lost part of yerself,” Calamity was saying.

I looked down at my PipBuck-foreleg and a pained frown immediately swept over my muzzle; I forced myself to smile. “More like had something added, actually.”

“Don’t go using specific details to muddy the issue,” Calamity warned. “The truth is, a loss like that pains a pony, an’ Ah’m not talkin’ just physically. An’ it ain’t brave t’ pretend ya ain’t hurtin’. It ain’t smart neither.”

I stayed silent.

“When Velvet Remedy lost her leg,” Calamity recalled, “She was a right mess, even after she got it back.”

“Sorry, Calamity,” I chuckled wryly, “But I don’t think I’ll be indulging in the same therapy.”

“Don’t be a manticore’s backside, Li’lpip,” Calamity said crossly. “When we get outta here, we need t’ go back t’ Tenpony Tower an’ y’all need t’ spend...”

“No!” I barked. I looked at Calamity, his wings up and eyes wide, clearly taken aback by my abruptness and the strength of my refusal. More pleasantly, I complained, “We’ve become experts at not getting

what we need to do done. After Canterlot, we go right to Splendid Valley. No more delays, no more side quests, no more distractions. We get the damn job done.”

Calamity didn't speak for a while. In the background, I could hear the robot saying, “Hello, ma'am. I do hope the morning finds you in good health. (As if that could ever happen.)”

We rounded the corner and found ourselves looking at a Stable Atrium. The place had been renovated to hold a plethora of shops and small stands where Canterlot Ghouls traded goods and services for bits and wares.

As we started down the stairs, Calamity asked me softly, “Are you okay, Li'lpip?” It was a stupid question considering the conversation immediately prior, but I ignored that as I heard the concern in his voice.

“I'm weary, Calamity. I'm getting worn out,” I admitted dourly. “I need this job to be over. To get out from under this threat, this mission.” I looked up, scanning the Stable City marketplace. “Then, after that, I can rest. Maybe, when this is over, I'll just lay down and take a nap for a century or few. But not before.”

We reached the bottom of the steps. The place looked like a right lively little necropolis. The only thing that struck me as missing was any sort of diner or foodstuffs vendor. I supposed ghouls didn't really need those. I was suddenly keenly aware of how hungry I was and how long it had been since I had eaten.

“How about you?” I asked in return as we approached a store labeled Caliber's Guns and Ammo.

“Me? Ah'm doin'...” He paused as I turned to him and pointedly raised an eyebrow. “T'ain't fair, throwin' muh own words back at me.”

“I didn't say anything.”

He neighed. Then, brushing his brow beneath his desperado hat, he admitted, “Ah'm not doin' so good, actually. Ah keep thinkin' 'bout those bandit's back at Arbu. An' the ponies up at Bucklyn Cross.” He

frowned. "Now, the bandits Ah can rightly live with. Accordin' t' the old man, half o' 'em came from Arbu, but they were still bandits. They were still ambushin' a merchant."

He looked at me, "Ah know y'all think bein' a bandit is a downright noble step up from bein' what the folks in Arbu were. But from muh perspective, the moment those folks in Arbu started killin' folk fer their meat, they weren't no better than bandits."

I nodded. My own feelings were... considerably different. But my horrific actions in Arbu voided any validity those feeling might have had.

"But Bucklyn Cross? That's another matter," Calamity shook his head, nickering bitterly. "We went there demandin' somethin' and ended up killin' 'em fer it."

"That..." my jaw dropped. "Calamity, that's not how it went down at all!" We tried to negotiate. They fired first. We were trying to get something they didn't need to give to ponies who were suffering without it. We had something to trade and were trying. They risked their Elder's life! We... we weren't raiders.

"Ain't it?" he asked me, clearly unsure. "Ain't it jus' a li'l how that went down?"

I stomped, shaking my head. "No."

Still unconvinced, Calamity stepped up to the door of the weapons shop. "If ya take from the rich an' give t' the poor, yer still just a raider," he said as the door slid up.

"No!" I said firmly. "You're not. A bandit maybe, at best. But not a raider. And you know better." I couldn't believe my kleptomaniac pegasus was arguing this. "Some would call you a hero."

Bucklyn Cross had to be disturbing Calamity deeply for his thoughts to have plunged into such uncharacteristic and messy logic. Maybe Velvet was right and we all needed years of therapy.

Stepping into the store after him, I put a hoof on his shoulder. Then, not knowing how else I could help, I hugged him.

“Not in my shop,” the little dead colt behind the store counter coughed in disgust. “If you’re looking for *that*, it’s two floors up.”



The colt shoved the missiles across the counter to Calamity. “One or two of these anti-armor missiles are pretty much guaranteed to take down an alicorn’s shield and make a very pretty mess of the winged bitch inside.” He looked at what Calamity was offering in return. Leave it to Calamity to not only retrieve all our weapons and supplies, but to go through the garbage for anything else that might be good for a trade. “This all will get you these five. Toss in one of those magical energy weapons, and I can give you all eight.”

Calamity raised an eyebrow. He was no Velvet Remedy, but he had fair bartering chops of his own and I could tell he thought he was being snookered. “Three missiles don’t equal a top-o’-the-line magical energy weapon, not even iffin they’re all as fancy as ya claim they are.”

The colt bit, “Oh they are. One of the benefits of living in the Ministry of Wartime Technology. We have all sorts of toys you living folk haven’t even heard of.” I was willing to bet he was right. I was also willing to bet most of it was either in questionable prototype stages or stocked in too limited a supply to sell.

“If these work so well against alicorn shields, then why haven’t you used them against the alicorns?” I asked reasonably.

It had not been hard to glean that the ghouls of Stable City had been fighting with the alicorns since they started showing up in the Canterlot Ruins about a decade ago. From the impression I got, the ghouls were losing and were now effectively contained in the Ministry they called home.

The colt frowned. "Eight missiles aren't much use against a few dozen of those winged bitches. That magic rifle, on the other hoof, can rack up quite the kill count over a couple years of sniping."

Calamity whinnied. "Well, then sounds t' me like the rifle is worth all eight. But Ah'll give it to ya fer six and we'll call me the Element of Generosity."

The colt made the trade, although from his expression, he'd be calling Calamity quite a few other things shortly after we left.

"Now, what do y'all have fer rifle ammo?"

The colt shook his head, giving a snorting chuckle. "Sorry, but I can't help you. If you want ammo, you'll have to look elsewhere."

Calamity blinked. Then made an exaggerated act of reading the store sign. "Ah thought the name of the store was Caliber's Guns and *Ammo*. How do you not have ammo? You only sell two things."

"Ha ha," the little ghoul said dryly. "My ammo's all stored in an ammo vender for safe-keeping. Only the damn thing is busted and I can't get it to dispense. So no ammo."

Calamity began to smile. "Oh, Ah bet Ah could fix that fer ya. Fer, what say, a ten percent discount on ammo?" I thought Velvet Remedy would have been so proud.

The colt ghoul's eyes lit up (literally) as he asked, "Definitely! If you're sure you can do it."

Calamity laughed. "With the number o' times Ah've broken inta them things t' pilfer 'em, Ah reckon it might jus' do muh karma some good t' be fixin' one up fer once." He gave me a wink. Our earlier conversation still hung in the air, but it was good to see Calamity in brighter spirits.

Calamity rubbed his hoof on the colt's head. "Don't worry, uncle Calamity will have it all taken care of." He flew over the counter and trotted back towards the modified Ironshod's Ammo Emporium vending machine, leaving the ghoul colt staring at him in disdainful amusement.

"I'm a century older than you."



"So what can you tell me about this place?" I asked Caliber, the twelve-decade-old Canterlot Ghoul in the body of a colt as we watched Calamity work. He had half the machine taken apart already, and occasionally graced us with an "ayep" or a "dagnabbit".

"It's a gun shop," Caliber snarked. "I sell guns. And, usually, ammo."

"I meant about Stable City," I clarified. "We're new here."

Caliber put on airs of false surprise. "Really? You mean there haven't been two breathers living in Stable City that I just hadn't noticed?"

I brushed it off, asking, "How did a group of ghouls end up living in a Stable?"

Caliber sighed, quickly giving up on deflating my desire to pester him with questions. "Stable One was built to protect the Princesses, the nobility, the government officials and the higher-ups of the Ministries. Or, at least, that was what Stable-Tec told everypony. They built Stable One into this building because apparently the top ponies of Stable-Tec and the Ministry of Wartime Technology were real chummy."

Well yes, they were *sisters*.

"Anyway, when the Pink Cloud came, a whole bunch of ponies from all around, mostly from the castle and the Ministries, tried to gallop over to Stable One, hoping they could get in. After all, while they were safe from the Pink Cloud in any of the Ministry buildings -- except possibly for the Ministry of Peace -- only Stable One had a long-term food supply. It was come here or starve.

"Of course, all those ponies had to run through the Cloud to get here, and a whole lot of them didn't make it. Those who did found that the fuckers already in Stable One had closed it early. They were once again trapped in a safe haven without food, but then most of them 'expired' overnight, having suffered just enough exposure to turn them into ghouls. They didn't need food anymore after that. So it all worked out.

“Karmic justice, since Stable-Tec pretty much killed all the ponies in Stable One. The ghouls had already started a town inside the building by the time it opened up. When they added the resources of Stable One, the town became Stable City.”

I listened intently. “How about you?” I asked Caliber once he thought he was done.

“Ugh,” he groaned. “Are all breathers this nosy?”

“Yes,” I said just because I could.

“Fine. I was born in Stable Three. Stable Three was constructed underground.” He looked at me expectantly. Then sighed when it became clear I didn’t know how big a deal that was. “You think the Pink Cloud out there is bad? That’s nothing. You go underground, to any of the sewers or maintenance tunnels or under-rails and you’ll see bad. Then, being a breather, you’ll die. It’s *solid Pink* down there. Down there, the Pink Cloud is alive. And hungry. It was only a matter of time before it found its way in.”

That got a jump from me. Followed by a look of disbelief.

“Of course ponies like you scoff. The one alicorn who ever tried talking to us instead of attacking us scoffed too. But I tell you true, the Pink Cloud is alive down there. I’ve heard it breathing.”

Caliber shrugged. Then the colt rambled off in breathless rapid succession, “Anyway, the Pink Cloud got me. I died. Became a ghoul. So did my parents. The Pink Cloud ate Stable Three, so we came here. Then the alicorns came, killed my parents. Now it’s just me. Which is fine, because I’m old enough to be your grandfather’s great grandfather. I run a gun store. I sell guns and ammo. Usually. *Ta-da!* We’ve come full circle. Question time over.”

Calamity had stopped his work and was looking at me with a knowing expression. While Caliber wasn’t looking, he mouthed: *we need to talk.*



“A... *DRAGON?!?*”

"Ayep," Calamity claimed as we trotted towards the open door of Stable One. "A big, mammoth, behemoth, super-old dragon."

Just beyond stretched a large, open area of the Ministry building which had once been used for processing. But the ghouls had converted it into a sort of liberal arts common room. A two-pony band had started playing, one on a glass harp and the other on a glass armonica. The music that floated in through Stable One's entrance was beautifully haunting, crystalline and strangely disorienting. It was the music of ghosts.

"How is the Pink Cloud a dragon?" I asked, confusion overcoming my initial shock.

"It's not... exactly..." Calamity struggled. "It's... weird, okay. Look, ya know how the zebra balefire bombs work, right? They take a balefire egg an' weave it into a megaspell... talisman... thingy. Or somethin'. Anyway, the Pink Cloud megaspell was the same way. They took a bunch o' those things they used against Littlehorn, which best Ah figure are essentially like water talismans only fer Pink Cloud, an' wove them into a megaspell... thingy."

"Okay," I said, nodding. I was fairly sure I was following what Calamity was saying better than he did. "But how does that...?"

"Well, if ya want t' build a talisman that's gonna last a long time, or at least long enough t' kill someone whose really hard t' put down, what d'ya make it out of?"

Oh. I had a sinking feeling in my gut. "You use gemstones."

I paused as we reached a water fountain. Stable One had a functioning water talisman. I tested the fountain, holding my PipBuck leg close to it, but there was no sign of contamination. I ran it a bit, but there was no hint of pink.

"Ayep," Calamity said as I gulped down water from the fountain. It was not a true substitute for food, but it would do. "This Pink Cloud megaspell talisman was jus' chuck fulla gemstones."

I saw where this was going. "The dragon ate it, didn't he?"

“Ayep. An’ the dragon’s a she. The dragon that guards the royal treasury, t’ be exact.”

As we reached the entryway, I paused, observing a glowing terminal. My curiosity got the better of me. “Hold up,” I asked Calamity.

I poked at the terminal and was surprised to find that it had already been hacked and the information on it was freely available to anypony who was interested. That information consisted of a single audio file. I downloaded it into my... foreleg.

Turning back to Calamity, I commented, “Okay, now the secret passage makes sense.”

“How ya figure?”

“Well, Princess Celestia’s school was obviously using baby dragons for *something*. They had to come from somewhere,” I reasoned. “I think the Princess had some sort of arrangement with the dragon. She got the biggest horde in Equestria and the Princess got... well, her children.” The royal treasury dragon was mommy.

Calamity nodded. “Well, seems the dragon digested the megaspell or somethin’. It changed her, became part o’ her. Right now, she’s asleep in the treasury, an’ she’s *snoring* Pink Cloud.”

Well fuckity-fuck. I now understood how Canterlot’s Pink Cloud survived after centuries of week-long rains. And why the Cloud was so dense in underground passages. The cloud would have gotten into the secret passage, started eating away at its walls, and from there it would have gone... everywhere. Sewers, tunnels, you name it.

“She prob’ly doesn’t look a thing like a dragon anymore neither,” Calamity mused. “Ya gotta figure she’s fused t’ her horde. The whole damned treasury.” He kicked at the metal railing next to the steps leading out. “So much fer dreams o’ lootin’ the royal treasure. Such a waste.”

I rolled my eyes. Then asked, “How do you know all this anyway?”

Calamity turned to me. “Cuz while y’all were vacationin’, Ah was stuck down in the hole with crazy alicorn lady. Y’all jus’ got a few minutes o’ loony town. Ah had that damn argument running through muh head non-stop all damned night!”

He let out a loud whicker. “Ah picked up a few things from alla that.”

A sign hanging on the wall next to the Stable’s gear-shaped maw read:

Artistic Commons (No broadcasters please.)
--

We stepped out through the open, gear-shaped door and paused, hearing the music more fully now. I felt the urge to move aside somewhere, lay down, forget about dragons and necromantic clouds and everything else. To just listen as the ethereal tones moved strangely through my soul.



Calamity and I were still in the Artistic Commons, lulled by the music, when SteelHooves found us. The armor-clad ghoul trotted up heavily, stopping for us just long enough to demand, “Come with me.” He was trotting back through the crowd of Canterlot Ghouls before I even fully registered his presence.

I struggled to my hooves, feeling sluggish, relaxed and strangely off-balance. Calamity stretched out his wings, giving a few lazy flaps before lifting himself into the air. The ceiling of the processing area was three-ponies high, giving him just enough room to maneuver between the maze of ghouls, easels and displays below, and the light fixtures above.

SteelHooves kept a brisk pace, weaving dispassionately between the residents of Stable City. I had to wonder what this was like for him. He had anticipated nothing but poison, death and monsters in the Canterlot Ruins. And while those existed in great abundance, we had also found a pocket of civilization -- a community composed of Canterlot Ghouls like himself.

As we started climbing one of several flights of stairs, my stomach rumbled, again protesting my lack of a proper breakfast or lunch. I distracted myself by putting in my earbloom and playing the audio recording from the Stable One terminal.

The voice was very familiar, which made the beginning of the recording all the more jarring. There was wetness in her voice; she had clearly been crying. But no more. Now, while the bitterness and sorrow remained, the hurt was gone and a cold anger had nested in its place.

"Hello. And goodbye.

"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me as the vice-president of Stable-Tec, the company who designed and built the Stable you have taken refuge in. But right now, I'm talking to you as one of the very, very many ponies you fuckers have murdered.

"You. The Ministries, the heads of Equestria, the Princesses if you're in here. You killed us all with your stupid, senseless war. And now I'm returning the favor.

"I'll admit, I gave a lot of serious thought to just keeping the door of Stable One from sealing properly and letting you all die from whatever horror you hid yourselves from while the rest of Canterlot's ponies, and all the rest of Equestria, perished. All...

"All the ponies that we were unable to save.

"...

"But that's the whole point of the Stables. Above and beyond everything else, the Stables are meant to save people. (Yes, 'people'. I'm happy to report that one of the Stables has been built to save as many of Equestria's zebras as possible, the ones that you fuckers shoved into a dump and tried to forget about. And Stable Fourteen is currently housing many of Equestria's griffins... But the Stables were mostly built to save ponies. Even ponies like you.) It is for that reason alone that you're all going to live out the rest of your natural lives in Stable One, as will your children. Regardless of the conditions existing outside.

"I have seen to it that Stable One will not open so long as even one of you is still alive. (Which, if the Princesses are in there, might be a very long time.) No matter how fast

Equestria heals, not a single damn one of you is going to get to profit from what you have done. Equestria is something you ponies don't deserve."

"I hope your souls rot for eternity."



SteelHooves led us to the border of Stable City -- a once rather drearily officious room labeled "Ministry of Wartime Technologies - Subsidy Application Center" which had been converted into a defense position, complete with turrets, armored wall reinforcements and barricades with murder holes -- and to a door that had been canvassed with welded armored plates. SteelHooves stopped, raising an armored forehoof and banging it against the door in four impatient raps.

He waited a moment, nickering softly to himself. "SteelHooves, what is this about?" I asked, disquieted by the mood radiating from him. I noticed he was carrying a saddle-satchel that he had never worn before.

He didn't answer, still nickering. Just as I began to suspect he was counting, he stopped. SteelHooves opened the armored door and barged outside, passing a displeased-looking Canterlot Ghoul who stood guard. Calamity and I followed.

I waved to the guard as we passed, observing his battle saddle, armor and the PipBuck on his leg. His broadcaster was turned off; I realized quickly the purpose of SteelHooves' knock. The guard did not return my greeting.

Feeling a wave of depression, I noticed his PipBuck was not part of him. I suspected most of the PipBucks worn by the ghouls of Stable City had been acquired from Stable One or the residents therein. Without the right tools and knowledge, it was impossible to open a PipBuck and lock it onto a new body. However, the PipBuck Technician's stall in Stable One should have had both the tools and the documentation the Canterlot Ghouls needed. I tried to buck up. Feeling morose about my leg wasn't going to help anything. The emotion didn't even make sense.

As we moved forward, I found myself staring out at a wall of pink. We had exited on an upper mezzanine overlooking the atrium. Dim, pink-tinted light flooded the once-grand atrium. The Cloud was thick enough outside that we would need to drink healing potions after making the run between each Ministry building now. Down below, we could hear the sea of static from dozens of broadcasters hidden amongst the skeletons that littered the floor. But we were high enough to be out of danger.

Feeling a flood of *déjà vu*, I moved up to the railing and looked down. I had been here before. From this very spot, I had looked down into a much sunnier lobby as Applejack spoke openly with her old zebra friend Zecora. I had watched, and my host had plotted Applejack's demise.

I shied away from the railing with a shudder of disgust. SteelHooves was looking back at me from several yards ahead. "This way."

The place our Applejack's Ranger led us to was an odd little alcove underneath a sweeping stairwell. The door had long ago been removed and a simple, stained curtain hung in its place. Warm light poured out from underneath the hanging drapery, as well as above it and along the sides. SteelHooves knocked on the wall beside the curtain, this time almost reverently.

"Star?" he rumbled gently. "It's Applesnack. I've returned with as many of the things you asked for as I could find. And I've brought my friends."

Although I had counted SteelHooves amongst my friends for weeks, to hear him refer to us this way was surprising, strange and poignant.

"Oh bless you," an elderly mare's voice rasped from inside, followed by an odd squeaking. "Please, step inside."

SteelHooves pushed past the curtain without hesitation. With a mixture of caution and wonder, I stepped in behind him.

The room under the stairs was small, lit by a couple old Sparkle-Cola lamps sitting on old metal boxes. There was a clean-looking toilet in the

near corner with several pristine coffee mugs sitting on it and a few shelves. The back half of the room was sectioned off by a once-beautiful hanging curtain, originally of rich hues of scarlets and purples, now faded and fraying. Much of the wall directly opposite the doorway was taken up by a rusty ventilation grate, the fan behind it slowly turning. The only other notable furniture amongst the clutter was an ancient phonograph sitting beside a player for more modern audio recordings. I immediately pictured this room as having originally been a little get-away for some janitor or maintenance pony. A place she could sneak off during her shift to smoke, relieve herself or do other things.

Living in this secluded and somewhat sad place, outside of Stable City yet still inside the Ministry building itself, was a mare who had been elderly even before the Pink Cloud made her undying. She was a unicorn, her body fused into the wheelchair to which she had been largely confined even before. My first assumption upon seeing the curtain was that the next “room” held a mattress, but I realized now that not only did Canterlot Ghouls not sleep, but this mare was not even able to lay down and rest.

Still, she greeted us with a smile, her eyes wide and glowing. “Thank you, Applesnack!” She beamed at us. “It has been so long since I’ve had visitors.”

SteelHooves set the saddle-satchel on the floor. “I am sorry that I could not find everything, Star.” A violet light manifested around the unicorn ghoul’s horn and enveloped the satchel.

“Oh, this is lovely!” Star said, floating out several records and a few audio recordings. “You have saved this old mare, Applesnack. Truly you have.” Books levitated out next. “I was going to go insane if I had to read the same dusty old books one more time!”

She gasped as she pulled out a few boxes of old snack cakes. “Oh how thoughtful!” The elderly ghoul’s smile was somehow beautiful despite the condition of her decayed and warped body. “I may not need to eat, but it is so wonderful to occasionally taste sweetness.”

I looked at SteelHooves. His stance was almost bashful. I could almost feel a warmth radiating off of the normally dour and stoic ghoul.

The elder mare paused, a ghost of a tremble passing though her lower lip. She swiveled away, turning the wheels of her chair with her magic, likewise magically tugging at the curtain to dab at her left eye. The chair squeaked as she rotated. I noticed that the larger wheels were still functional, but the smaller ones had fused rigid. The movement of the curtain revealed the wall behind was plastered with posters and images. I couldn't make any of them out, save that lavender seemed to be the dominating color and one of the posters boasted the word "READ".

As the curtain fell back into place, I realized two things. First, I had no idea why the old ghoul had emotionally reacted to what my mind had labeled a shopping run. And second, she had been unable to wipe away the tear with a hoof because her forelegs were melted into the leg-rests of the chair. I felt an involuntary shudder, trying to imagine living forever unable to move. I immediately wanted to help this poor mare. And I felt very proud of SteelHooves.

"But where are my manners?" Star asked abruptly, turning back with a big smile on her face as she floated the contents of the satchel away. "And where are yours?" she said without a hint of malice. "You haven't introduced your friends."

SteelHooves whinnied. Then turned to look at us. Calamity had been staring at him with eyebrows raised so high they nearly pushed off his hat, but now he broke into an almost smug grin. "Yeah, Applesnack. What say ya introduce us and quit hoggin' this pretty young gal all fer yerself." Calamity shot Star a warm smile and a mirthful wink. She rolled her eyes, smiling.

"Star, this is Littlepip," he said, nodding to me. "And the pegaus is Calamity." "Littlepip, Calamity, this is Star Sparkle."

"Howdy, Miss Sparkle," Calamity said. My smile of greeting faltered a moment. Wait. Who?

"She's living here, outside Stable City, because she's being shunned," SteelHooves said, his voice carrying an edge. I blinked. Canterlot

Ghouls needed neither food nor clothing, and the Ministry hub provided shelter, whether in Stable City or not. But I had learned that ponies need more than these things. Ponies needed companionship and some sort of social framework; and that is what Stable City provided them. As much as water, ponies thirst for friendship.

In shunning Star, the ghouls of Stable City had taken from her the one thing they could, the one thing she probably needed most.

“Because the ghouls of Stable City believe her daughter created the alicorns.”



“...was always proud of my daughter,” Star Sparkle told us firmly as she magically drew back the curtain which bisected her humble living space. “And nothing that those monsters outside have done will ever change that.”

Twilight Sparkle was behind the curtain. Every inch of wall space was covered in images of her, everything from Ministry posters to ancient and yellowed home photographs (all of which seemed to be of Twilight as a young filly.) There were open scrapbooks of newspaper articles featuring Star Sparkle’s daughter. A large oil painting of a smiling Twilight Sparkle hung in a decorative oval frame on the center of the back wall. Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle tchotchkes filled small shelves and crates. And in the center was a precious Twilight Sparkle statuette, her base reading a familiar “Be Smart.”

“Golly,” Calamity breathed.

“But when the alicorns started appearing in Canterlot and they began killing us, the other ponies of Stable City decided I was no longer welcome among them,” Star Sparkle explained sorrowfully. “They said I posed a danger to the city. The alicorns have never paid me unusual attention, but...” She looked away. “Well, maybe they’re right.”

“Sounds t’ me more like they all were lookin’ fer somepony t’ take it out on,” Calamity grumbled.

Star gave Calamity an aching smile. "Please don't judge them too harshly. After all, they have allowed me to still live in the building. I've never been harassed. Maybe once a year, somepony will even bring me things." She smiled warmly at SteelHooves. "Like Applesnack here. Such a sweet young buck."

"You deserve better," SteelHooves asserted.

My heart echoed the sentiment, filling with an aching sadness. But the little pony in my head found the scene in front of me more than a little creepy. Standing beside her daughter in the face of public persecution was admirable, but what I saw before me was more like a shrine. I felt I was looking into the face of obsession.

Star Sparkle seemed to read something in my expression or body language. "Your friend thinks I'm crazy," she told SteelHooves.

I opened my muzzle to protest.

"Don't fret, dear," she said to me kindly. "I understand. It looks like a lot when all of it is in such a small space." I shut my muzzle, sharing a glance with Calamity before lowering my head with an apologetic expression that was not entirely sincere. This would seem excessive even if spread over a multiple rooms twice this size.

Star Sparkle let out a sigh, looking over the Twilight Sparkle shrine. "No, you're right. But it's not what you think." She bit her lower lip. Closed her eyes.

"I loved my daughter. More than life itself. As did my husband." She opened her eyes, looking at the oval oil painting. "And I admired her. The Princess' favorite pupil, the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, the Mare of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. I was so proud." I heard a tremble in her voice. Her gaze lowered to the floor.

"But I was... afraid of her too," Star Sparkle admitted slowly. "We both were, although my husband less than I. Just once, when she was very young, she lost control. She changed me into a potted plant... entirely by accident. If it hadn't been for the Princess..."

The mare who had given birth to Twilight Sparkle looked up at me, her eyes again damp with tears. "I know I shouldn't have been. But I was frightened. And even though I never stopped loving her, I let myself grow distant." She frowned. "Some mother... my daughter received more correspondence from the Princess Herself than she did from me. I never visited her all the time she was in Ponyville. I never met her friends..."

She shook her head. "She never forgot us though. When they built Stable One, my Twilight made sure my husband and I were amongst the first to be guaranteed a place inside. We were on the way there when the Cloud overtook us. My husband died on the steps just outside the Ministry, making sure I made it through the door."

She looked away, softly muttering, "Of course, they'd sealed the Stable early..."

I found myself looking at her wheelchair and thinking of the stallion's skeleton outside with his hooves sunk into the concrete. I was suddenly very angry with the ponies of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. How dare they seal up the Stable, trapping good ponies outside, family and loved ones who the Stable was supposed to save! They deserved... Well, what they got.

"I suppose... I've been trying to make up for all the distance I let fall between us when my daughter was still alive."

I looked at the shrine with fresh eyes. This wasn't obsession. It was overcompensation.

"I come in here and talk to her," Star Sparkle told us. "Sometimes I tell her how my day was, although not so much anymore since all my days are pretty much the same. Sometimes I read to her. She did so love books." Star smiled sadly. "Sometimes, I just tell her I'm sorry. And that I love her." She looked away, a few tears escaping to drip from her cheeks.

"Sometimes," she admitted softly, "I even think that I hear her say something back."



"We are taking her with us!" SteelHooves stomped.

We were standing on the mezzanine as we waited for Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight to join us.

"We are *not* taking her with us!" I stomped back.

"She deserves better than that," SteelHooves insisted, pointing his hoof in the direction of Star Sparkle's hovel.

"She doesn't deserve to face what we have to," I argued, shaking my head. "Where we're going next is too dangerous..." I was cut off by a majestic hoot as Pyrelight landed on my head, her talons pricking at my scalp through my mane. I turned to see Velvet Remedy trotting up, a rather large package hovering behind her.

SteelHooves nickered angrily. "Well of course we're not taking her with us *now*. The alicorns will be waiting for us right outside. I'm not trying to get her killed."

"Ah might have somethin' t' help with that," Calamity interrupted, pulling the case of new missiles out of his pack and setting it before SteelHooves.

"Oooh?" Velvet Remedy sang, "We're giving presents? Perfect, because I have one for Littlepip!"

I blinked. "A present? For me?"

She floated the package over to me as she joined us. "I just had to get you something new to wear," she chimed. "Especially after throwing your dress to the dragons."

I tried not to grimace. Of all the things I was worried about right now, a pretty dress was really not amongst them. I had rather given up on pretty dresses. The Equestrian Wasteland favored a more rugged and armored look. Still... maybe it would be something to look nice in for Homage?

But when I opened the package, I found that Velvet Remedy had surprised me.

“Canterlot Police Barding,” Velvet Remedy told me as I pulled out the old uniform. It was in amazing condition. “Some of the best light barding in Equestria.” She whinnied theatrically, “You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find anything practical in your size.”

“Wow... I...” I blinked. It was a wonderful gift. Yet at the same time, I had grown rather attached to my armored Stable Utility Barding. (Although, thankfully, not literally and permanently.) Ditzzy Doo had armored it, after all.

Velvet Remedy seemed prodded. “Go ahead, put it on.” Almost as if she had read my mind, Velvet said, “I know your old Stable suit has been a constant companion, but haven’t you put it through enough? That suit has been torn up and mended as often as you have, and deserves a rest. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I nodded solemnly and started to disrobe.

“We’re still not taking her with us,” I said firmly.

“Taking who?” Velvet asked.

“Star Sparkle,” SteelHooves told her.

“Who?”

“Take her where?” Calamity asked.

“Tenpony Tower,” SteelHooves said emphatically.

“D’ya really think they’ll jus’ let her, a Canterlot Ghoul, live in that posh, stuck-up...?”

“Yes they will.” SteelHooves slowly intoned in a low voice that told me it would be very bad for the citizens of Tenpony Tower to refuse her. “She was *Twilight Sparkle’s* mother! Remember what Tenpony Tower is. They will.”

I nodded. “I agree,” I stated, suspecting that the Twilight Society would go to great lengths to have a direct relative of the Ministry Mare in the

Tower. "I'm sure that Homage would help. And..." I chuckled, shaking my head, "I can set her up with a place. I own a cheese shop."

Both Calamity and Velvet Remedy looked at me oddly. "Ya 'ave a what now?"

As I pulled the Stable Utility suit over my head, I informed SteelHooves, "But we're not taking her with us..."

I tossed my Stable Utility Barding onto the floor and stared at it. It was ragged, so patched up it looked like it was sewn from rags. There were deep stains, not all of which were blood. It was repulsive.

"...not now." I looked to SteelHooves, who was still snorting impatiently. "We'll come back for her though. I promise. Until then, she's safe here."

"Why not?" SteelHooves asked insistently.

"Because we're not going to Tenpony Tower. As soon as we're done in Canterlot, we're going straight to Splendid Valley..." No more delays.

"After we pick up Xenith," Calamity reminded me. Okay, one delay.

"...After we pick up Xenith," I added. "Splendid Valley." I leveled a look at SteelHooves. "You know what's there. I'm not taking Twilight Sparkle's *mother* anywhere near that place. I am not taking her *anywhere* until the Goddess has been dealt with."

SteelHooves seemed to accept that answer, backing down with a nod.

I folded the barding up as best the armor plates would allow and slipped it into the duffle bag filled with tools for Calamity. "Oh!" I looked up, floating my old armor and the StealthBuck II out of the duffle bag before passing it to Calamity. "I've got a present for you too."

Calamity took one look inside and let out a whinnying squeal of glee.

I started putting on the Canterlot Police Barding, which really did fit quite well and... oh, what was that feeling? Oh yes! I remember now: it's the feeling of wearing something clean!

SteelHooves walked over to the nearest Stable City guard and spoke with him, getting a nod.

I trotted in place, getting used to the feeling of the new armored barding. "Thank you, Velvet! This is... nice!" I paused, noting the color. "How does it look? Does it go with my mane?"

SteelHooves neighed, returning as the guard trotted over to the railing of the mezzanine. "Honest opinion? I can't picture it on you. Not enough bloodstains."

I gave SteelHooves a dirty look.

"Give her time"

I shifted my attention to the guard, ignoring them both. The guard's horn began to glow. Sparks of magical light floated down and spread about the skeleton-covered floor below.

The static from beneath us stopped.

"How...?"

"I shut them off," the guard said simple. "I'll turn the broadcasters back on after you leave."

Shut them off? My hoof slapped my face as I remembered cowering in a corner in the Ministry of Magic lab, shooting frantically at a broadcaster. Of course you could just turn them off.

I was not a clever pony. I was, in fact, a very stupid pony.

As we walked down the steps and made our way through the sea of bones, I stopped and pulled one of the broadcasters from its PipBuck, turning it over, familiarizing myself with its design.

"Well, ain't this obviously an ambush," Calamity said dryly, looking out into the pink. "Where d'ya think they all went?" There was no sign outside of even a single alicorn. "Hidin' up on the roof or 'round the side o' the buildin'?"

"Maybe the one they called Nightseer got tired of losing alicorns to us and called them back?" Velvet Remedy suggested hopefully. Something

in the tone of her voice betrayed that she didn't really think that was possible either.

"So," Calamity looked to me, "What's the plan?"



The Balloon Orb

Pinkie Pie's office. Ministry of Morale. Manehattan.

Only... not.

As I pushed open the door with a pink hoof, everything seemed off. Distorted. It was as if the normal color scheme of the world had become a twisted painting of grotesque pastels.

I felt awful, and yet I felt horribly alive. A buzz ran through my nerves and up my spine. My ears itched. There was a tremor in the back of my right hindleg and an odd burning sensation was growing in my left forehoof.

I knew this feeling. My host was riding the razor cliff of a Party-Time Mint-als high. The edge before the awful crash. But it was more than that. This was... wrong.

The world tasted funny. Smelled funny. Like peppermint and rotted cabbage.

"Stupid, bitchy-witchy Twilight. I'm *fine*! I'll show her..." My host looked around, scowling. It was as if even she realized something was terribly out of place, but couldn't put her hoof on what.

"..I know. I'll record my memory and send it to her. A nice long one. She'll see there is nothing wrong with me. And she won't be able to leave until she's *done* seeing..."

No. No Pinkie. You are not fine. Nothing about this is fine.

“Pfft, leave her be,” a voice whispered from beside me. “If she wants to throw you away because she doesn’t like your parties anymore, then good riddance!” The voice was female and it was coming from... the plant? Yes, one of the potted plants in Pinkie Pie’s room was actually talking to her. I saw the plant move, the leaves rustle as the voice drifted up from it. “You don’t need her. You don’t need any of them!”

My host barely gave her... it... a glance. “I thought she was my friend.”

“Indeed,” came another voice from a marbled paperweight on Pinkie Pie’s desk. “None of them see what you can see. They don’t understand the pressure you’re under.”

“No,” Pinkie Pie agreed. “No, they don’t.”

Oh Goddesses. Pinkie Pie was having a mental break. I was seeing what she was seeing in her head.

Pinkie Pie continued to look around, then stopped, staring at a tall, thin object concealed by a sheet. “Where did you come from?” She plodded over and grasped the sheet in her teeth, pulling it free.

Before her stood a mirror. I saw my host staring back at me. Pinkie Pie, but not as I was used to seeing her. Her coat’s color was off. Her mane hung straight and limp. Her expression was cross and dour. This was Pinkie Pie right after her last party.

There was a ribbon wrapped around the mirror with a note on it:

Dearest Pinkie, Thought this might help you find your way. ~Rarity.

Pinkie Pie scowled as she read the note. “I’m. Not. Lost.” She grasped the ribbon in her teeth and tore it away. Then stared at herself in the mirror.

“You too, Rarity?” she mumbled. “Are *all* my friends going to abandon me?”

“Can’t trust anypony anymore,” the paperweight grumbled.

Pinkie Pie trotted to a nearby intercom, pressing her hoof against a button. “Hey. There’s a mirror in my office that isn’t supposed to be here. Call somepony to pick it up.”

“Yes ma’am,” a mare’s voice crackled over the intercom, sounding oddly distant. “Where is it supposed to be?”

“I don’t care. Take it to one of the FunFarms or something,” Pinkie grumbled. “Just get rid of it!”

My host trotted backup to the mirror, staring. She reached out a hoof, touching the surface...

...and jumped back at the shock of cold. The image in the mirror changed abruptly. Now, looking back at us, was Pinkie Pie. Smiling, cheery, objectionably pink, poofy-haired Pinkie Pie.

“Oh! Hey!” the Pinkie Pie in the mirror called out happily. “Hello, Pinkamina! Ooh, you don’t look so good. Which is bad because you’re me, and that means I don’t look so good!”

She had enchanted a small mirror. To look in it, you would see your reflection, just as with any mirror. But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell within the mirror... took a picture of your soul. Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image.

The mirror Pinkie Pie looked at my host with concern. “What’s wrong with us?”

“Who the hell are you?” Pinkie Pie, my host, grumbled.

Goddesses, this was bizarre, if not downright creepy. I decided to think of them in different names just to keep my thoughts straight. Although part of me worried that was buying into this insanity.

“Why, I’m you, of course!” Pinkie Pie giggled. “I’m the real you... Which is weird, since I’m totally high too.” The reflection was high on PTMs? Or was that Pinkamina’s high warping... the reflection that can’t really be having this conversation in the first place since reflections. Can’t. Talk! Just like paperweights and potted plants!

“This is a trick,” Pinkamina hissed.

"You mean like a practical joke? See, they really do still care about you." Pinkie Pie paused. Then brightened. "Oh! Hello, Littlepip."

Uh... hello? The conversation had taken a left turn into weirdsville

"Littlepip says 'uh, hello'." Pinkie Pie proclaimed, beaming.

Wait. What?

"Now Littlepip says 'wait, what?'." Pinkie Pie giggled.

This was impossible!

"You remind me of our friend Twilight Sparkle, Littlepip!"

"She's not our friend," Pinkamina sighed. "Not anymore."

Pinkie Pie's eyes widened. "She is SO our friend. If she wasn't, she wouldn't be trying to help us!" Pinkamina opened her mouth but Pinkie Pie shook her head. "And don't try telling yourself you don't need help. I know better. And that means you know better."

"I... I'm just trying to make ponies happy."

Make them happy?

"Littlepip has a point," Pinkie Pie said seriously. "You can't make somepony happy. You can only help them find happiness." Pinkie Pie pointed at the window. "Look out there. Do they *look* happy?"

"No," Pinkamina mumbled, looking anyplace but the window.

"They're not happy," Pinkie Pie admitted sadly. "I think... I think they're actually... scared of us."

This was... this was what led to Pinkie Pie realizing she needed help. This conversation, that somehow, insanely, I was a part of, was what pushed Pinkie to...

"Shussssh!" Pinkie Pie scowled at me from the mirror. "You have to keep secrets, Littlepip!"

What? No! If... if there was any chance that I was somehow... communicating... then there were things that Pinkie Pie needed to know! I could warn her! I could save...

“Nooooooooot list-en-ing!” Pinkie Pie said, covering her ears theatrically. “You. Can’t. Tell. Littlepip!”

But... but everything ends so horribly!

“No. No it doesn’t.” Pinkie Pie shook her head fervently. Then, suddenly, she was smiling again. “Everything will end in sunshine and rainbows!” she announced gleefully. I was struck by the strangest sense of *déjà vu*.

She pointed a hoof at me, or was it at Pinkamina. “As long as you’re willing to face the fire, that is.”

“What fire?” Pinkamina asked.

“Don’t listen to her!” the potted plant insisted. “She just wants you to fail.”

“No,” Pinkie Pie insisted. “We have to do what is most important first. We have to save the other ponies before we save ourselves. You know what I mean, with those bad, bad ponies at Four Stars. But then...” Pinkie Pie smiled sadly. “Then we do have to save us, don’t we?”

Sunshine and rainbows. I wanted to tell her how absolutely impossible that was. Hell, the two things this world didn’t have anymore were...

Pinkie Pie grew very cross, glaring at me through the mirror. “Sunshine. And. Rainbows.”

Pinkamina dropped to the carpet. “We... I...” She began to cry. “How? How can I fix this? How can I giggle at the ghostie when *I’m* the ghostie?”

If a hug could heal pain, then laughter could heal fear. But the Ministries cast a big shadow. There were many, many ponies who needed to giggle.

“We need to stop,” Pinkie Pie said solemnly. “The whole Ministry of Morale isn’t helping. It’s hurting ponies, and we need to stop.

“We need to get clean. Then record this memory for Littlepip. Then...”

“The whole Ministry,” Pinkamina moaned. “We need to tear it all down. A big going away party. The biggest ever.”



Ahead of us loomed a tall, curving building of feminine grace, adorned with large gemstones and crystalline latticework. If the Ministry of Wartime Technology building was the king of Ministry Walk, the Ministry of Image was clearly the queen. Everywhere else, Ministry of Image preferred to keep itself invisible, a shadowy hoof supporting all the others from behind the scenes. The Canterlot Hub of the Ministry was a showpiece, the name of the Ministry wrapping around the façade in diamond-studded letters.

Rarity, the Mare of the Ministry, had never appeared in any publication, poster or product of the Ministry of Image. Here, she stood proudly before her Ministry as an alabaster statue lording over a fountain of crystal, glass and diamond dust.

My plan, which had largely amounted to “run”, seemed to be working. Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves galloped beside me as we passed between the dead trees that lined the park. My lungs were burning, fighting for breath. My head pounded and my vision blurred. I could feel the strain on my heart and muscles as the Pink Cloud attacked every part of my body, inside and out.

Still no harassment from our enemies, but I had two red lights on my E.F.S. compass. “Look sharp!” SteelHooves called out, his visor giving him the same warning. I didn’t see anypony; either they were invisible or they were hiding in the draped alcoves of the Ministry. Calamity beat his wings, soaring upwards, wary of alicorns on the roof.

It all happened in less than three seconds.

We charged around the Rarity Fountain and right into the trap.

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

Proximity mines! *A lot* of them, many of which were magical energy based, virtually paved the space between Rarity and the front door of the Ministry of Image. Many of them had already begun to flash as Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves drew to a stop next to me. My horn was already glowing as a field of levitation magic swept over the mines.

The two alicorns stepped out of their hiding places and sat down, becoming statues as they instantly erected an alicorn shield around us, trapping us inside it with the mines. Pyrelight, who had been keeping pace with us, smacked into the inside of the shield and fell to the ground amongst the mines, dazed.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

I parted the sea of beeping mines, shoving them into piles against the shield right next to the alicorns as I magically switched on the broadcaster which I had attached to my PipBuck. Velvet Remedy telekinetically pulled Pyrelight back and wrapped us in her own magical shield.

My head exploded in agony. My vision swam with red. Beside me, Velvet Remedy started to scream as the broadcaster's deadly necromancy attacked her as she held the spell. The alicorns jerked, opening their muzzles in a twisted cry of anguish, their shield dissolving.

The mines exploded in a cavalcade of fire, shrapnel, concussive force and magical energy.



BLAM! BLAM!

The turret exploded as Little Macintosh sent two armor-piercing bullets through its innards. A twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle took out the last of the six security turrets. Compared to the security systems we had run into in other buildings, this had been almost too easy.

I stumbled into a plush bench, face-planting into the cushions, and caught my breath. The others settled down, imbibing healing potions. The Pink Cloud had harmed us more than the alicorns' trap and the turrets combined.

I could smell something foul from the cushion, but I didn't care. Even at a glance, I could see that much of the Ministry of Image was succumbing to rot and decay. The furnishings and décor had been chosen for appearance, not longevity.

"This don't bode well," Calamity said with a grimace. I looked up wearily, pulling out a healing potion of my own. Shoving myself away from the blissful cushion-ness of the bench, I moved to where he was flying. Calamity was looking behind the lobby greeting counter.

Steel Rangers. Dead. More than half a dozen of them.

"Sent by Cottage Cheese to retrieve the Black Book," SteelHooves noted solemnly, joining us.

"Ayep. But... what killed 'em? And who laid them out like this?"

I shook my head. Not a good sign indeed. I turned away, tipping the potion and letting its healing liquid pour down my tongue and throat. Calamity was flying over the bodies, pulling ammunition from their battle saddles.

Velvet Remedy was looking over the Image Directory hanging on a wall between two columns of twisting marble. “Where were we expecting to find this book?” Velvet questioned.

“Rarity’s desk. A secret safe in her office.”

Velvet nodded. “There’s an executive elevator. For once, we might actually be in and out as quickly as Littlepip keeps hoping.”

Calamity coughed into his hoof. A cough that sounded a lot like a comment about “liking mares”.

Rolling my eyes, I checked the map and started towards the elevator. It was just down the right-hoof hall and around the corner. The hall was hung with backlit posters in gilded frames, each boasting the merits of the other Ministries.

I pulled up short as I rounded the corner.

The executive elevator was between two “PROGRESS” posters, one of which was the familiar image of the glee-filled mare and her hover robot, the other a group of ponies staring in awe at a glowing terminal. The elevator itself was richly designed, gilded with gold, and stuck open by the dead body of a Steel Ranger knight. The body of a scribe lay crumpled inside, slowly rotting. Her horn and the top of her skull had exploded, painting the back of the elevator car. Soft static poured out of the speaker on the roof of the elevator car.

“Maybe we shouldn’t take the elevator?” Velvet suggested as she caught up with me.



As we wove through the maze of terminals, monitors and meeting tables that seemed to make up a large bulk of *Media Oversight*, I was struck by the lack of skeletons or other signs of dead ponies. Not just in

the Ministry of Image, but in the Ministries of Peace and Arcane Sciences as well. Perhaps it was the sight in the Ministry of Wartime Technology's atrium that had reminded me that something was missing. The only dead here were Steel Rangers. Other than one message written in blood, there was no indication of pony death in Twilight's Ministry either.

The lighting in the room flickered on the verge of giving out. When we had switched them on, two of the light fixtures had exploded.

SteelHooves paused, looking at a line of dust-covered maneframes along one side of the building. "This room alone could have killed them," he commented. "Just by seeing all the technology preserved here and knowing they were only here for a book."

I glanced at a nearby terminal, this one still glowing. Curious, I drew out my hacking tool. It was an extremely easy terminal to access. The password was "glitter".

Media Oversight, Intraoffice Memo #057

Just a reminder and clarification for ponies new to Media Oversight's division of Imagery:

All pictures of ponies including multiple, non-specific individuals are required to have at least a two-to-one ratio of ponies with bold or pastel palettes to ponies whose coat and mane bear neutral colors such as brown, grey or tan. A three-to-one ratio is preferable. The only exception to this is for ponies with white coats. White is Celestia's color and is always permissible in any amount.

Likewise, be sure that any planned photography be coordinated with at least one of Imagery's pegasi. We want the image of Equestria to be one of glorious sunny days and bright starry nights. Overcast skies are to be strictly avoided unless required for Effect. Color correction may be employed to make the sky over Equestria an even deeper blue.

In addition, remember that all images of zebras are to be monochromatic. Color photography should be rendered black and white or passed through a desaturation and palette correction spell. Attached is a list of appropriate tints for zebra imagery, but a good rule of hoof is any coloration that gives the image a demonic or sickly appearance.

Personal Memo:

Dearest Shutterbright,

While I do appreciate your artistic thinking, and I agree that a "bright and beautiful" Equestria is a most desirable aesthetic, I must decline your proposal that all imagery of Equestria display a sunny day. Please remember that Princess Luna sits on the throne now. Let us not set policy designed to wound Her.

Sincerely,

~Rarity

Media Oversight, Intraoffice Memo #162

All ponies with Media Oversight are required to attend the mandatory employee meeting tomorrow, starting promptly at eight. In this meeting, we will be giving you an overview of our new Radio Override System. Thanks to assistance from the Ministry of Awesome, we have been able to establish an Equestria-wide system for emergency interruption or enhancement of radio broadcasts. All ponies in Media Oversight will need to be familiar with the basics of this new system and how to access the ROS from either the Media Oversight office or the Base Station of any of the MAW Towers.

The meeting is expected to last two hours. Lemon cakes and tea will be served.

"Uh, Li'l pip?" Calamity said, staring at a dead monitor. Across it, somepony had painted a message:

THEY EAT YOUR SOUL!

"C'n we just go home now?" the pegasus moaned. I didn't blame him.

We continued on, even more alert and cautious than before.



"A dragon!?" Velvet Remedy gasped, echoing my own sentiment. Pyrelight let out a worried hoot.

"Ayep," Calamity asserted as he flew over the book bins and tables of *Restricted Publications*. The rest of us had to walk around them. From

what I could discern, the very long table I was passing had once been where a small legion of unicorns had magically converted books to “new editions”. There were bins for books beside each workstation, one labeled “inappropriate” and the other labeled “corrected”.

A poster on a nearby bookcase showed a dark-blue earth pony reading over a book, with more stacked on each side. The poster read: “Be diligent. We check your work.” We had passed through the book review office to get to this room.

“That makes this much more difficult,” SteelHooves commented. “I do not believe we have the firepower to kill a dragon of that age.”

Velvet Remedy frowned. “You ponies do realize this is probably Spike’s mother we are talking about, right?” She nickered, “Show a little compassion.”

I winced. But right now, she was a threat to Equestria -- a giant, living Pink Cloud factory.

“Ah don’t think we ‘ave to,” Calamity stated. “Kill her, Ah mean. The crazy alicorn lady already solved the problem fer us.”

“She’s already dead?” I exclaimed in surprise.

Calamity shook his head. “Seems that the alicorn got ‘hold of a spell that’ll turn big mother dragon into something small that doesn’t breathe Cloud... or, at least, that would only breathe tiny puffs of cloud. A field mouse, Ah think.”

Velvet Remedy stopped, staring. “A spell that turns a dragon into a field mouse?”

“Ayep.”

“And how do we cast this spell?” she queried. “I’m pretty sure it’s outside of my scope of spellcraft, and we know it’s outside of Littlepip’s.” Rub it in, why don’t you.

I’m the one who found the spell, the not-Trixie personality had said. I’m the one who cast it.

“Taken care of,” Calamity grinned. “Crazy alicorn lady already cast the spell. Well, sorta.”

“Sort of?” Velvet prompted. I wasn’t sure if she was asking what he meant or correcting his grammar. Calamity assumed the former.

“Way Ah hear it, she used somethin’ that the Ministry o’ Magic came up with fer the Ministry o’ Morale. A way t’ cast a spell and hold the effect on a trigger,” Calamity rubbed a hoof against the back of his neck. “T’ be precise, a way t’ cast a spell into a present. The spell goes off when the present is opened. She hadda quirky name for it.”

“Spell in a Box,” I guessed.

“Ayep,” Calamity said as he landed next to a set of cages labeled *Sanitation*. “That was it.”

I ducked under the table between us and trotted up to him, glancing at the clipboard which hung next to the cages. “For processing of dangerously seditious materials. Please read instructions carefully.” From what I read, the empty cages once held trained parasprites which had been ensorcelled to eat the words off of pages. I wondered if they only ate specific words, or if they rendered the whole book blank (and thus gloriously sedition-free).

“Makes sense,” I thought aloud. “With the thickness of Pink Cloud down there, she probably couldn’t actually approach the dragon and cast the spell herself. So she had to cast it into a Spell in the Box. I wonder how she got it down there to mother though.”

“She made a deal with a couple of the Canterlot Dragons,” Calamity said.

“Oh dear,” Velvet said. “No wonder her personalities were in crisis. She really was on the verge of rendering half of herself obsolete!”

“How do you know all this?” SteelHooves asked.

“All. Fucking. Night.”

“I take it the present hasn’t been opened yet?” I looked to Calamity expectantly. “So that’s what we have to do?” That would mean sending

SteelHooves into the treasury. There wasn't another of us who could survive it. "Open her present without getting transfigured into a field mouse?"

"Not... exactly."



"What?!" I stared at Calamity in disbelief.

We had gone up a level and were working our way through the brightly-colored *Educational Reform* floor as Calamity explained the plan that the alicorn in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences basement had devised. When Calamity was finished, I felt all reason had fled from the world.

"Who the hell ties something this important to the start of a gala?" I huffed. "That's insane!"

Calamity fixed me with a level stare. Behind him was a poster of happy foals playing in a cheerful-looking schoolyard under the arch of a rainbow. "What part o' what ya saw down in that basement screamed *sanity* t' ya?"

I groaned, pressing a hoof to my face. "Okay, okay... let me see if I've got this. In order to stop the continuous replenishment of the Pink Cloud, we have to trigger a Spell in the Box that will turn the treasury dragon into a field mouse. The trigger for the Spell in the Box has been rigged into the fireworks display for the Grand Galloping Gala..."

I remembered Pinkie Pie's endorsement on the Fillydelphia FunFarm poster in SteelHooves' shack: *Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been. Every day, forever!*

In Equestria's final year, Princess Luna had given over the Grand Galloping Gala to Pinkie Pie. The fireworks had been rigged up with one of her "instant party" systems. But the Gala had never happened. The megaspells rained down and life in Canterlot had ended. No more parties.

“...And the trigger to set off the fireworks is in Princess Luna’s private chambers in the royal castle?” I understood now why Calamity had said we needed to go to the castle. I was so frustrated I could just scream. Why wasn’t anything ever easy?

“How would we know if it worked?” Velvet Remedy asked. Asking SteelHooves to wander into a dragon’s lair and check had clearly never crossed her mind.

Calamity pulled something out of his pack and spit it onto his hoof. “With this!” He held up a large, pink gemstone with a flaw deep within it, an artificial flaw in the shape of a rune. “Spell in the Box goes off, this little darlin’ lights up.”

I wondered if this was the “it” that the alicorn had been searching for.

“You stole that on our way out of the basement, didn’t you?” Velvet asked rhetorically.

A blob of red light appeared on the edge of my E.F.S. compass. I spun, trying to spot the source. My ears perked, catching a low, unearthly hum. It sounded similar to the warping, grating sound of a Canterlot Ghoul reviving, only softer and caught on a single note like a broken recording.

But there was nothing there. Just a short, colorful bookshelf carved and painted with hearts and rainbows and prancing pony children. The bookshelf contained equally colorful books. The paint was peeling now, and two of the shelves had rotted through, spilling their contents onto the floor. Above was a chalkboard with a story problem: *In Sunshine’s home town of Ponyville, the reward for turning in zebra sympathizers is 500 bits. Sunshine reported her bad uncle yesterday, two zebra sympathizers today, and will report another tomorrow. If half of the ponies she reported are proven to be zebra sympathizers, how many bits will she receive at the end of the week?*

A dark shadow formed on the blackboard. Then bulged, pressing through it, a shadowy cloud that reached through the wall like a grasping claw.

I froze, trying to process what I was seeing. The shadow cloud grew, moving towards us, splitting into multiple flowing tendrils. The unhallowed hum was coming from it, growing louder. The lights began to dim, like the thing was devouring the illumination in the room. One tendril curled down, passing through a desk, totally insubstantial. The tail of it pulled out of the chalkboard, the thing fully in the room with us.

I tried to kick on S.A.T.S., but my targeting spell faltered, unable to lock on.

Whoooooosh! The rocket from SteelHooves' battle saddle arrowed past me, moving through the shadow cloud as if it was really just a shadow. The rocket struck the far wall in a loud explosion of fire, dust and colorful debris. The blowback knocked me down, toppled bookshelves, threw a table. The shadowy cloud barely reacted, its tendrils still reaching out towards each of us.

I skittered back, away from the snaking shadow, certain of what would happen if it touched me. *They eat your soul!* Our weapons were useless against this creature. No armor would stop it. I was no longer surprised that all the Steel Rangers who made it this far had perished here.

Velvet Remedy cast her shield, wrapping the shadow cloud in her magic. It pressed its tendrils against the wall of the shield, the shadow molding over the surface, unable to get through.

Velvet Remedy had contained it. No... them! The shadow was a swarm of tiny, jet-black necrosprites. *They could pass through solid objects, but not through magic fields.* I shuddered, shakily releasing a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"I'll keep them contained," Velvet said. "You go on ahead."

Pyrelight landed on her rump, looking insistent on staying. We nodded and ran off, leaving her holding the swarm.



The Book was here. In this room. I could *feel* it.

I had been in Rarity's personal office before. It was much the same, although gnawed on by the teeth of time. A dress pony stood in one corner next to an ornate chest. There was a note attached to the chest, written in Rarity's elegant script.

Thoughts on the dress:

The goal is to create elegant yet functional armor of a moderate weight and classic style. I've chosen a color scheme of amaranth and gold that harkens back to the dress that my beloved friends created for me for that first Gala so long ago. In honor of my dearest and closest friend, I am drawing on my best skills at haute couture. The armored plating, particularly over the breast, will draw inspiration from the armor worn by the royal guards.

I have woven a little magic into the dress. Although only the metal plating will stop bullets, cloth should hold well up against bladed weapons, as well as being resistant to the wear and tear and general dirtying that I have come to expect from a battlefield or a Gala. (I jested that I might make the final version indestructible, but it was only a joke. I did, after all, tell Applejack that I would do no such thing. And besides, the reaction from my top magician would have been enough to put me off the idea even if I had been serious. He was right, of course. With what I have done, I most likely do not have enough of a soul left to spare even a little of it.)

Anyway, I am very pleased with my first pass. But the final dress needs to be even better, beyond mere perfection. The Grand Galloping Gala is still months away, so even with all the insanity here, I do have plenty of time. It is my most sincere hope that most, if not all, of my friends will be at the event this year. If so, I hope to convince them to allow me the honor of fashioning each one of them a similar-yet-unique, elegant "Ministry Mare" armored dress.

Normally, the Gala would not be the venue I would choose to show off the first in what I hope will be a new line of fashionable armor. But this year, Pinkie Pie is finally living her dream and has been put in charge of the event. So really, all bets are off.

I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin, picking the lock on the chest with relative ease. Opening it, I laid eyes on the armored dress. It was... beautiful.

“Ah thought ya said the book was in the desk?” Calamity said, flying up from behind me. “Whoa nelly!”

“Yeah,” I whispered, pulling the armored dress out and looking it over.

“Uh... Li’lpip?” Calamity said timidly. “Could... uh... could Ah have that?”

“I didn’t know you liked to wear dresses,” SteelHooves intoned as he joined us.

Calamity spun around in the air. “Ah don’t!” he insisted. “It’s fer *Velvet*.”

I snickered as SteelHooves neighed mockingly. “Of course you can, Calamity. She’ll look... exquisite in it!”

I passed the dress to Calamity and moved to the desk. I closed my eyes, drawing on the memory of how Rarity had opened the secret compartment. One of the gems embedded in the front of the desk concealed the lock.

Opening my eyes, I extended my magic over the desk, moving aside the gem. I began to pick the lock, this time using just my magic. The lock was deceptively easy to pick, almost like the compartment wanted to be opened.

I slid open the hidden compartment. There, laying amongst the papers and detritus like a sleeping dragon, was the dark tome -- perfectly preserved, its ancient pages filled with the most powerful and forbidden magic between covers of the blackest leather.

I reached out with my magic. I felt a cold shock as I touched it with my meager ability, the book promising to unlock greater powers and mysteries than I ever dreamed of. I didn’t have to be a one-trick unicorn anymore. With this Book, I could be *Magic* if I wanted to, powerful enough that I was worthy of being a Bearer of that Element.

It was mine!



Velvet Remedy made her way to us slowly. Her horn was still glowing and beads of sweat fell down her forehead. She was pouring most of her concentration into maintaining her shield even though it was out of sight. Once we were outside, she would release it. The necrosprite swarm hadn't left the Ministry building in over two centuries. We were hoping it wouldn't now. I gave equal odds that either the magic woven into the Ministry walls that kept the Pink Cloud out also kept the swarm inside, or that the swarm had remained here, drawn to the presence of the Black Book like moths to a lantern.

I turned to stare at the pony-sized poster on the wall. I had seen it before on a massive billboard in Manehattan. I hadn't liked it much then. I liked it less now that I actually knew a zebra.

Ponies love laughter. Zebras do not understand joy and fear it.

Ponies are honest. Zebras tell only lies.

Ponies are loyal. Zebras will knife you in the back.

Ponies are generous. Zebras are selfish and greedy.

Ponies care about each other. Zebras care only about themselves.

"Okay, here's the plan," I said, knowing the others would not like this. "Everypony else runs to the Ministry of Awesome. I'm going to slip into the royal castle and set off the Gala fireworks."

"Alone?"

"Yer gonna what now?"

"Not a chance!"

The responses I expected.

"No, Li'lpip!" Calamity said as he swooped close to me, backing me against a wall. "Ah should do this. Ah'm faster. Ah'm more maneuverable. And Ah called it. This is muh mission."

I slipped out the MG StealthBuck II and floated it before them. "I can get in undetected. But it has to be me. Just me." I was the only one with a PipBuck. There was no room for discussion.

"Pony feathers," Calamity spit, bucking his hoof through the pony-sized poster.

"If you find the Goddesses," Velvet Remedy said slowly, still concentrating.

I frowned. I didn't want to find the Princesses. My mind conjured nightmare images of Their skeletons fused together in the throne room and my heart stopped. Just for a moment. I wasn't sure I could handle finding Them, seeing where They died.

I certainly didn't want Velvet Remedy to bear witness to such a devastating horror. "If I find the bodies of the Princesses, that won't mean I've found the Goddesses. They're transcendent souls."

I ignored Calamity's snort.

"But you will tell me what you find," Velvet Remedy insisted. I really didn't want to. "Promise me."

I only nodded, feeling a tear form in my eye. I prayed to the Goddesses that I wouldn't have to either honor that promise or break it. I begged them silently that I would find nothing.

Calamity flew up to me again, this time with the pink gem in his teeth. He tossed it to me. "Now ya gotta promise me somethin'," he said softly. "Ya gotta promise me yer gonna do this. See it through." I looked at him with surprise. I quickly nodded. Of course I would!

"Ah'm serious, Li'lpip. Ah really want it t' be me," he lowered his head, looking ashamed. "I know it in muh heart, but muh head needs convincin' that we're still the good guys. Ah need this."

I floated up the pink gem with its rune flaw. "Then maybe you should hold this," I offered. "That way, you'll know when its done."

Calamity shook his head. "As much as Ah'd love t', y'all might need it. Without it, how else will ya know its worked an' y'all can come back?" He looked away. "No way Ah'm gonna leave ya hangin' just t' satisfy muhself."

I nodded again and tucked the gemstone away. Calamity flew ahead silently.

We moved into the stairwell and descended. The Black Book radiated an unpleasant coolness through one of my saddlebags. I was beginning to question whether I was really intending to give this to Trixie. Maybe my plan, whatever it was, needed revision. Or maybe there was something inside the book that would take care of Trixie once and for all.

What was it that Rarity told Applejack that the Black Book contained?
Magic to tear souls apart.

Maybe... maybe I could even save Twilight Sparkle!



"Arrrrrrrugh!"

I hurled the Black Book against one of the pillars in the royal throne room. I floated out another healing potion and downed the contents, hoping it would relieve the pounding in my head and the tightness in my chest.

The royal castle was filled with Pink Cloud, thicker than outside. It had rotted away the tapestries, turned the carpets and draperies into greasy residue, cracked and discolored the stained glass, and decayed the once royal furniture into collapsed heaps of debris. The golden fountain pools at the foot of the royal throne were tarnished beyond polishing and stagnant with thick pink sludge.

At least there were no bones in here. No skeletons of Celestia and Luna.

I knew I shouldn't have paused. I needed to keep moving. If I dallied, the pink would kill me. Or the StealthBuck II would die and the alicorns would kill me.

But still, I had stopped, my curiosity strangling me, threatening to kill me with razor claws if I didn't at least look inside the Book. Just a peek. I had stopped, telling myself I would just crack the cover open. That I

was just making sure that parasprites hadn't eaten the words off the pages.

The Black Book was written in archaic zebra glyphs. Every damn page. The book wanted me to read it. I was sure if I studied it, the answers would come to me in dreams. But that didn't help me now. The little pony in my head was throwing a tantrum.

Red lights moved about on my E.F.S. compass. I clamped my muzzle closed, biting my lower lip. Stupid, stupid, stupid! I dashed over, retrieving the book, shivering at the frosty surge I felt from it whenever I touched it with my magic.

Two alicorns stepped into the throne room, their shields up. As far as I could tell, the alicorns in the castle never dropped their shields. They seemed more resistant to the Pink Cloud, but they were not immune. And with the Cloud's concentration here, they were limiting their exposure.

I crouched behind the throne, hiding even though I was invisible.

I could feel the Cloud eating at my insides, gnawing at my muscles, clamping down on my lungs and heart, seeping into my bowels. I already wanted another healing potion, but I had to hold off or I would run out. Princess Luna's private chambers couldn't be far. I could probably make it in a short gallop if these two would just leave. Or at least move so their shields weren't blocking the Celestia-damned doorway.

"I don't see anything," one said, turning to her companion. "But I *feel* something. The room feels colder than it was before."

What the hell? Was the Black Book a damn refrigerator? No, that made no sense. The safe it was in would have been freezing. Was the alicorn sensing something metaphysical? I suddenly wondered how Pinkie Pie would have responded to the proximity of the Black Book.

"I feel nothing different," the other said, at least partially confirming my suspicions. "We should inform Nightseer. She will know what to make of your sensitivity." The alicorns took one last look around. One

of them walked up to the throne, tilting her head and looking straight at me. Through me.

"There is nothing here," she said, turning back and rejoining her sister.

"We go."



The door to Princess Luna's chambers was sealed with a lock almost identical to the one which had secured Princess Celestia's room back in Her school. A very tricky lock, but familiarity helped me open it swiftly.

I pushed open the door with a hoof and stepped swiftly away as thick Pink Cloud rolled out into the hallway. The Cloud was pooled here in lethal concentrations. I could barely make out the ceiling (which I noticed formed a once-beautiful mosaic of a light blue sky with wisps of clouds and a cheery sun); I couldn't make out the far wall at all.

I floated out a healing potion, drinking it. I felt it repairing my heart and lungs, taking the edge off the thudding in my head. My stomach settled. I took a deep breath.

I charged into the room, my horn glowing to provide light. I was looking for the pressure switch for the Gala. Immediately, my heart tried to seize, my lungs lost their cache of air as I began to choke. I felt like a thousand tiny spiders had hatched in my intestines and were spreading throughout my insides.

I found her bed, closet, dressers... but I didn't see the switch! I dashed for the doorway as those spiders started to bite and sting.

I slammed the door closed behind me, pulling out two healing potions and downing them. As my mind cleared, I realized I had only one healing potion left, plus a super restoration potion.

And I needed to make at least one more run through the room.

I nudged open the door, stepping back again. I lowered myself, preparing to run.

A spot of red appeared on my E.F.S. compass. I moaned, shaking. I hoped the invisibility spell would hold out. The last thing I wanted right now was a fight.

“Come out, come out, my little pony!”

The alicorn’s majestic voice rang in my head as well as my ears. I turned and watched as she ascended the staircase behind me and stepped into the room with me. She was one of the forest green alicorns, but her coat was so dark it appeared sheer ebony. Her mane and tail flowed behind her like plasma, rippling in a non-existent wind. She wore armor made of bones, a saddle fashioned from a pony’s ribcage, with wing bones splayed out across her own. From her neck hung a pony’s skull with an exceptionally long, slender horn.

Thick wisps of pooled Pink Cloud rolled along the floor from Princess Luna’s chambers behind me, curling around my hooves. I felt myself trembling.

The alicorn stopped, looking right at me, then looked about the rest of the room. Her horn glowed as she slid a small knife out of her armor. The knife hovered a moment before whipping around, slashing two deep cuts across her own shoulders. The alicorn began to bleed.

My eyes widened. But I couldn’t stare at her self-inflicted wounds. My eyes were pulled back to the pony skull with its long, slender horn.

The alicorn cast her spell and the blood from her wounds began to drip upwards, flowing out into the air, swirling and pooling. Her eyes glowed as the twin pools of floating blood forged themselves into wicked, curving blades.

I felt myself trembling again. Not with weakness but with horror. I knew that horn. I had seen it before in a memory.

Sister? You called for me?

The twin bloodswords launched through the air, spinning, slashing at me. One glanced off my barding, bouncing away. The other cut a deep wound across the left side of my neck. Blood began to pour down over my armor and left foreleg. I hissed in pain, staggering.

“Oh yes, I see you, my little pony!” the alicorn laughed from behind her shield. **“Did you really think you could hide from Nightseer with your pathetic little invisibility toy? What a silly little pony.”**

The bloodswords spun back through the air at me. I felt another chill as I pulled out the Black Book, deflecting one of the swords with it as the other struck against my armor with enough force to bruise. The first sword disintegrated into flakes of ruddy powder as it rebounded from the Book.

“Oh! Well what do you have there?” the alicorn purred.

“What do you?” I grunted, feeling a wave of weakness and nausea. I was losing blood. I needed to take the healing potion before I bled out. But...

The other blade of blood slashed around. I cantered out of the way, the edge barely missing my muzzle. I floated the Black Book up, trying to strike it, but the blade dodged away, returning to its mistress. I tried to keep my eyes locked on the bloodsword, but my gaze slid from it, latching again on the sight of that skull. That slender horn...

This... this is going to be the Luna Academy for Young Unicorns? A magical school of my very own? Just like yours?

The ribs, the wings, the skull with its slender horn... I knew they were all from the same pony.

The blade straightened out and shot straight at me, aiming between my eyes. At the last moment I magically tossed the Book in front of my face. Red mist poured about its edges, the sword dissolving as it struck the black leather cover.

“I believe I’ll be taking that.” Nightseer focused, wrapping her magic around the Book. Her shield faltered for a moment as she felt the cold shock of the book’s aura. But only for an eye-blink, not long enough for me to take advantage.

“You *dare!*” I was trembling even harder now. But not from weakness or horror. The alicorn took the Black Book, easily prying it from the grip

of my telekinesis. But I didn't care. The Black Book was nothing to me. Not compared to what Nightseer wore around her neck like trophy.

"And you die," she said casually, almost yawning as she took the Book for herself. Motes of magic formed about her, fashioning themselves into eldritch knives.

My legs gave out. I dropped to my knees; they splashed into a thin pool of my own blood that was becoming saturated with pink. My lungs were burning. My head throbbing harder.

I didn't care. (Be Unwavering!) I focused on that skull with its long, slender horn.

The host of magical knives darted through the air at their target.

Nightseer glanced downward as she felt her necklace shift. With a telekinetic thrust, I drove Luna's horn through the soft tissue under Nightseer's muzzle and up into her brain.

She twitched once, the spark of life remaining in her just long enough for her eldritch knives to strike home. Most evaporated against my new barding, but several sunk in deep before vanishing along with Nightseer's shield spell as the alicorn crumpled to the ground.



No healing potions left. No super restoration potions left. Almost every unarmored part of my body wrapped in healing bandages.

I faced Princess Luna's private chambers -- the room filled thickly with pink.

The Black Book was once again in my saddlebags. But my sense of obsession was fading, overpowered by other emotions. Just like the chill from the Book was overpowered by the heat of the fire behind me. I had stripped Luna's bones from Nightseer and I was burning them. It was the only semblance of a proper burial I could offer.

I faced Princess Luna's private chambers and I continued to pray.

The smoke from the fire behind me curled around me, black and acrid. The Pink Cloud floated out of the doorway in front of me in wisps. The smoke pushed its way inside as more of the Cloud flowed outward, forcing me to slowly step back until I could feel the heat of the fire breathing against my tail.

I jumped as I heard a boom of thunder from inside Princess Luna's chambers. The ceiling mosaic had changed, the puffy white clouds growing thick and dark. A moment later, it began to rain inside Luna's room, the sudden deluge washing the pink out of the air. I heard it gurgling out small vents in the floor.

Shaking, I began to laugh. I looked upward and shouted, "Thank you!" The Goddesses had heard me and answered my prayers!

Either that, or this was the most peculiar design for fire protection ever!

Galloping into the pouring rain, I looked about. Finding the switch was easy now. I threw my hooves against the pressure plate, then spun to face the chamber's only window, jumping up on the dilapidated remains of Luna's bed to keep my hooves out of the pink water that flooded the floor. Outside the window, I could hear pops and bangs. A ribbon of glittering golden light shot into the air and burst into a prismatic spray of light.

I fished out the pink gemstone just in time to see its soft glow fading. Success! The gem's light died and I saw the rune inside had burned out, replaced by a blackened smear within the stone.

I jumped on Luna's bed, squealing with glee as another light exploded outside the window, showering down on Canterlot with all the colors of Celestia's flowing mane. I knew that there were more fireworks going off that I couldn't see. Many more. For a moment, the thunderous explosions rivaled the sound of a hundred SteelHooves firing away. Then exceeded it.

I shifted away from the window, eager now to get back to my friends.

On the opposite wall I saw them. A collection of Ministry Mare statuettes. All six, gathered together, just like they should be. Lined up

in a crystal display case. I realized that only Luna and Spike had kept intact collections. Even Rarity had separated the ponies in her set, giving herself to her sister Sweetie Belle, keeping Fluttershy with her wherever she went.

I wrapped my magic around the case, taking it with me.



“Will you look at all of this stuff?” Calamity said with a tone of awe.

Watcher had told us that the Ministry of Awesome had been repurposed as a warehouse. But I had never pictured this.

The interior walls had been knocked out. The entire building was a gigantic black void filled with seemingly endless rows of crates, filing cabinets and metal boxes. The rows were divided into clear sections that stretched the length of the building, each section filling with containers painted a single color. Small, diamond-shaped lights hung from the ceiling at intervals, many of which had burnt out. The effect was like staring down the length of a rainbow under a black sky sprinkled with stars.

“Are y’all seein’ alla this?”

“Yes,” Velvet Remedy said, staring.

“C’n we just...”

“No,” I answered. It would take forever, and there was no way we could carry it all.

“How ‘bout just one row?” Calamity pleaded.

“No.” I looked about. “What we are looking for is behind a shield. And behind defenses. I don’t think it’s in this room. Which means it’s probably below us. Fan out and look for a way down.

“Well shoot. Y’all are no fun!” Calamity complained as he flew off.

Pyrelight swooped into the air, a streak of emerald and gold between the rainbow and the darkness.

“Velvet, hold up,” I said as she and SteelHooves began to trot down rows in the yellow section and green section respectively.

Velvet stopped, turning towards me. Then, unable to help herself, she struck a pose. “Admiring it?” she cooed. “Isn’t this just *lovely*?” She was wearing the armor Calamity had given her. When I first saw her in it, my heart had skipped a beat. Now that she was posing, my heart skipped another.

She grinned, watching my expression. “Or... do you prefer this?” She dropped down into a sultry, pouty pose and my heart threatened to stop altogether. I felt suddenly hot.

“I-I... um... w-wow.”

She beamed. Dammit, this wasn’t fair. I wasn’t supposed to be thinking like this about Velvet Remedy anymore. I needed Homage.

“So, how do I look?”

“Lickable,” I whimpered.

She blinked innocently. “What was that?”

“Pretty!” I coughed, blushing. “Very, very pretty! And armored. Which is good. Good that you finally have some armor!”

She gave a charming laugh, getting up. “Why thank you, Littlepip.” Looking up at the spot of air Calamity had recently occupied, she purred, “I hope I can get the same response from our flybuck.”

“Our barded bard,” I said, gazing at her.

Velvet Remedy facehoofed and shook her head. “I was waiting for somepony to say that. It had to be you, didn’t it, Littlepip?”

I started, realizing that I had forgotten why I called her to hold back. “I have a gift for you too.”

She blinked, putting down her hoof. “Really? You’d think it was my birthday.” She watched as I pulled out a wrapped bundle. With a slightly chiding tone, “Is it a weapon?”

“No,” I said, slightly wounded. “But this is very, very special. And you have to promise not to take it apart or remove anything from it. Ever.”

Velvet Remedy now looked curious and slightly worried.

“Promise,” I required. “It’s important.”

“All right, Littlepip. I can see that it is, at least to you. I promise.”

I floated the bundle over to her, unwrapping the crystal case from Princess Luna’s bedroom. Velvet Remedy gasped, her eyes going immediately to Fluttershy.

She reached out with her magic to take the case and I heard a sharp intake of air as the magic of each of the statuettes flooded over her at once. Back in the royal castle, picking up the case had not had any effect on me, but then I already possessed a full set; they were already giving me what they had to give. I kept a net of levitation magic beneath the crystal case just as a precaution should the gifts of the statuettes be overwhelming.

Velvet Remedy’s eyes widened, first with alarm and then understanding. “Where?” she asked, her voice trembling a little. There were tears in her eyes.

“Princess Luna’s private chambers. These were Hers. Now they are yours.”

“And did you find...?”

“Just bones,” I said sadly. “Their spirits have gone elsewhere.” I didn’t say more.



“Li’lpip! Yer four!” Calamity shouted as I emptied Little Macintosh into the body of the Ultra-Sentinel, penetrating its armor but failing to take it down. It rolled closer, moving fully into the aisle of orange boxes and cabinets. I spun, terrified to see another of the rainbow-painted robot tanks bearing down on me from behind, the turret of its main gun locking onto me.

Wrapping myself in a field of levitation, I kicked off from the ground. Both Ultra-Sentinels fired at me with high-explosive anti-tank guns, slaying each other.

WHBOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The next aisle over, SteelHooves was facing at least two more, opening up with his grenade machinegun. The tanks were taking the battering, firing back with a multi-gem, rapid-fire magical energy gun. The scream of the magical energy weapons dampened as one of the tanks went down. The flickering orbs of energy above my head and Calamity's popped as Velvet's disintegration ward saved SteelHooves from being turned to ash.

SteelHooves fired several more grenades, then retreated around the corner, smoke curling off his armor. Several plates of the armor were gone, taking melted flesh with them, leaving egregious and gaping wounds that seeped with the dark fluid that formed a Canterlot Ghoul's blood. He stumbled in pain. The missile launcher in his battle saddle was half-disintegrated; more than just a diet of scrap metal would be needed to repair the damage.

Calamity started to reach back for Spitfire's Thunder, but I waved him on. My E.F.S. compass was completely red, solid no matter which direction I turned. "There's got to be a hundred of these things in here, Calamity!" And this was only the first line of defense. The Goddesses knew what else was in here. "We aren't going to fight our way out of this. You need to find the controls and shut security down! You're the only one of us who can!"

I whipped out my sniper rifle, loaded with magically-enhanced bullets, and floated over the top of the shelves of crates, taking aim at the badly damaged tankbot which had sent SteelHooves running. The multi-gem magical energy weapon swung upwards on a universal joint, aiming all its barrels at me. We opened fire together.

My new armor took the first four of the five shots it got off in the space it took me to fire once. The fifth blast of magical energy struck me like

a ball of molten steel, burning into my chest. Unbearable agony exploded in my chest as my ribcage saved my heart, but at the cost of one of my ribs disintegrating completely.

“AAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!” My magic imploded as I dropped.

Simultaneously, the bullet from my sniper rifle struck directly into the center of the tankbot’s magical energy weapon, ripping through to its core matrix. The top of the Ultra-Sentinel exploded in a flash of multi-colored energy.

My body hit the shelf full of orange metal boxes like a rag doll, bouncing off and landing hard on the floor amongst the jagged shards of the slain tankbot. I felt one shard slice into my armor, jabbing into my stomach but not deeply.

An odd, static-like detonation echoed a few rows over. SteelHooves let out a scream, more of rage than pain as I heard his metal armor collapse to the floor.

I groaned, an indescribable pain in my chest. I was having trouble breathing.

“They’re changing tactics again!” Velvet Remedy yelled from somewhere further away. “Li...”

The air filled with the sound of crackling explosions. A wash of charged energy flooded the aisle, bathing me, making the hairs of my coat and mane stand on end. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle winked off. I twisted about slowly, lifting my PipBuck. It was dead. Matrix-disruption grenades. That meant SteelHooves was immobile and my PipBuck was just a metal part of my leg until I could reboot it. Which might be tricky without SteelHooves’ armor to reboot it from.

I heard the metallic whine and rumble as another Ultra-Sentinel rolled into my aisle. I tried to float my sniper rifle around to fire at it, only to realize I didn’t have it anymore and wasn’t sure where it was. It must have fallen into the other row.

This rainbow-painted tankbot had a grenade launcher as its primary weapon, probably the one that had just sprayed the area with matrix-disruption grenades. The secondary weapon was an integrated, high-powered rifle, and it was swinging around to aim at me.

I focused, the glow of my magic surrounding dozens of crates and metal boxes on each side of the aisle. I couldn't dislodge the tankbot's spark batteries before it could fire. But I could float enough crap into its way to act as a shield.

The tank depowered.

"Yee-HAW! And that's how we do it up in the sky!"



The shimmering field of magenta magical energy surrounded about one fourth of the basement. The shield was easily as powerful as the super-unicorn's shield in Fillydelphia. Velvet Remedy took a deep breath, looking a little nervous, then stepped forward. The direct descendent of Sweetie Belle passed through the shield unharmed. It didn't even frizz her mane.

She turned back to us, letting out a breath, looking relieved.

This part was easy. Actually explaining to Velvet what she needed to do to disable the generator was more difficult than bypassing the shield itself. I motioned her on with my hoof. At this point, the only thing that could go wrong is if she ran out of air inside there before deactivating the generator. Not something that seemed remotely likely.

A few minutes later, the shield melted away. Velvet stood at the depowered generator in the center, looking accomplished.

In here were the greatest secrets of the Ministry of Awesome.

I turned to Calamity, who was prancing in the air like a filly who just got her cutie mark. "Hate to do this to you, Calamity, but would you please go get the *Sky Bandit*?"

His face fell. I actually felt bad for him. "What? Now? But... But all..."

“SteelHooves can’t move. My PipBuck is dead. We can’t go back the way we came. We need to risk a landing right in front of the Ministry of Awesome.” This was insane, but I couldn’t think of another way. Fortunately, we had seriously thinned out the alicorns out in Ministry Walk, and the fireworks had scattered most of the rest. There was no telling for how long, though.

Calamity looked disappointed, almost grievously wounded by my request. I looked at him seriously. “You’re the fastest and most maneuverable amongst us, and the only one who can bring our ride. Get the *Sky Bandit* and position yourself up above the Cloud. Take my binoculars and keep an eye out for us. The moment we’re out, swoop down and get us.”

“All right, dangit,” he said dejectedly.

I floated out the pink gemstone with the scorch mark inside. “This is yours. It’s done.”

Calamity smiled wanly. “Thank ya, Li’lpip. Ah owe ya one.” He slipped the gem into his pack, looking a little better. The orange-maned pegasus in the desperado hat pivoted and flew away, casting one look back at the treasures he was being denied. “Ah hope sacrifice is a virtue.”

I rotated and looked at the crates and cabinets before me. On one end of the previously-shielded area was a maneframe and several terminals. In the center, under a spotlight, was a stand with small lockbox, the sort used to hold memory orbs.

I gasped as I saw the symbol emblazoned on the lockbox:

A burning hoof.

Minutes later, I was laying on the floor of the Ministry of Awesome, staring at the contents of the burning hoof lockbox.

Six memory orbs. Each sat in a plush velvet indentation with a symbol pinned underneath: an apple, a butterfly, a star, a balloon, a cloud with a bolt of lightning and finally a diamond.

I took a deep breath, then leaned forward and touched my horn to the first one.



The Lightning Cloud Orb

I felt my host swallow nervously as she walked into the darkened, circular chamber. Huge, arched windows stretched upwards, giving a breathtaking view of a brilliantly starry night. A circular window above the arches perfectly framed the moon.

Moonlight fell through the chamber to illuminate a large, round table. There were seven chairs -- six with emblems emblazoned on their backs, one which was taller than the others and inlaid with obsidian and lapis lazuli. My host strode up between the chairs, looking at the table. The chairs were cushioned in red. The same emblem from the back of each chair was also inlaid in the table before them where a dinner plate might be set.

To my host's left was the image of gears and sparks, bisected with a blade: the symbol of the Steel Rangers and the Ministry of Wartime Technology. To her right was the image of a large star ringed with smaller ones, a tall horn above them and wings to each side: the symbol of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Directly across the table, I could see a cross overlaid with a butterfly. My host didn't look at the others.

The rest of the table was taken up with a map of Equestria. There were markings indicating battle lines where the zebras had managed to push into the country. Most of the war, however, was being waged in the zebra's homeland, and in the seas and lands between. My host's gaze lingered on a small part of Equestria that had been lost, including a crescent-shaped canyon.

Littlehorn Valley.

All over the map of Equestria, tall mushroom-shaped models had been placed. At first, I thought they marked balefire bombs, but then I realized they were white, and their stalks were tall and needle-thin. Towers.

Somepony flew overhead, picking up one of the towers in her teeth and moving it half an inch. "The Fillydelphia Tower should be on that side of the city," Rainbow Dash said as she landed on the opposite side of the table, sitting down in one of the chairs. The symbol in front of it was almost identical to her cutie mark, but with purple wings lined in black. I had seen that symbol on one of her Shadowbolts uniforms.

"Where should Ah sit?" my host asked, her voice holding a reserved country twang.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Why not sit in your sister's chair? I'm sure AJ wouldn't mind."

Apple Bloom's eyes widened. "Ah couldn't do that!"

A door opened, and Princess Luna strode into the room. I felt a javelin skewer my heart. Apple Bloom and Rainbow Dash both bowed as the Princess took Her chair at the head of the table.

"Good night, Rainbow Dash. Welcome back, Apple Bloom."

Apple Bloom gulped.

"Please, up."

I didn't want her to stand back up. This was... painful. I was in the presence of Luna, my Goddess, living and well, not an hour after having burned Her bones. After having seen Her defiled by an alicorn! I wished for Apple Bloom to remain bowed. Or at least, look away.

Apple Bloom stood back up, realizing Rainbow Dash had already been standing, and turned her attention to the Princess.

"It is good to hear you are finally doing something with the Ministry that I gave you, Rainbow Dash," the Princess said, chiding a little. "Now, tell me about this new project. It seems...vast."

“Oh yeah!” Rainbow Dash grinned, flapping her wings. It seemed she couldn’t remain seated long. “Remember how you told me you wanted my help building the Equestrian Skyguard? Well, here’s my answer: the Single Pegasus Project!”

“Sounds... impressive,” Princess Luna said patiently. “What is it?”

“In a word: weather control!”

“That’s two words,” Apple Bloom whispered to the cyan pegasus, who shot her a look.

The Single Pegasus Project was... weather control? Well, I guessed that made some sense, if the Enclave was able to alter the towers so that they could plant crops in the clouds.

“Weather control?” Luna said, tilting her head curiously, echoing my thoughts, then taking them in a whole different direction. “So this project will allow us to rain lightning down on enemy positions? Mire their convoys with torrential downpours? Drive them back with hurricanes and hail?”

Rainbow Dash’s jaw nearly hit the floor.

She closed it, zipping around the room. “Oooh yeah! This is even more awesome than I thought! I mean, I knew it would be awesome. But I never even realized just *how* awesome it would be!”

Princess Luna chuckled. Oh Goddess, I loved that chuckle. I was in awe of it. “Then what were you thinking of using it for?”

Rainbow Dash stopped in mid-loop, and hovered, turning back to the Princess as she shook off a blush. “Well, way I see it, this war will be won through air superiority. No offense to Twilight. I mean, we have it. They don’t.”

She flew up to the table. “Problem is: we don’t have enough combat fliers. Especially now that the zebras are using dragons. There simply aren’t enough pegasi because they’re all too busy already keeping control of the weather. And the ones we do have often have to leave for

other obligations. Hell, even I have to abandon the war once a year to help Ponyville wrap-up winter!”

“Surely some other pegasus...” Princess Luna started to say, but Rainbow Dash interrupted (!) Her.

“Not a chance. They need me. I won’t leave Ponyville hanging.”

Princess Luna looked cross for just a moment, then smiled and nodded. “Of course.” Looking back at the map, She bid, “Continue.”

“Well, with the Single Pegasus Project, we’re gonna finally automate all of our weather making and weather control systems. The towers you see here will control the weather over each area,” the wild, rainbow-maned pegasus grinned broadly, almost dancing with anticipation. “Check this out!”

Rainbow Dash pulled out a little switch and tossed it. Both Apple Bloom and Princess Luna jumped as a crack of thunder roared over the table, and black rings of smoke expanded out from each of the model towers, crackling with energy.

“That would start rain!” Having seen a downpour from Princess Luna’s ceiling, I was mildly surprised when miniature clouds didn’t form and start flooding the table.

“I designed it after the contrails of the Wonderbolts!” Rainbow Dash boasted. “Everything about the Single Pegasus Project goes through me, and it doesn’t get my hoof of approval unless it’s cool!...”

I felt my host roll her eyes.

“...And it will all be under the management of one single pegasus in the Rainbow Dash Hub of Pure Awesome!...”

“We’re still decidin’ on a name,” Apple Bloom quickly interjected at Princess Luna’s chagrined expression.

Rainbow Dash looked a little put out. “Hey, it’s my project, and my Ministry...”

“Anyway,” Apple Bloom said, taking over, “The pony in the central hub will be placed into a sort of... induced coma.”

“Induced coma?” Princess Luna said, sounding shocked.

“We haven’t ‘xactly worked that part out yet either,” Apple Bloom admitted.

“But we’re really close!” Rainbow Dash interjected swiftly. “Apple Bloom’s company is working on modifying a life support pod, and I’m gonna be talking to Twilight and Rarity to see if they have any ideas that could help.”

“I see.” The Princess didn’t sound fully convinced.

“And hooked up to one of our new Crusader computers,” Apple Bloom continued only to have Rainbow Dash interrupt again.

“Yeah. But none of that download-your-brain nonsense. I had them disconnect all that stuff. I want a living pony running Equestria’s weather, not some machine that *thinks* it’s a pony.”

Apple Bloom sighed. Then continued once more, “The pony in the life support pod will be mentally linked into the Crusader, which will allow her to manage running all of Equestria’s weather.”

“Does it have to be a pegasus?” the Princess asked.

“Yes!” Rainbow Dash proclaimed. “Well, no. Not technically. But it should be.”

Princess Luna looked over the map and all its towers, at least four dozen in all. “You have given me a lot to think about. This would be a massive expenditure of resources...”

“But totally worth it!” Rainbow Dash pushed, sounding hopeful.

Princess Luna nodded. “Most likely,” She agreed with a smile. “And I believe the Ministries of Morale and Image each have proposals that could be integrated into this.” The Princess stood. “And the central hub will be a prime target for assault, so it will need the best defenses that the Ministries of Arcane Sciences and Wartime Technology can devise.”

“But... it will still be my project, right?” Rainbow Dash asked. “It will still be the Ministry of Awesome?”

“Of course.”



Velvet Remedy and I trotted back down the red row, SteelHooves floating along beside me, our weapons and supplies floating behind. I winced, holding a hoof to my chest. Velvet Remedy had done the best she could for me with her magic, rebuilding the rib I had lost, but it hurt like hell and I was still having trouble breathing. The damage had weakened me, and it would take time (and potions) before I would regain my endurance.

I plan to ascend, Red Eye had told me. Somepony will have to take up the tasks that the Princesses and pegasi left to run wild, after all. Somepony will have to regulate the weather, to raise the sun and the moon.

Weather control. Now I knew how he intended to pull that off, just as I knew how he was going to become a God capable of doing Celestia's and Luna's tasks. (And I realized he *would* be able to move the sun and moon too, since neither of Them stood in the way to, as Princess Luna had told Midnight Shower, “trump” his efforts.) I wasn't sure on the details, but by now I had learned enough to know that Red Eye had a plan, even if I couldn't see it. That cyberpony knew *exactly* what he was doing.

After hacking the Ministry of Awesome's terminal, I had been able to review the specifics of the Single Pegasus Project. Unfortunately, without my PipBuck, I had no way of saving a copy of any information or schematics. It occurred to me that I may need to have the memory recorded so I could review it later. What I didn't know, what I didn't learn until a lot later, was that accessing that terminal had set off alarms someplace far away. And that the war was coming.

Several things were clear. The Single Pegasus Project was indeed designed for Equestria-wide weather control. The center hub for the S.P.P. was located above the clouds, and had some of the most fearsome defenses I had ever imagined, including a shield that put the one in the Ministry of Awesome to shame. There was a bypass spell on the shield, but I had no idea who it was designed to allow through. My guess was Rainbow Dash.

The suspended animation pod from which the entire Single Pegasus Project was supposed to be run was unoccupied. It had never been activated.

A dull rumble shook the Ministry of Awesome. The lights above swayed, dust showered down, and poorly stacked boxes thudded to the floor throughout the building.

I looked up, shocked from my reverie. I turned to Velvet Remedy as another tremor vibrated the floor. We trotted faster, my chest beginning to ache badly as we picked up the pace.

We flung the doors open...

...and were greeted by chokingly thick pink and flames!

My lungs collapsed, and I fell to the ground, my magic imploding, dropping SteelHooves. I felt myself dying, the Pink Cloud tearing me apart like I was filled with Fillydelphia parasprites. Velvet Remedy collapsed next to me with a weak cry.

The basement of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences had exploded. The suffering alicorn had finally lost her battle. Or perhaps the clinking chains had let off a spark. The whole Ministry was on fire, as were the dead trees. All of them, including the ones that formed the Ministry of Peace. I could hear the building groaning as it began to buckle.

The basement had been huge, stretching under about a third of Ministry Walk; and when it blew, the explosion breached the tunnel between the royal treasury and Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. The remains of the field were filling with an instantly lethal concentration of Pink Cloud. Setting off the Gala fireworks and

turning the mother dragon into a mouse had not made all that Cloud magically disappear. It was more diffused here, but that just meant we had seconds more to live. Maybe a full minute, and most of that without consciousness.

My vision blurred and darkened. I felt Pyrelight thump down limply on my back. I barely saw the shadow of the Sky Bandit dropping out of the air above us. Velvet Remedy shoved all three of the super restoration potions she was still carrying into my muzzle, making me drink, then fell into unconsciousness.

I felt my body jolted alive as the overdose of healing magic flooded through me. I was alive to the point I was burning up. My nerves were on fire. But I was conscious, and that was enough to levitate everypony and everything around me. I tossed us all onto the *Sky Bandit*, shouting for Calamity to fly as fast as he could. Already, I was beginning to weaken, the Cloud clawing at me.

The Pink Cloud was hurting Calamity too, and fast was not very fast at all. I could hear him grunt, straining to keep us aloft, whinnying with the effort. I pulled open Velvet Remedy's medical boxes. We were out of super restoration potions, but maybe she had a healing potion left? Nothing. I closed it and crawled around to her other side, but before I could open the box, Calamity fell unconscious. The *Sky Bandit* began to fall.

I tried to focus, but my brain felt like it was being beaten with a sledgehammer. I screamed with the effort. My lungs were hot coals in my breast. Tapping into reserves I shouldn't have had anymore (Be Strong! Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!), I enveloped us with my magic, my horn flaring with an overflow. The strain was excruciating. The *Sky Bandit* drifted downwards until it splashed into the river, heavily ribboned with pink, which formed a moat around the front of Canterlot. I was tossed forward, falling on top of Velvet Remedy.

The *Sky Bandit* seemed willing to float, the magic that allowed Calamity to pull it through the air with all of us inside apparently making it buoyant. Or maybe the Goddesses were again showing us

mercy. Either way, I released my magic, falling weakly to the floor of the passenger wagon. I pressed a hoof against Velvet Remedy's neck and checked Pyrelight's breathing. They were both unconscious but alive. I prayed neither of them were in a coma.

The passenger wagon began to turn lazily in the flowing water. My ears perked as they caught the roar of the waterfall. "Oh... oh no." So much for the mercy of the Goddesses.

I didn't even waste the energy of getting back to my hooves. I threw my magic around the *Sky Bandit* and prayed.

The passenger wagon reached the edge and began to tip. My horn flared again, enveloped by another overflow as I struggled to keep us from somersaulting. The water continued to shove us over the outcropping.

We burst through the Pink Cloud. We were falling.

I pushed us forward, as far away from the falling water as I could while we fell. I kept us from flipping, and slowed our fall, but I didn't have the strength to stop our fall completely, or even really guide us.

Canterlot was a long way up the side of the mountain.



Velvet Remedy was thrown from the passenger wagon when the *Sky Bandit* hit the Zebratown aqueduct with a jarring thud! It was almost wide enough for the passenger wagon to slide down broadside; her body landed in the aqueduct and was swept away in the rushing water.

"Whoa Nelly!"

Calamity jerked conscious, flapping his wings hard as he could. I dodged SteelHooves' sliding body and jumped out after Velvet as Calamity struggled to get the passenger wagon under his control.

I heard a peeling metallic scream behind me as the *Sky Bandit* scraped against the walls of the aqueduct, Calamity trying to pull up. Ahead of me, I saw Velvet's body. I lashed out with my telekinesis. Water

splashed into my muzzle. I wheezed, fire igniting in my lungs again, worse than before. My magic faltered on the edge of burnout.

I focused harder, kicking with all four legs as I battled to keep my head above the water while concentrating on Velvet Remedy. I had to get us out of the water before she drowned!

I cast out my magic again and this time I caught her, lifting her up out of the water even as we both rushed down the aqueduct. I began to draw her closer, reel her in. Now I was merely struggling to keep from being pulled under.

It was a losing battle; I was not even an adequate swimmer. My head went under and my lungs took in water. I broke the surface again, coughing violently. My magic had imploded and Velvet had fallen back into the water two pony's-lengths in front of me.

One of the collapsed sections of the aqueduct loomed just ahead.

I kicked, this time propelling myself forward. I reached out, hooking my foreleg around Velvet's, trying to grab a hold of her, wishing I had talons rather than hooves. I got my other foreleg around her neck. We twisted about in the water, rushing towards the edge, as I tried to keep either of us from drowning. I fought to wrap us in magic, but I was too overstressed and exhausted. The spell wouldn't manifest.

We washed over the side, plummeting towards the broken blocks of the aqueduct below.

Calamity caught us!

...And promptly splash-landed at the edge of the lake which had formed beneath the broken aqueduct. Velvet Remedy and I flew out of his forelegs and hit mud, sliding to a stop.

I struggled to get up. To crawl over to her and make sure she was still breathing. I would have settled for squirming through the mud if it got me closer. But my body wouldn't respond at all. It had quit. Too much trauma, too much stress, in too short a period of time.

Enough.



The Diamond Orb

The wash from the landing Griffinchaser IV tugged at my hood and flapped my cloak behind me. I watched as Rarity stepped off the flying machine, her head bundled in a fashionable scarf to protect her mane from the wind.

She trotted towards me as the pony-peddled whirligig lifted back into the brilliant blue sky. I basked in the light and warmth of the midday sun, such a rare and precious gift, as my host watched the beautiful white unicorn approach.

“There you are!” she smiled as if my host had been lost. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes, Mistress Rarity,” my host said in a naturally husky voice. “If I may ask, who will be the victim of this spell?”

Rarity cocked her head, looking at my host oddly. “Why me, of course.” I felt my host’s jaw drop. “I wouldn’t dream of doing something like this to any other pony.”

“O-of course,” my host said, clearly taken aback. “Then, if I may ask, how many?” The Griffinchaser IV was now far enough away that the wind had died. The squeaking sound of the machine was fading into the distance.

Rarity motioned with a hoof for my host to follow, walking towards a set of glass doors on a quaintly non-descript building. My host galloped forward and tipped his head. I felt the casual flow of magic as he opened the door for the Ministry Mare.

“Why thank you!” she beamed at him. “Such manners.” Rarity gave my host a kiss on the horn.

He turned and followed her inside, watching her reverently. She was gorgeous, sexy in a way that transcended her age, regal... and my host was male, yet the only stirring was in his heart. He was a perfect gentlestallion, and not just in appearance. I found he was a male I didn't mind having as my host in the slightest. And I felt ashamed, remembering what I had done weeks ago while sick in SteelHooves' shack. My host was a better pony than I.

"Forty-two," Rarity announced.

My host stopped dead, his heart skipping a beat, and not in a good way. His muzzle gaped, his eyes widening in shock if, not outright horror. "F-f-f-forty-two!?" My own mind was reeling.

"Well, actually forty-three," she said whimsically. "I do wish to keep a small part for myself."

"You..." My host stood there, shaking. "You want me to cut your soul into forty-two pieces?" he said weakly. "I mean... forty-three?"

"Yes," she nodded primly. Rarity smiled, walking up to my host and putting a hoof on his shoulder. "Don't worry. I know you can do this."

"I-I..." My host blinked.

"I'm always telling ponies that my top magician is the absolute master when it comes to magic and cutting things," she said encouragingly. "And that, Snips, is you."

My host, Snips, swallowed nervously and nodded.

"Now, is the chamber ready? You've had enough time with the Black Book?"

Snips nodded again. "But... Mistress Rarity, forty-three? I can't be sure you'll survive! Or what you'll be like afterwards."

Rarity's smile faltered, revealing a deep sadness behind her mask. "I'll survive. We all will." She pulled her warm, confident demeanor back on. "Now, I've sent Snails the soul jars. He'll be doing the guidance, so don't you worry about that. From what I've read, the shards will seek

out the vessels themselves, so it's practically idiot-proof." She patted me on the shoulder. "Just worry about the cutting."

"Shards of your soul," my host said softly.

Pieces, a *lot* of pieces, began to fall into place.

"Yes." Rarity took a deep breath. "Now, I'll be right down. I need to freshen up a bit first."

She began to trot off, then turned and looked beseechingly at my host. All pretense of being happy or worry-free had evaporated. She looked scared. "Snips? Will it hurt?" Her voice was almost like that of a filly.

Snips swallowed hard, frowned, and admitted, "Mistress Rarity, it will probably re-define torture."

Rarity gave a little shake and strangled back a soft whimper. Then pulled herself together, lifting her head high. "Well, at least it will be quick."

She disappeared down the hall.

My host watched her go until the shadows of the hallway enveloped her. Then he turned, using his magic to push a block high in the wall. A grating sound filled the hallway as stones slid into stones, revealing a hidden stairwell that descended into blackness.

Minutes later, my host was standing in a darkened ritual chamber. The only light was from a few glowing gemstones set within strange glyphs that shimmered with crimson liquid, and a single candle. The candle illuminated a stand upon which the Black Book rested.

The air in the room was exceedingly chilly. I could see my host's breath.

"Forty-three, Snails," my host moaned. "Rarity wants me to cut her soul into forty-three pieces! I... I don't know if I can do it."

"Forty-three?" the other, taller robed unicorn asked slowly. "But... there's only forty two soul jars. I counted. Twice, just in case I messed up the first time."

"Yeah. She says she wants to keep one piece for herself."

“What? Is she givin’ the rest away as gifts or somethin’?”

Snips shook his head. “I don’t know.” He looked up. “Hey, Snails, you okay?”

“Yeah,” the other unicorn said slowly. “I just hope I won’t mess anything up.”

I felt Snips sigh. “Hey, you won’t mess it up. Mistress Rarity wouldn’t entrust something this big to ponies she thought would mess it up.” He gave Snails an encouraging smile. “Remember what Rarity always says about you.”

“That I’m tall?”

“No, the other thing,” Snips urged.

“That I may be slow, but I always get there event-u-ally,” Snails said, his voice building in confidence. “And that’s better than she can say for most ponies.”

“That’s right!” Snips clapped. “Now go to the soul jars and be ready. This... this is really going to happen.”

“Well, we always wanted to see awesome magic,” Snails reminisced. “And this is the most awesomest.”

“Yeah,” Snips said, sounding a little nervous again.

The room was dark and cold and still.

The light of the candle flickered as the candle slowly burnt down.

It felt like forever before Rarity came down the stairs. When she did, she was wrapped in a black, hooded robe, like she was attending her own funeral. Without a word, she walked into the center of the chamber, standing in the midst of all the softly glowing gems.

Snips turned towards her, levitating the Black Book in front of him. Carefully, he read the alien words, words from a long dead zebra tongue, born of madness or possibly born of the stars. I felt my host concentrate, pouring all his focus into the spell. I felt power wash over

me, not only from within but from without. Power drawn from strange, black places.

The magic was vile and repulsive. I felt violated.

Rarity lifted from the floor, beginning to float upwards as a small magical vortex pooled beneath her. The vortex of eldritch energy rose up and began to wrap itself about the unicorn mare, curling around her like a cocoon or a constricting snake. Her expression was one of mounting worry, edging swiftly toward panic... but never getting there. Instead, the screaming began.

I wanted to pull out of the memory orb. I couldn't bear to hear those screams. Not just of pain but of nightmarish mental anguish. I remembered my hellish ride in the autonomous healing booth. What the spell was doing to Rarity was orders of magnitude worse!

The black magic washed over Snips, pooling at the tip of his horn, then taking flight. A sphere of pure void, blacker than absolute darkness, took flight from our horn and collided with the eldritch energies spinning about Rarity.

There was an explosion as darkness turned to light, and the eldritch energies transformed into a prismatic legion of shattered lights, streaking over Snips' head, leaving bright plasma trails behind them as they homed in on their receptacles.

Snips never turned to watch. He never even looked at the soul jars. The unicorn buck only had eyes for Rarity, and he dashed to catch her as she fell, unconscious, to the floor.

But then, he didn't have to. I already knew what they were.



How far would you go for your friends?

How much would you give up for them?

With all I had seen of Rarity, I knew her deepest fear and greatest pain was losing her friends. Seeing them drift apart. Fracturing.

Oh no, I'm fine. It's just... sometimes it feels like we're pulling apart. And I can't stand to see that happen. I really must do something about it.

What did I know of soul jars? I knew that they were virtually indestructible, eternal.

I knew that you could hang other spells on them, allowing those spells to last effectively forever.

But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell... took a picture of your soul.

I remembered being Spike as Rarity led all her friends down a hallway to see Rainbow Dash's new armor. I recalled the strange carpet we had walked across, and the sudden chill when Spike had stepped on it. Twilight Sparkle had reacted to it as well. Of course she had; Twilight had felt that particular chill before, from Rarity's mirror. I even suspect she was about to call Rarity on it when Rarity distracted her with Rainbow Dash.

Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image.

A reflection of the soul. Of who you truly were, deep inside. A picture is only a picture. But a picture with that spell placed upon it would be more than just an image of the pony. It would radiate with an aura of her true soul.

And Twilight? Pinkie Pie had asked in that final message, the one Twilight Sparkle had never received. Do you think... maybe... you could go with me? I'm... kinda scared. And it isn't the sort of scared that goes away with giggling. I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway..."

I should be there for her. Like she's with me. Somepony should be there... Scootaloo had said, coughing violently. Just want Dash to know... we didn't all... She's not alone.

Forty-two.

Only forty-two were ever made, Watcher... Spike had told me. Seven sets of six. One for each of the Ministry Mares, and one for Princess Luna.

Concentrating, I opened my saddlebags and floated out Rarity's soul jars, setting them before me. All together. They were stronger, better that way.

Be Strong!

Be Pleasant.

Be Unwavering!

Be Smart.

Be Awesome!

Awareness! It was under 'E'!



Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: My Little Ponies - You have collected one of each of the six Ministry Mares statuettes. Stronger together than they are apart, they have granted you +1 Luck in addition to their normal benefits.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



PEACE IN OUR TIME

“Be good... or I’ll shoot you dead.”

Enough.

My abused body was through. My nerves didn’t even have the will to scream at me anymore. My muscles arched dully, my insides hurt, my PipLeg itched. I could feel the mud slowly squishing in between my armor and coat, seeping through the hole the Ultra-Sentinel had burned in my chest.

I didn’t care. My friends needed me. Velvet Remedy was unconscious (oh please, let her just be unconscious). I had tried to save her from drowning, but she’d gone under more than once, and now she was just laying there, unmoving.

A few yards away, the *Sky Bandit* was half-sunk in the lake, the front end thrust upwards over the muddy shore. I heard a grunt from the air to my left where Calamity hung from the *Sky Bandit*’s harness.

“Ugh. Nnngh!” Calamity’s legs kicked circles in the air. “Oh pony feathers!”

My attention was focused on Velvet Remedy. I was desperate to get closer to her, to see if she was all right, but my body ignored me. I tried to pull her close, but my magic flickered over her limp form and died. Too much strain.

She wasn't breathing. I could see no lift and fall from her body.

Oh Goddesses, *Velvet Remedy wasn't breathing!*

"Calamity!" I shouted hoarsely, terror surging through me. "Velvet's not breathing! Help her!"

"Ah'm tryin'!" Calamity shouted back, suddenly thrashing in his harness. "Ah can't get down!" His wings flapped and his hooves kicked.

My mind was exploding in panic. Every second, she was dying. And I still couldn't get to her, couldn't even crawl. My horn flared with the surge of adrenaline. There was not enough in me to wrap around Velvet, but that flush of power was enough to pull apart the clasps of Calamity's harness, dropping the rust-colored pegasus into the mud. He scrambled to Velvet's side and began pumping his hooves against her breast, pausing only to breathe for her.

Behind him, a groan rose up as the *Sky Bandit* slipped further into the lake. With a start, I realized SteelHooves was still in the back of the passenger wagon, paralyzed in his dead armor, unable to move as he sunk into the water. I knew he couldn't drown, but the thought of being trapped in a watery grave had to be horrifying. My mind immediately conjured memories of my nightmarish imprisonment in the healing booth.

Calamity continued fervently, trying to bring life back to Velvet Remedy.

Tones of grey bled into my vision. My whole self cried out for rest, begging me to just let go, just go to sleep. But I fought the cool embrace of darkness, the little pony in my head kicking and screaming, telling me that if I let it overtake me, I would never wake up again. If I lost consciousness now, I could slip into a coma. And somehow, I knew

it wouldn't be a peaceful sleep. All the nightmares of the healing booth awaited for me down there.

I heard a choked, sputtering cough from Velvet Remedy. My panic lifted, my heart crying out. Oh thank the Goddesses!

The grip of panic eased around my heart and mind, and blackness rushed in like a surging ocean. I think I heard Calamity fire his battle saddle and yell something, but he sounded too far away. Then nothing.



Visions of my life in Stable Two passed before my eyes. Boring, dull, safe, grey. Devoid of any real life, empty of friends or of purpose. A job where I was helping no pony. Out of a sense of responsibility and a hope, I braved the possible nothingness beyond the Stable door, leaving that peace behind. Trading it for pain and horror as I searched for *her*.

I remembered my first day, and how the daylight seemed so strange to me, beautiful yet odd and unhealthy, strained by the curtain of clouds above us. I saw how stupid and foolish I had been, plunging headlong into places like Ironshod Firearms and Stable Twenty-Four, repeatedly risking my life and later those of my friends, driven by curiosity and a need for answers. I was lucky to still be alive.

My friends swam before me. My fearless first friend Calamity, always by my side, always ready to catch me when I fell. I owed him my life, over and over. Velvet Remedy, the real mare (not the one of my foolish fantasies) with the caring heart who tended to me while I was sick, and who took my burden when the return home was too much for me to bear. SteelHooves, met in battle with a flurry of explosions. I had seen him conquer his own demons to fight alongside Xenith and to finally step up to lead a new force for good in the Equestrian Wasteland. And Xenith herself, pulled from Red Eye's hell of industry and slavery, a tortured mare, a survivor who became our guide in Old Olneigh, one of the most grim and deadly places the wasteland had to offer.

My mind filled with voices. The voice of DJ Pon3, broadcasting out of Manehattan, bringing messages of warning and hope, and making us

out to be heroes. I remembered that first real voice from the past, that message from Scootaloo, a hello from one of the ponies who had shaped the world and watched it fall. From them, I learned of virtues, of sacrifice and of failure. Even though they were gone, they had become my family almost as much as my living friends. I was no longer alone.

I recalled moments of joy, times I had almost forgotten. Breakfast with Gawd at Junction R-7. My water fight with Homage in the pouring rain. My head filled with shadows. The horribly damaged Pinkie Bell with her balefire bomb she was saving for fireworks. The accidental shot (BLAM!) on Bucklyn Bridge.

I dreamt that I was drowning in blood, a crimson river from all those whom I had slain. The memory of Arbu transformed that terror into reality. Of all the things I had struggled against – raiders and slavers, zombie zebras and even a dragon – the greatest threat had always been from myself. The darkness and the rage that hid within me. Addiction and failure.

My soul was weary. I needed rest. Hadn't I been through enough? I had tried to do good, I had tried to help. I had pushed myself through torture and horror. Death awaited me, and I could hear the sweet, cajoling song of the grim reaper pony, offering me final respite.

I wanted to go to her. Let her wrap me in her cloak of blackness and unending sleep.

But even here, the little pony in my head fought with me, reminding me that there was still too much to do before I could allow myself peace. There were still ponies who needed me. Red Eye still threatened Tenpony Tower and my beloved Homage. There was still a Goddess out there bent on the extinction of ponykind through Unity.

As long as you're willing to face the fire...

Well, fuck. My little pony was right. As much as I yearned otherwise, I had to return. To regain consciousness...



I moaned, rolling onto my side. My body was covered in a sickly sweat. Unpleasant warmth rushed through me, and my head and stomach churned with nausea. I itched from dried mud.

I was laying on a filthy cot in a ramshackle wooden structure that stank of damp wood and rot. I tried to push myself up, my legs trembling weakly before giving out. The effort caused my gut to rebel, and I found the strength to roll over and vomit. Mercifully, there was an old mop bucket next to the bed, seeming to exist just for the purpose of being filled with my sickness. My throat burned, the inside of my mouth turning horrid. The stench of my throw-up made my eyes water and drove my stomach to churn and release even more.

I collapsed back, tears in my eyes. This had happened before. Illness brought on by physical overexertion, mental turmoil and the nastiness of the wasteland. We needed to go. I didn't have time to be bedridden again for days.

Canterlot had been physiologically brutal, the Pink Cloud and the broadcasters putting my brain and insides through a grinder. The loss of a rib was traumatic and terrifying. The scar there, like the one on my neck, would never fully heal. My PipBuck had fused to my coat and flesh. Was it any surprise my health was falling apart?

The memory orbs had been emotionally gut-wrenching. Part of me screamed to gallop back to the Ministry of Peace just to give Rarity a proper burial. But even before we had left the Ministry of Awesome, the fires and Cloud had made that impossible. The heart-rending blow of watching Applejack step out of that elevator... and realizing that Applesnack had intended to propose to her that very night, and she was anticipating it... oh Goddesses.

I fought to get up only to fail again. I must not be this weak. My sickness could be costing lives.

Goddesses, where was I? My eyes moved slowly over the filth. A few empty bottles, rubbish, a doorway without a door and the stained sheet that covered it. Not SteelHooves' shack.

"Now... let's get ya set up jus' like that." I heard Calamity's voice drift in from the next room, followed by a loud thump of metal against splintering wood. I felt the urge to call out to him. "The gal was fine enough t' let me rent this here set o' magically powered armor long 'nuff fer us t' reboot ya. Should have ya mobile in no time."

"Are you sure you know what you are doing, Calamity?" SteelHooves' voice followed his. "Maybe you should wait for Littlepip."

"An' leave y'all stuck like this?"

Xenith's voice chimed in, "Is it wrong that I want to stick him in poses?"

Even feeling as wretched as I did, I had to bury my muzzle into the mattress to stifle a snicker. I felt better knowing three of my friends were just on the other side of that filthy curtain.

"Try it and I will hurt you," SteelHooves warned, grumbling. "Calamity... hurry."

"So, which end do Ah plug this inta again?" Calamity asked, feigning confusion. The levity in his voice betrayed him.

"Just hurry. Before the zebra gets any other ideas."

"Thank you, SteelHooves," Xenith said quietly. "For helping my daughter's village. I know it must be hard for an old soldier to help zebra kin."

I mentally grasped at that through the swimming in my head. We were in Glyphmark. Through the doorway, I realized the next room had fallen still.

"Applejack was afraid of zebras," SteelHooves finally said. "It took her little sister to show her that they are people just like ponies. Good folk, most of them." I listened, surprised, as Applesnack opened up to Xenith. "She never forgot that. Not even in the blackest hours of the

war. Not even when her closest zebra friend betrayed her..." His voice seemed to freeze. SteelHooves' low, rumbling voice impossibly dropped even lower. "...or so we believed."

Again, the room beyond mine filled with a pregnant quiet.

"Applejack would have wanted her rangers to protect all good people. Not just ponies."

I loved SteelHooves a little more at that moment.

After a moment, Calamity spoke up, changing the topic. "How are they?"

"Neither has woken," Xenith's voice turned solemn. Neither? Velvet Remedy is still unconscious? I once again felt a twinge of panic. How long had it been since Canterlot? "Although Littlepip moans and mutters fevered things in her sleep."

"Littlepip is awake," SteelHooves announced. "She's probably eavesdropping."

I also hated SteelHooves just a little bit right then. Go ahead and put him in silly poses, Xenith!



I was shivering when Xenith came in. Somehow, my body had gone from overly hot to unpleasantly cold.

"The metal ghoul was right," Xenith intoned casually, "You are awake."

"W-what about Velvet?"

"She still slumbers," Xenith informed me. "I have given her what salves and remedies I know, but only she can find her way back to us as you have done."

"She will," I assured her. "Velvet Remedy's stronger than she looks."

"So are you," the zebra said as she placed a hoof on my forehead just below my horn.

I groaned. “Well, that’s easy when you look pathetic.” Xenith smirked ever-so-slightly.

“We need to go...” I started to say, trying a third time to stand. I forced my forehooves under me, lifting myself just enough to reach the mop bucket as another wave of nausea swept over me.

Xenith watched as I vomited. “You are sick,” she said grimly (and quite unnecessarily). “You need to rest. I will not allow us to go until you are well enough for the journey. Another day at least. Maybe two.”

“How long...?” I asked, spitting into the bucket of sick, trying to clear the acidic foulness from my tongue and teeth.

“Less than a day,” Xenith told me. “Calamity has been negotiating with your trader friend to get the things you need. And he has been putting armor on our flying vessel. If there is one thing Glyphmark is not poor in, it is scraps.”

I had wondered when he was going to get around to that. Nodding, I tried to reason with Xenith, “One night. But then we have to go. I’ll prop myself up with crutches if I have to.”

“No,” Xenith said flatly. “I decide when we go, and I say: not until you are at least able to walk on your own and hold food. Only then will I consider it. Assuming that the medical pony hasn’t woken up by then and had you chained down until you are fully healthy.”

I moaned, slipping back onto my bed. We couldn’t wait that long. Especially if Velvet Remedy did decide to chain me down until I got better. Something Velvet was more than capable of. Xenith might not realize that, but then the zebra wasn’t there when Velvet shot me.

“I can recover on the ride to Splendid Valley,” I told her, recalling having said something similar to Velvet Remedy after Arbu. But the mere thought of riding in the *Sky Bandit* made my head whimper and my stomach twist unpleasantly. “Okay... once I can hold food.” I wasn’t going to subject the others to a ride in the passenger wagon with me while I spent the whole trip with my head in a bucket.

My mind wandered a moment, trying to retrace the days. How long ago had Velvet Remedy shot me with my poisoned dart gun? How long since I had left Stable Two? My whole life was condensed into... what, eight weeks? Over a month and a half, not quite two months. The equally miserable little pony in my head pointed out that between now and SteelHooves' shack, I'd used up all my sick days, and soon the master PipBuck Technician would have to dock my allowance. I found myself giggling.

"Laughter," Xenith mused. "A sure sign of regaining health. Or slipping into insanity."

That just made me giggle harder for no good reason.

Xenith got up, taking the mop bucket's handle by her teeth. The stench from it had begun to permeate the room. I felt simultaneously thankful towards her and embarrassed at my disgusting frailty. I was sorry to be the reason she had to do something so unpleasant.

My might caught on something as she started towards the filthy curtain. "Xenith, how is your daughter? And... have you told her yet?"

The zebra stopped. She set down the bucket of vomit and turned to me. "Xephyr is doing well. She is the doctor for these townsfolk, and plies her craft well. She is very thankful for what we have done here."

Xenith sat down, staring off into the air. "She and the others of her village have released me from my responsibility, so I am free to go." She looked at me sternly, "As to your second question: no. And I wish that you would not tell her."

I nodded. "But... shouldn't she know? And, Xenith, you deserve to be reunited with her."

Xenith smiled sadly. "She is her own mare now, not the little girl I knew. I would rather she keep that strength than submit to being my child again." She looked away again. "And, to be truthful, I cannot be responsible for her. I do not know how. Plus, you need me. More than she does."

With that, Xenith stood back up, taking the mop bucket once again, and walked out, the curtain waving in her passing.

I laid there for some time, unsure how to feel. Part of me was happy that Xenith would be with us again. Another part of me, the part which deeply wished for a happy ending for my friends, was softly crying. I wasn't even sure why. My own mother, as much as I loved her from a distance, was not as important to me as my friends; and I would not wish to sacrifice my time with them or the good I was trying to do for a reunion with her. So why did my heart desire for Xenith and Xephyr to be together?

I shivered again. Part of me wanted to pull down the disgusting curtain and wrap myself in it. But a better part of me shuddered at the thought. And I knew that, if I did, I would just become too hot again. Instead, I curled up. A wave of weariness pass over me.

We needed Xenith. I needed her. We were stronger together. Better.

I would need my friends. Soon... as soon as I was well enough to function... we would be enacting my plan, whatever that was, to deal with the Goddess.

I moaned as another shiver quaked through my body. Suddenly, I felt nervous. Scared. I was about to risk our lives with a plan I didn't even know. I was trusting myself... which was beginning to feel awfully stupid. They all trusted me, but why should they? I hadn't told them what I was doing, just their specific parts. No one knew what we were doing! This was insane!

I've got a plan for dealing with the Goddess. I've told everypony their parts, and just their parts. I'm the only pony who knows all of it.

And then I took that knowledge from myself and locked it away in orbs sitting far away in Tenpony Tower. What was I thinking? Literally, what was I thinking?

I've told everypony their parts, and just their parts.

Every pony...

Oh!

...because the Goddess couldn't read zebra minds.

A smile broke across my muzzle. Ooooh, I *was* a clever pony!



"She did what?!" Calamity gasped, startling me from the near-sleep my aching body had fallen into. "Dammit, Li'lpip *promised* me..."

Oh no. What did I do? I immediately felt awful for whatever I had done to upset Calamity.

"Calm yourself," SteelHooves commanded softly. "Everything was fine." Was SteelHooves mobile yet? It didn't sound like he had moved. The idea that he might *still* be paralyzed within his armor was horrible. I thought of how he had been trapped helpless under the water and prayed to Celestia and Luna that he had been pulled out quickly.

"Fine? Ah was gone, you were immobile and Li'lpip goes pokin' her head into a whole heapin' mess o' memory orbs right in the middle o' the Canterlot Ruins?" Calamity roared. "Dammit! Ah know that mare ain't got no sense at all, sometimes, but Ah expected her t' treat a promise better! What did she expect Velvet t' do if y'all were attacked? Or if the Cloud got in?"

"Turn on the shield," SteelHooves said simply.

Calamity stopped mid-rant. "What now?"

"We were inside the Ministry of Awesome, within the shielded zone. If anything happened, Velvet Remedy could have protected us with the throw of a switch," SteelHooves informed him, adding the jab, "Or don't you trust Rainbow Dash's defenses?"

I could hear Calamity let out a defeated sigh. "Fine. Okay."

"She's not responsible for Velvet Remedy's condition," SteelHooves added. "In fact, she risked drowning to save her."

“Ah know that. An’ Ah’m not mad at her cuz o’... hell, Ah’m not mad at her. Ah’m just mad,” Calamity admitted. “Feels better than bein’ worried sick.”

I heard a crack of wood and dust shifted down from between the ceiling boards as the small building shook from Calamity’s kick.

I could understand the sentiment.

“Hell o’ a time t’ let everypony down, Calamity.” What?

“I seem to recall you saved them.” My thoughts echoed SteelHooves’s sentiment. Calamity had caught us. And then he saved Velvet when I couldn’t.

“Yeah, well they wouldn’t ‘ave needed so much savin’ if Ah had jus’ flown us outta there. Muh fault we ended up in the moat. Hell, Ah don’t even remember touchin’ down.”

“Calamity!” I called out weakly. “Stop. Just... Not your fault...” That was all I had the energy to shout, and it left me panting.

The orange-maned pegasus poked his head through the curtain, hovering a pony’s height off the floor. “Li’lpip? Ah’m sorry. Ah thought ya were asleep.”

Part of me regretted letting him see me like this. I was drenched in sweat. My coat was matted to my skin beneath. I hadn’t bathed since being dropped in the mud.

I shook my head, then weakly hoof-waved him in. The pegasus landed to pass through the doorway, stepping up to the old, stained mattress that served as my bed. “C’n Ah getcha anything? Water? A blanket?” He frowned. “Not sure we got any o’ those. An’ the water here ain’t ‘xactly the best neither.”

I wanted both. But I asked for neither. “Calamity, thank you,” I said, smiling as best I could. “Velvet and I both owe you our lives. You were... awesome.”

He shook his head. “Thanks all the same fer sayin’, but...”

"But nothing. It... it's been... hard and hurtful on all of us. Sometimes, I just want to stop..." I trailed off, ashamed. I felt like I wanted to stop a lot lately.

"Ah know whatcha mean. A lesser pony woulda called it quits a long time ago." Calamity laid down next to me. He pulled out the pink gem and set it between us.

"Thank ya fer this, Li'lpip. Ah got right messed up in the head after Bucklyn Cross. Ah hate what happened there, an it was sendin' muh mind inta dark places. Ya gave me somethin' t' remind me that we are the good guys. We don't always get it right. Hell, sometimes we mess it up real bad. But we keep tryin' and there are folk better off thanks t' us."

I nodded, staring into the gem.

"I hate this plan of yours," Calamity told me bluntly. "Once again, yer going inta someplace insanely dangerous alone. An' once again yer the only one who c'n do it. I hate that."

I'm... going in alone? The idea of going into Maripony (or worse, all of Splendid Valley!) alone terrified me. I no longer liked this plan either.

On the other hoof, it didn't surprise me. I knew myself too well. Any chance to spare my friends the danger, any way I could make it my burden alone, and I would take it. I had done it again.

"Y'all remember what that place did t' us last time?" Calamity reminded me. "An' we were together then."

"Calamity?" I asked, worried now. "What can you tell me about the plan?"

Calamity blinked. His eyes widened as he realized what I was asking. "What? Y'all don't know? Ah mean, Ah know that ya had yer memories removed, but ya really don't know *nothin'* 'bout the plan?" Now he was beginning to panic. "Didn'tcha even leave yerself any notes?"

Notes? "Where would I...?" I stopped. Dammit, of course! My PipBuck! How could I have not thought of that before?

Slowly, I lifted my right foreleg, my gaze sliding to the dead screen of my PipBuck.

“um... Calamity, you rebooted SteelHooves’s armor, right? Is he able to move again?” I felt supremely stupid and foalish.

Calamity winced. “Ah, actually, no.” My eyes widened. SteelHooves had been immobile this whole time? “Turns out, it ain’t as easy as it looks. Ah ain’t a certified PipBuck Technician an’ Toaster Repairpony after all.”

“Then...” I started to pull myself off the mattress, determined that SteelHooves not remain paralyzed a moment longer. My forelegs trembled and my stomach shot me a queasy warning. I looked around, but the mop bucket wasn’t back yet. I laid back down, putting a hoof over my muzzle and tried to force my insides still.

“...could you bring him in here, please?” My head was swimming again. Trying to remember just what I needed to do was like slogging through belly-deep sludge. I needed tools, the spell matrix master key and something to reboot him from. “And could you please fetch my utility barding and... you borrowed magically powered armor from somepony?”

“Ah’ll do muh best,” Calamity said, looking chagrined. “He’s... kinda heavy.”

I nodded, wondering how they got SteelHooves inside in the first place. Or out of the water. My eyes widened as I remembered something else. “There was a shot!”

Calamity started, jumping up and looking around, “Where? Ya sure? Ah didn’t hear nothin’.”

I shook my head, whimpering slightly at how sick the sudden movement made me feel. “No... before. At the lake. You shot... something.”

Calamity visibly relaxed. “Oh. That shot. Ah was catchin’ the griffin’s attention. ‘Parently, some folks tend t’ notice when a passenger wagon falls outta Canterlot.”



SteelHooves sat silently by my side. I was feverish and having trouble focusing, but I was finished. I started disconnecting my PipBuck from his armor, glancing once more at the set of badly damaged power armor laying in the corner.

"I'm sorry," I told him, wiping a sick coat of sweat from my face. "We should have had you moving faster." I felt so tired.

SteelHooves said nothing, but it wasn't a damning silence. His tail shifted. I pulled my tools away. "Done." I cast another look at the armor Calamity had rented for this and winced. Sometimes, things were just unfair.

It was Steel Ranger armor, torn up but with a still functional spell matrix that I had been able to use to restore my PipBuck (and then use my PipBuck to restore SteelHooves). There was still traces of pony blood on it. I had chosen to restore my PipBuck first not merely because it was easier, but because I felt SteelHooves would rather not be connected directly to the other armor.

The magically powered armor had been taken from the body of one of the Rangers we had killed in Stable Two. From the damage, it was a pony whom SteelHooves had put down himself.

SteelHooves stood up. He tested each leg, then stretched. "Thank you," he said solemnly. "Now rest."

I curled up, part of me hating that he saw this but unable to properly care. I really wanted nothing more than to sleep... and hopefully not dream.

I watched him as he turned towards the doorway. He would just walk out as if everything was concluded. But it wasn't.

"Applesnack..." I whispered but I knew he heard it by the way he stopped. I wasn't sure if this was what I should do, but... no more secrets. "I saw you."

"You see me often."

"In one of the orbs... in the Ministry," I told him. "It was the memory of a guard... he was assisting Zecora on a mission... to help get her closer to Caesar..."

SteelHooves said nothing, but the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

"You... were going to propose... to Applejack that night." I looked at him, my heart squeezing in my chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Closer to Caesar," SteelHooves repeated. "To do what?"

I closed my eyes. "I don't know. Spy on him, I think."

"Or assassinate him."

I shook, feeling a chill that was more from sickness than reaction to his words. "I... don't know... but I don't think so." I wasn't sure why -- maybe it was the way Zecora had worried about pony deaths, or how her inexperienced fighting skills caused her to likely kill my host by accident -- but I just didn't feel like Zecora was that kind of killer. I cringed as I realized I was. "She was a spy."

Simmer down, sallie. Zecora ain't no spy!

The world was filled with sharp-edged irony.

SteelHooves stood there, as unmoving as he had been all day. Finally, he said, "It wouldn't have mattered. Killing the Caesar wouldn't have stopped the war. The legatus legionis would have simply stepped in. And, if anything, he was worse."

I swallowed, my mouth tasting filthy. "SteelHooves... Applesnack, I'm not judging you. I'm saying..." What was I saying? I fought for words. "I'm saying I understand now. I know what you meant when you said I made it easier for you to live with yourself. And... I'm sorry."

He nickered.

"Applejack never knew the truth about Zecora either," I told him. "And she loved you. She tried to fight for your relationship because she loved

you. And, I think, because she understood.” Not approved. But understood.

SteelHooves walked out.



I was trapped. Buried alive. Encased in a coffin of metal. There was no air. I couldn't breathe.

Sounds... horrible, horrible sounds came at me out of the darkness. Warping, unearthly tones. Rending sounds. The sounds of saws.

I tried to back away, but there was no room. My backside hit a smooth surface, not metal but glass, and I felt a shock of cold. My hooves splashed into the sticky warmth of blood. I could smell the sick, coppery stench. My healing booth coffin was filling with it.

You cut a bloody swath through them. How many ponies are dead tonight because of you, Littlepip? Velvet Remedy's voice echoed accusingly, provoking a sickening déjà vu. *How many ponies have you slaughtered?*

The blood was the blood of Arbu.

It sure didn't take you long to become a mass murderer, did it, Littlepip?

The sound of the saw was getting closer. It intended to cut me apart with ragged teeth. To slice open my head and take my brain.

Strange symbols appeared, floating in front of me. Alien glyphs of ancient zebra design. But unlike the sounds and voices and darkness, their pulsing lines of crimson and black were soothing. They shifted in odd dimensions, offering to unlock themselves. To protect me.

I knew these and they were blasphemous. I turned away...

...I was facing the mirror. I stared back at myself, bleeding, dying. Littlepip the raider. My expression was grim, hateful. The stream of blood was pouring out of the mirror, the blood of Arbu coming from my body, mixing with my own.

The saw was getting closer. I could feel the wind from its gnarled, spinning teeth blasting my mane. It was going to cut out my heart. Rip me open and wrench out my spine. It would hurt. Hurt so badly. But I wouldn't be allowed to die.

Let us help you, the glyphs whispered. You have no power. You have no purpose. Let us give you purpose.

"I have a purpose!" I shouted at the raider-Littlepip in the mirror.

I'm not the Wasteland Savior, Homage, I heard myself saying. You are. You and them. I'm just the one who clears the way.

You could be the savoir, the glyphs whispered, floating in the air around the mirror. I realized I could almost understand them.

Let me show you secrets!

"I don't want your secrets!" I shouted at the glyphs, but I was lying. I'd seen the blackness that the Book held, the horror. But...

You've seen how much good we can do in the hooves of the right pony. You cannot deny.

"I..." I whimpered, faltering. I knew that was true. Even the blackest magic could be used for good. But... "I'm no Rarity. I'm weak."

I could make you stronger. Better.

"D...don't..."

My gaze locked on the raider in my soul. She trembled, dying from blood loss. She was grotesque, horrible.

"I'm not this!" I cried out. "I have a purpose!"

It... it's not us, is it? I heard my voice cry. We're not the right group of friends. We can't bring Equestria back.

No, Spike's voice laughed at me. You're not!

The saw was so close now. If I didn't take the glyphs for protection, it would start cutting me.

Let me show you so many secrets!

“NO!” I screamed, crying. I wanted those secrets. I tried to fight, but I really, really wanted them.

The saw was gone. The noises stopped. The healing booth was no longer a coffin and I was no longer alone.

“Enough of this,” Rarity said, stepping forward. She glared at the glyphs. “You leave her alone.”

When...? How?

The beautiful white unicorn gave me a sad frown. “I was not that strong either.” She stared back at the glyphs as the other Ministry Mares walked up from the darkness behind me. “The Black Book preys on you when you’re weak and alone. But you’re not alone anymore.”

“I’m... how?”

“Cuz ya brought us together, didn’tcha?” Applejack smiled. “It’s what you do.”

I think I know who you’re looking for, I remembered telling Spike.

“It’s happening differently this time, isn’t it?” Twilight Sparkle’s voice was curious.

“Well duh,” Rainbow Dash hovered over her. “Do you think it was the same when it was just Celestia? Same is boring.”

“Ah reckon it’s diff’rent every time.”

I was confused yet comforted. I didn’t know how, but they were with me. And with them, I had the strength to refuse and fight.

But you don’t want to fight, do you? Let me give you a taste of what I have to offer.

“Hey Pinkie, this is a great party, but I’ve got something that will make it even better,” Pinkie Pie said dourly, her expression cross. She was staring at the floating runes, but I didn’t think she was seeing quite what the rest of us were. “You’ve got to try these. Just take one. They’ll blow your mind.” Her hoof stomped.

Another voice echoed out of the darkness.

Have you given up your principles for the greater good yet? Red Eye asked. *I see you've already become a monster. Or did you think I wouldn't hear about Arbu?* The blood began to rise.

"Ah don't like this feller," Applejack hissed.

And look at that, Red Eye's voice mocked as I felt a burning in my right foreleg where my PipBuck had merged with my flesh. *You're becoming more like me every day!*

"I'm not like you," I asserted, lying again. "And I'm not a monster." I knew I was. I could see it in the mirror.

"CORRUPTED KINDESS!" Trixie's voice accused triumphantly, her image floating above the mirror.

Fluttershy stepped forward, "How would you know?"

"I'M THE GODDESS! I KNOW EVERYTHING!"

"Hush now," Fluttershy commanded, Staring. "Quiet now."

The image of Trixie faded, looking abashed.

Power, the Black Book cajoled. *Purpose. Together, we will unlock the world!*

"Don't listen to it," Rarity strengthened.

Applejack rested a hoof on my shoulder. "Ya already got a purpose. Yer the Bringer o' Light, ain'tcha?"

"I... I don't even know what that means." I shook my head. "I *don't* have a purpose! I'm lost. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Now listen here," Applejack said sternly. "What Ah'm tellin' ya is the honest truth. Ya *do* have a purpose."

"Yer the one that brought 'em together," she said as images of my friends floated at the edges of my vision. My living friends. Calamity. Velvet Remedy. SteelHooves. Xenith. Even Pyrelight. They were here with me too.

I felt tears.

"Ya find the good ones. Draw 'em out. Clear the path an' light the way," Applejack smiled gently. "There's a name fer that, y'know."

I wanted to believe her so badly that I was trembling.

"But..." I turned back at the mirror. To the shot up, bleeding, dying Littlepip in cobbled-together, gore-stained raider armor, barely standing as she faced down her next kill, Little Macintosh floating in front of her, pointing upward. "...but this is my soul. Isn't it?"

"Of course it is, silly," Pinkie Pie said, hugging me suddenly and pointing at the mirror. "You're just looking at it wrong."

"Look behind you."



I awoke with a gasp, sitting up suddenly. Then collapsed back onto the mattress. I felt awful, damp with sweat and caked with mud. Filthy. Almost too tired to move. My mane was clumped and stringy. But the nausea was gone and my fever had broken.

I was not alone in the room. "Xenith?"

The zebra who moved closer wasn't my companion. "Xephyr," I said, recognizing her. "Where is everypony? ...I mean everyone?"

Xephyr pulled a wet sponge from a tin pot filled with water. "Your other friend woke up an hour ago," she told me as she began to wipe my forehead. "They are all with her right now."

I wished I could be too.

"Xenith is my mother, isn't she?" Xephyr asked. I froze, unsure how to answer. Xenith had asked me not to, and I wanted to do right by her. But if Xephyr already suspected...

"I thought so," Xephyr said as she continued to sponge me down, removing some of the illness sweat from my coat. "She has tried to hide it, but how many zebra mares named Xenith does she think this wasteland holds?"

Smart girl. I shivered a little under the cool dampness of the sponge, but was immensely thankful for every stroke of it. I wanted a bath so much it hurt. I would have given my left forehoof for a day at the Tenpony spa.

"You will be going soon," Xephyr gleaned. "You will be taking her with you."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"I will be happy to see her go," the young zebra mare told me bluntly. "I am not ungrateful for all she has done, but she would not have done it if you had not led her."

I winced. "No, that's not true!"

"Yes, it is," Xephyr said, accepting no argument. "I love her... from a distance." I felt an odd chill as the zebra's words echoed my thoughts from the evening before. "But she is not her own mare, and she never will be. I will not be like her."

Xephyr continued to sponge-bathe me in silence.

"Your father...?" I began to ask.

"My father," the young zebra said bitterly, "Was Qarl Death-Hoof, leader of our parent's tribe until that slaver griffin killed him." Stern. I was sure of it.

"I was just a little foal, but I remember how he treated mother. And how he ran the tribe. I am not sorry he is dead."



I knew I shouldn't be moving. My body wanted nothing but more rest. But I had to see Velvet Remedy. And I didn't want to go back to sleep. There were things waiting for me in my dreams, and not all of them meant me well.

The ramshackle shack (it would be generous to call it a building) was Glyphmark's attempt at a clinic, and possibly the largest old house in town. The floors were broken, the roof was sagging, but it housed all of

us. Velvet Remedy was being kept in what had once been a bathroom. The old tub, waterstained in brown with traces of pink, was the only intact object in the room full of debris and shattered porcelain

“Ah thought Ah’d lost ya,” Calamity was saying as I approached. I stopped, backing out of sight, not wanting to interrupt. My legs cried out that this was a good time to lay down, or at least lean against something. They were weary and tired of bearing my weight, and if I refused to sleep, the least I could do was get off them.

“Now you know how I feel every time you go off and do something reckless,” Velvet replied without malice.

“Ah... I don’t think Ah could take this anymore without ya,” Calamity told her. “Ah’m strugglin’ here, Velvet. It feels like all muh friends are fallin’ apart, and Ah’m tryin’ t’ be the strong one. But Ah ain’t doin’ so good.”

I remembered what I had heard Calamity mutter to himself as we entered Stable Two: *Ah gotta be strong fer them. Not go crazy. Ah can’t jus’ charge in an’ kill every armored bitch Ah see. Ah need t’ be strong. Need t’ watch fer them. Need t’ protect ‘em. Ah c’n do this.*

“What’s wrong, love?” Velvet asked gently. “What’s eating you?”

“Bucklyn Cross.” I winced. “Ah’ve tried t’ make peace with it, but...”

“Come closer,” Velvet said in response. “Let me hold you.”

I could hear Calamity’s throat hitch. “We were bullies, Velve. Nothin’ better than bullies. We went in demandin’ somethin’ that we knew they wouldn’t want to give, an’ it all ended in blood. Those young knights didn’t deserve t’ die.” My friend was crying now. I felt a lump in my throat. My heart twisted in knots. “Ah shoulda stopped us. Ah knew better. An’ that makes it muh fault.”

“Hush now, love,” Velvet cooed. She knew there wasn’t anything she could say, so she wisely said nothing. I imagined she was holding him as he cried into her mane.

“An’ Ah’m terrified that Ah’m losin’ ya too,” Calamity said brokenly.

“What? No, love,” Velvet soothed. “You’re not losing me.”

“That crap ya pulled in the Ministry o’ Peace says different,” Calamity asserted. There was strength in his voice. I could tell he had pulled back from her. “No... no, don’t say anythin’. Ah understand why ya did it now, Ah guess. But yer too wrapped up in Fluttershy. Ain’t right nor healthy, puttin’ all yer faith in a pony ya hardly know.”

“I know Fluttershy,” Velvet insisted softly.

“Yeah, but there are things ya don’t know,” Calamity replied and all sorts of alarm bells started going off in my head.

“Oh?” Velvet asked, and I swore the question sounded like poison. “Like what?”

Calamity faltered. “Well... Ah don’t rightly know. But Li’lpip’s seen things in those orbs, and...” I could hear from the timbre of his voice that he knew the hole he was digging. So he changed tack. “Jus’ remember what DJ Pon3 always says is the one big truth o’ the wasteland? We all done things that we regret. An’, well, sounds t’ me like Fluttershy had some regrets too.”

“And Littlepip is keeping what she knows secret, isn’t she? To protect me, no doubt.” Velvet hissed out a sigh. I guessed that Calamity had nodded. “What a surprise. Littlepip keeping secrets from her friends. I swear, if there was an Element of Frustration...”

“Velvet, please,” Calamity said softly. “Don’t be mad. She means well, really.”

“And do you think she’s right? Do you think I need to be protected from whatever this is?”

“I dunno,” Calamity struggled. “After the Ministry o’ Peace? Maybe.” He found more solid ground as he told her, “Ah just know ya shouldn’t get so wrapped up in tryin’ t’ be yer idol.” I had a sudden flash of Pinkie Bell, and I bet Velvet Remedy did too. “Yer a wonderful, lovin’, carin’ pony all on yer own. Jus’ be yerself.”



I slipped out the front door, not wanting to interrupt the quiet moment Calamity and Velvet Remedy were sharing. I blinked in the odd daylight, once again recalling how strange the air seemed without the healing light of the sun.

Ditzy Doo waved at me.

I blinked again, taking in the sight of Ditzy Doo's delivery wagon. (*Absolutely Everything!* "Yes, I do deliveries!") She'd picked up a new companion, I noticed. A griffin bodyguard in Talon armor.

Now I knew who Calamity had rented the Steel Ranger armor from. And which griffin he'd been signaling. Xenith had given Glyphmark a buck to the town's economy, and Ditzy Doo had taken only days to start trade with them. That was... amazingly fast for word to have gotten out. I suspected a little of Homage's hoofwork.

A little lavender filly with a blonde mane trotted up to me. She was smiling, a piece of parchment in her mouth. "Here, Miss Littlepip," Silver Bell said, her voice almost singing. "I painted a picture for you. See, it's you and Homage."

I floated the parchment up and gazed at the painting. It was a crude child's painting... and it was the most beautiful picture I had ever seen.

"Aw... you're crying? Don't you like it? I tried really hard!"

"I... I love it!" I knelt down and hugged the filly gently. I wondered what I had done to deserve such an innocent and wonderful gift? With deep shame, I remembered that I had once intended to steal from this little filly. "Thank you, Silver Bell!"

Ditzy Doo had trotted up beside us. As I let Silver Bell go, I noticed that Ditzy had a couple of little chalkboards dangling around her neck. She set one of them down, pulling out a piece of chalk, and scribbled "Hello!"

"Hello, Ditzy Doo," I replied, floating the picture up next to me. I would have to find something waterproof to keep it in until we returned to Junction R-7, where I intended to put it up in a cherished

place right next to my bed. Silver Bell had somehow really captured Homage and made her look absolutely adorable.

Ditzzy Doo erased the board with a hoof, then wrote, "Can a horn grow back?" She looked at me with an urgent smile, right eye rolling upwards disturbingly.

I blinked. "I... I don't know." I thought about it some more. "A horn is a bone, right?"

Minutes later, Velvet Remedy was kneeling next to Silver Bell, the older mare's horn glowing as Ditzzy Doo, Calamity and I watched.

"Now I've gotten a lot better at this spell," Velvet cautioned, snarkily adding, "Thanks to an abundance of practice. But all I can do is help the physical horn grow back. I do not know if her magic will heal, or how long it might take."

"Thank you, Miss Velvet Remedy," Silver Bell chimed softly, understanding. Her eyes drifted to Pyrelight, widening along with her smile.

The majestic balefire phoenix began to sing to Silver Bell. Her song was rich, sadly nostalgic and overwhelmingly beautiful.

Velvet Remedy smiled gently and stretched out her magic. The scar on Silver Bell's head where she had cut off her own horn began to glow.



"What do you think will happen to Silver Bell?" I asked Velvet as the Sky Bandit pushed its way through the smoke-yellowed sky.

"I truly don't know," Velvet replied, giving a polite cough. "I hope, with her horn reformed, that her magic will swiftly return. But the wasteland has never seemed that forgiving." She coughed again, and I found myself joining her.

We were skirting the edge of the forest, heading towards Splendid Valley by way of Ponyville. The fires of Everfree Forest were choking the air in every direction around it. The forest had been burning for

over a week now; it was consumed in flames and a thick fog of smoke, but from what I could see, it seemed absurdly intact.

“Damn, ya’d think the whole place would be ash by now,” Calamity called out, flying low to keep us out of the thicker smoke. “Hey, Pyrelight, y’ sure this ain’t a phoenix forest?”

Pyrelight let out a derisive hoot.

Our attention was snatched by the sound of a gunshot. It was rapidly followed by several more.

Calamity diverted towards the sound, and soon we came upon a gunfight. Two groups were battling between the cover of rocks and what looked like the charred corpse of a river serpent.

“Looks like raiders!” Calamity called back.

Raiders? Seriously? I’d already wiped out the raiders in Ponyville. What did they do, respawn?

“Who are they attacking?” I asked, bringing up my E.F.S. and trying to get a fix on both groups though the haze.

“Other raiders... I think.” Calamity banked and I got a better look. Sure enough, three younger raiders seemed to be holding out against four older ones. Neither side had lost a pony yet, but one of the two bucks in the younger group had taken a shot to the leg and was bleeding badly. I was mildly surprised that Calamity hadn’t started shooting yet.

“Shouldn’t we help?” Velvet Remedy asked, moving to the window next to me.

“Help who?” Calamity questioned. “Ah ain’t sure who the good guys are here, if anypony. An’ Ah’m... feeling a bit gunshy after... recent events. Don’t wanna start shootin’ at the wrong folk.”

Velvet Remedy gave an exaggerated sigh. “There are more ways than that to help.” She waved her horn as it began to glow. Below us, Velvet Remedy’s shield began to snake between the two groups of fighters.

“Excuse me,” Velvet’s magically amplified voice rang out. **“Could you please lower your weapons for a moment and tell me why are you fighting?”**

“What the hell?” One of the older raiders responded by tipping up the muzzle of his rifle and taking a shot at Velvet Remedy. The bullet struck the now-armored wall of our passenger wagon.

“Wrong,” Velvet informed him. Magic burst from her horn, striking him with her anesthetic spell. The raider buck toppled, paralyzed. **“Let’s try that again.”**

I had floated out my zebra rifle (thinking I really needed a weapon that used more common ammunition and did not set ponies horrifically on fire), and was holding myself in reserve. Calamity and I exchanged glances as we let Velvet Remedy’s tactic play out.

“Do ya have a death wish or somethin’?” one of the other older raiders shouted out. “Are ya out of yer fuckin’ mind?”

More shots rang out. Both sides were still trying to shoot at each other through Velvet’s shield. Neither was having any luck.

“They’re raiders!” one of the younger bucks shouted up at us. “They wiped out The Republic!”

“They wiped out the what now?” I asked, confused.

“Little town up north o’ here,” Calamity informed us. “Ah protected a few caravans travelin’ ‘tween it an’ New Appleloosa. Bizarre, cult-like group o’ weirdoes, but not bad ponies. Certainly didn’t deserve t’ be slaughtered.”

“And who are you?” Velvet asked.

“Whoa!” Calamity shouted as one of the larger group hurled a home-made explosive at the *Sky Bandit*. I caught it in my telekinesis, pulling Velvet out of the window as the bomb exploded in the air, sending shards of glass and nails in every direction. SteelHooves stepped between Xenith and the window, his armor deflecting the shrapnel that found its way inside. I heard Calamity bite back a cry of pain as a nail

tore through one of his wings. His barding and the *Sky Bandit* protected him from the rest.

"We're heroes!" the younger mare in her group of three yelled up at us as the two bucks next to her reloaded.

"You look like raiders," Velvet Remedy pointed out cautiously.

"What?" one of the younger bucks cried out in surprise. "Oh, the barding?" I blinked, feeling my life had somehow come full circle.

"Okay," I called out, moving back into the window and aiming the zebra rifle. One of the raiders shot at us again, missing the entire *Sky Bandit*.

"Ya sure, Li'l pip? We don't know..."

"We know one side is shooting at us," SteelHooves pointed out impatiently, opening the door of the passenger wagon as the missile launcher opened on his battle saddle.

"Fuck!" somepony shouted from below. "It's one of those outcast rangers!"

Whoooooooooosh!

SteelHooves' missiles shot out. One hit Velvet Remedy's shield which collapsed in the fiery blast. The other plowed through the fire and struck the ground at the hooves of the older raiders in an explosion of bloody meat. Two managed to dive to safety, but their fellow raiders were bloody, smoldering giblets.

The two survivors turned their attention fully towards us. One of them pulled out another home-made grenade. I prepared to grab it with my magic...

Let me give you a taste of what I have to offer.

...I suddenly understood. The spell was so simple. It was barely more than telekinesis. The easiest thing, really. My horn began to glow.

The splattered blood from the torn raider chunks began to flow together, pooling, lifting.

I realized this was the first spell, the little teaser offered to anypony who might be...

...be what? Fitting? Worthy? Weak enough?

Now just form the blade.

(Be Unwavering!)

"No!" I shouted, my scream simultaneous with the raider's throw. The blood splashed back to the ground, seeping into the soil. Velvet Remedy threw another shield up, this time between us and the raiders, deflecting the bomb. It exploded, sending its shrapnel into the shield.

No! I was shaking; cold sweat had broken over me. But I had refused. I would rather be a one-trick-pony than have a spell like that.



"I've never seen a zebra before." The olive buck walked around Xenith as she watched him apprehensively. "I mean, not a real one. You don't look like the ones in the pictures." He tilted his head, brushing a wisp of eggplant-colored mane from his face. "Can your eyes really glow?"

SteelHooves had made short work of the battle and we had landed. Velvet Remedy was tending to the wounded buck, and Calamity was talking to the group's mare who had recognized the pegasus from tales of his caravan protecting. Her eagerness to chat with him about hunting raiders had convinced him we had aided the correct side. We had yet to trade names.

"Haven't you heard about the Wasteland Heroine?" the younger mare in scavenged raider armor said excitedly. "She and her friends swoop in and save the day, shooting the bad guys and monsters dead. *Pow, pow, pow!*" The amber mare's magenta eyes were wide and she was nearly squealing. "We're going to be just. Like. *Her!*"

My ears fell back. I cringed a little inside, happy I was not wearing my Stable barding anymore. Calamity was looking at me, a hoof to his muzzle, snickering. Dammit, why was he snickering?

"Are you sure she'd want you putting yourself at risk hunting raiders?" Velvet Remedy asked carefully as she wrapped the buck's hindleg in healing bandages. "I'm sure the *Wasteland Heroine* wouldn't want you getting hurt."

The way she massaged the name made me flush with embarrassment. The radio was bad enough. I took a step back behind SteelHooves, my ears burning.

"Oh no," her patient insisted, a khaki-coated pony with a vanilla-colored mane said. "But she wants us to help make Equestria better. DJ Pon3 says we all need to learn from her example."

"She can't be everywhere at once," the olive-coated second buck explained. "It's up to the rest of us to be brave and step up, helping fight the good fight."

This was too much. I never deserved my reputation, but after Arbu... this was unbearable. Why should any pony idolize me? I wanted to bury myself in a hole somewhere until this was over.

"You are a lifesaver," the khaki-coated buck told Velvet Remedy as she finished binding his wound. "If anything, the Equestrian Wasteland needs more ponies like *you*."

Velvet blinked in surprise. "Why... thank you!" she breathed.

"Hey," the buck exclaimed, his eyes widening as he stared at Velvet Remedy. "You sound kinda like that gal on the radio! The one who sings the new songs."

Pyrelight landed on Velvet's tail and sang out a musical note. Velvet Remedy blushed. "You have a good ear." At least she was used to having fans.

"Wow," olive buck said, staring at SteelHooves. "Are you really one of those renegade Steel Ranger heroes?"

SteelHooves whinnied. "I am."

"That is *so* cool!"

“An’ so yer huntin’ raiders?” Calamity asked, sounding impressed.

“Yep! We’re on a rescue mission!” the enthusiastic amber mare said. A scowl broke over her face. “These raiders murdered every adult in The Republic and took the fillies and colts back to their fort. I guess they wanted to keep them for themselves. We’re going in after them.”

“Probably wanted playthings,” the khaki buck snorted, his voice filled with loathing.

Calamity bristled. Velvet Remedy gasped, “They did *what*?”

“Where is this fort?” I asked, stepping forward, my personal embarrassment forgotten.

The olive-coated buck pointed a hoof. “There’s an old hut on the far side of Ponyville, right up next to the Everfree Forest.” Dammit! I thought I had cleared Ponyville of raiders. This place must have been far enough out that I missed it. “They’ve turned it into the center of a small compound.”

“How many?” SteelHooves asked.

“About twelve. Minus these four, so eight. But they have guns and dogs.”

Xenith looked at me. “No more distractions?” she asked calmly. I bit my lower lip.

SteelHooves neighed, “The rest of you can go ahead if you wish, but Applejack would not want her rangers to ignore a cry for help.” The three younger ponies were staring at us.

I nodded. “The Goddess will just have to wait another hour or two.” We had a chance to help, and I wasn’t going to turn my back. No distractions be damned.



Velvet Remedy was trembling. “That’s...”

I nodded. I wasn't surprised now that I had missed this raider group. The cottage that they had built their compound around really was a bit removed from the rest of town. It was surrounded by a large fence of rust and razor-wire, and sharpened poles impaling the heads of rabbits, squirrels and other small animals. Sickly, poisoned trees twisted up from the barren ground, providing support for snipers nests. Dead birds hung from their branches, strung together like windchimes. A small river slogged through the property coming out of the Everfree Forest, the water grey with ash. Inside the fence were kennels, some of which were used for the angry, malnourished guard dogs that roamed about inside. As for the other kennels... through my binoculars, I could see the mangled body of a pony in one of them.

"...Fluttershy's cottage," SteelHooves confirmed.

The fence on the far side of the cottage lay in broken ruin, several trees on that side had been uprooted and a few kennels had been crushed flat. It looked like something huge had lumbered out of the Everfree Forest, barely noticing what it stepped on. A couple raider ponies were standing over the wreckage, poking at it, while a third was keeping the dogs from escaping with a shield spell much like Velvet's.

I passed the binoculars to Calamity. "Could you give us a fly-over? Make sure there's nothing we are missing?" The pegasus took off his hat, threw the binoculars' strap around his neck and kicked his hat back onto his head.

"Gotcha, Li'l pip. One aerial recon, comin' up."

The amber mare stared as Calamity stretched out his wings and flew. "Pegasuses are cool."

"Pegasi," Velvet Remedy corrected automatically.

"Yeah. Those too."

"We should split up," SteelHooves recommended. "Hit the main hut and the yard simultaneously. Keep them divided."

I agreed. "You should go with these ponies and take the ones in the yard. Xenith can free any captives and get them to safety while you four take out the..."

"Three," Velvet interrupted. "You're not sending this buck into battle with a wounded leg," she scolded. "Especially when he might have to evade dogs."

I frowned and nodded. "You're right. I wasn't thinking." The fact that *I* regularly charged into combat wounded didn't mean it was smart. Especially since this little group of wanna-be heroes didn't have a Velvet Remedy of their own.

I looked to SteelHooves, "It looks like most of the foals must be inside the cottage. Calamity and I will sneak in and take them out." I looked to Velvet. "I would like you right behind us with your shield spell ready. I don't want any of the kids caught in crossfire." She nodded primly.

"Wait," the khaki buck said. "You're taking her in with you? Are you insane?"

Velvet Remedy gave him a questioning scowl. "I'm not helpless."

"You're a healer! You should be protected. Kept out of combat." I understood his logic. The loss of Velvet Remedy was the loss of not just one pony, but countless.

Velvet huffed. "Why not put me in a pretty little cage then?"

Calamity landed before an argument could break out. "Three raiders in the yard, includin' a unicorn with defensive spells. Two snipers in the nests. Rest are inside." He frowned, "Ah spotted lots o' mutilated carcasses, but only two livin' colts in the cages. They're letting the dogs nip at 'em. Others must be inside as well."

I looked at Velvet with sudden concern as I remembered the horrors I had encountered in the Ponyville Library and Carousel Boutique. "Velvet? Are you sure you don't want to stay behind on this one? From what I've seen, these raiders take pleasure in desecrating the former homes of Fluttershy's closest friends..."

Velvet Remedy walked forward. "I'm not staying behind. Let's go."



Calamity flew me in through an open window on the second floor of Fluttershy's cottage. As soon as I had my footing, I levitated Velvet Remedy in after us, covering my muzzle, my eyes watering from the stench. The inside of the cottage was beyond foul.

The bedroom had been willfully destroyed. The bed, still displaying a bit of its butterfly motif in the carving, had been set on fire with a broken lantern and the burnt remains used as a toilet. Repeatedly. Pictures were knocked from shelves and smashed. Books were defiled. A fireplace was filled with a pile of skulls, some with rotting meat still on the bones. The rotting carcasses of small animals hung from the rafters. Some sort of wicked, bluish ivy had crawled up one wall and entwined with the rafters before dying. I suspected the raiders had poisoned the ground, killing all plant life as well as any animals unfortunate enough to try to find food or water here.

Velvet Remedy rushed to the window and threw up. I felt disgusted, not only at what I was seeing and smelling, but because I wasn't at the window doing the same.

Velvet Remedy moved back from the window as we heard the voices from downstairs.

"You want a knife? Little Bucky didn't need a knife," a cruel mare's voice laughed.

"Oh give the kid a knife," a buck growled. "Makes it more interesting." I slowly crept towards the stairwell, Calamity in front of me.

"Now remember, kids..." a third voice chuckled as I reached the railing and looked down.

The room below was filled with old, rusty cages. Most were empty, but there were nearly half a dozen foals locked up inside some of them. They were all staring down at the center of the room, eyes wide with terror. Several were crying.

The center of the floor had been torn up. Two fillies and a colt were in the hole, a tangled mesh of rusty barbed wire ringing it. One of the fillies was crumpled in the dirt, bleeding from multiple wounds, the flesh torn from her scalp. The colt looked battered and was breathing heavily, keeping weight off of one foreleg. Both he and the standing filly were shaking, tears running down their young faces.

The raiders were gathered around their crude, home-made version of The Pit -- smoking, drinking and lounging on furniture that integrated the bones of ponies.

“...the one that survives gets the bodies of their parents back.”

BLAM!!

“How dare you!” Velvet Remedy screamed, swiveling her combat shotgun towards the second raider as the first fell. **“The wasteland isn’t hard enough? Sick enough? Without you monsters making it worse?”**

BLAM!! The second shot tore the left hindleg and flank off the second raider. He collapsed screaming in a pool of blood.

“And in *Fluttershy’s* house?!” Velvet Remedy tossed her shield up over the children as she marched down the stairs, her expression full of unbridled fury. I watched, frozen.

“I’ll have your head on a fuckin’ plate!” the raider mare screamed as she dove for a riot shotgun.

BLAM!! Our shotgun surgeon splattered open the chest of the wounded raider. **“How dare you be this foul!?”**

Outside we could hear explosions interspersed with the irregular gunshot. SteelHooves was engaging the enemy.

The raider mare swung around, the riot shotgun in her muzzle, and found herself facing down Velvet Remedy’s barrel. The raider seemed to freeze, staring at the black hole of her death.

Our unicorn was trembling with rage. **“I’ve never killed a pony before,”** she said, her voice soft but still amplified by her spell.

This is Velvet's Arbu, I thought suddenly. At least she had the benefit that nopony anywhere would question the vileness of the ponies she was eradicating. At least she was saving children, not scarring them.

BLAM!!

Velvet lowered the shotgun, turning away from the third raider's raggedly decapitated body. **"Far as I'm concerned, I still haven't."**



"I didn't want to!" the little colt, Bucky, was bawling. "I-I didn't mean it. They m-made me do it! I-I didn't want t-t-to hurt h-her!"

The little filly with the head injury was dead. She had expired before we could get to her. Velvet Remedy hugged the colt, soothing him as best she could despite looking shell-shocked herself.

We had saved nine foals in all. There had been three outside, one with a black coat who had curled up so far inside his cage that even Calamity hadn't spotted him. To our surprise, he was a pegasus, great-grandson of a Dashite named Radar. Calamity had heard of the rogue pegasus. "Last one t' give the Enclave the kiss-off," he told me. "B'fore my time."

I was putting the burden of getting the foals to safety on the three young heroes. The yard of the cottage had a wagon filled with cages -- undoubtedly how the raiders had brought the foals here. It would serve as lightly armored transportation. I had seen that the wounded buck now had the riot shotgun. Once Calamity had worked his repair wizardry on it, the riot shotgun had become a truly respectable weapon. Even better than Velvet's own. They should be able to make it to New Appleloosa as long as they went straight there.

New Appleloosa wasn't my favorite place to send refugees. But it was the only place close. Junction R-7 was too far, and the only place closer had apparently been The Republic. They couldn't go back there.

"I wish we could come with you," I told the amber mare, realizing I had never gotten her name. "But we really have to be going."

She nodded. "Thank you. The Wasteland Heroine would be proud of you!"

I looked obliquely, reddening. "I... um... yeah. I hope so." I kicked my hoof in the dirt.

"Heh. Anypony ever tell you you're cute like that?" she asked, then gave me a little kiss on the cheek before scampering off to her friends. They were trying to coax the little colts and fillies onto the wagon. I blinked, my thoughts blown apart.

Within half an hour, the wagon was pulling away, hauled by the two unwounded young heroes. SteelHooves had ensured the raiders outside never got to harm them, and they were headed to New Appleloosa with a story of the "heroism and awesome might" of the Applejack's Rangers.

I could almost feel a warmth radiating off of SteelHooves. He had done Applejack proud, and he knew it. I hoped he was finally beginning to really heal.

I turned and looked at Velvet. She had managed to hold it together until the wagon was moving. But as I watched, she began to tremble, then collapsed in sobs. Calamity was there to catch her.

"Why does it all have to be so horrible?" Velvet sobbed. "How can these... horrible creatures be ponies?" I stared at the ground, having wondered the same thing. "We fight and hurt and bleed to try to make Equestria better," Velvet said, burying her face into Calamity's neck. "But you can't stop something until you take away its reason for being that way..." I thought of the Pink Cloud. "...and... but... there's no reason for the raiders! No reason for them to be s-so vile! N-n-no reason at all."



The sun was setting as Calamity landed the *Sky Bandit* at the edge of Splendid Valley. All about us were dead ponies and the strewn

wreckage of a military camp. One of Red Eye's banners, slightly scorched, flapped in the wind.

"Well, we're fucked," Calamity stated as he detached himself from the *Sky Bandit's* harness. (After the other morning, he had jury-rigged a quick-release mechanism.) He had spent the last few hours skirting the boundary of the valley, looking for this camp. This was one of those parts of the plan I had told him before extracting my memories.

The notes I had left myself on my PipBuck were very vague, clearly written to be reassuring but not informative, but they did include a mention that we were supposed to stop here just before flying into the valley itself. I wasn't sure exactly why, but I suspected it had to do with whatever I had gone into Red Eye's encampment around Tenpony Tower for. Something important enough that I took another Party-Time Mint-al, so I was really hoping it was damn vital... or maybe not, seeing as whomever we were supposed to meet here had been dead for days.

Large black birds were picking at the carcasses. I felt queasy as one of them pulled the eyeball from the armored corpse of a brown earth stallion.

"These wounds are from alicorn spells," SteelHooves noted, moving amongst the bodies. "The Goddess' children did this."

A total massacre. And not a single alicorn dead. Damn.

"Ah'm guessin' this means the Goddess and Red Eye ain't even pretendin' t' be on the same side anymore."

"Not necessarily," SteelHooves offered. "This could be a pre-emptive strike. Or maybe she just didn't like part of his army sitting this close." The more I saw, the more this struck me as part of the forces that withdrew from Tenpony Tower. "Either way, I doubt Red Eye has the benefit of instant communication. There's a good chance he doesn't know this happened. And when he finds out, the Goddess could pass this off as an unfortunate attack by something out of Everfree."

"Is that it, then?" Calamity asked me. "Plan over?"

I shook my head. “I... I don’t know.” I was the wrong person to ask. I looked around for Xenith. She had disappeared again.

Velvet was curled up in the *Sky Bandit*. Pyrelight was stroking her with a wing.

“Look, if we’re still a go,” Calamity told me, “I want to leave Velvet back here with SteelHooves. She’s not in any shape to be doing anything else right now.” I agreed. Assuming, of course, that the plan allowed them to remain behind. Dammit, where had the zebra vanished off to this time?

I rotated and jumped back as I found myself muzzle-to-muzzle with the striped face of our zebra.

“What we need is still here,” she said cryptically, her exotic voice low and urgent. “We best move swiftly. I have seen the Goddess’ children just beyond the ridge. They are engaged with a hydra, but the battle will not last long.” A hydra?! I suddenly guessed what had stomped its way past the slaver encampment in Fluttershy’s cottage. “Do what you must do, Littlepip.”

I nodded, both relieved that things were still on track and stunned by the thought of the hydra. Part of me really wanted to see that battle. But I knew I wouldn’t. I checked the notes on my PipBuck just to make sure, but I was right.

Now it was time for me to put on the blindfold.



I peeked.

I couldn’t help myself. As Calamity soared across Splendid Valley, hauling the *Sky Bandit* behind him, I heard the roars of the hydra and I just had to look. One peek couldn’t hurt, right?

The first thing I saw was that I was alone in the *Sky Bandit*. That shocked me. I felt certain that at least Xenith would be with me as well.

I scrambled to the window, looking out. But there was nothing to see. Splendid Valley stretched on for miles. I could see Maripony on the horizon, and the crater filled with hundreds of hellhound holes. Thunder cracked and the hydra roared again, telling me that I was looking out the wrong side of the passenger wagon.

“Whatcha movin’ ‘round so much fer?” Calamity asked as I shifted to the opposite window. I felt a pang of guilt, but it was swiftly washed away by the spectacle of the battle.

One alicorn lay crushed and bloody on the ground. A second was in the mouth of the hydra’s head farthest to its left. The monster was absolutely huge, and the head was almost able to swallow the alicorn whole. Only her wings protruded from its closed maw, fluttering limply as it chewed the life out of her. Three more alicorns swooped around the hydra, dodging the remaining heads as they snapped at their prey. One of the hydra heads sucked in a deep breath and blasted out some sort of gas, enveloping one of the Goddess’ magically shielded children. The purple alicorn’s shield seemed to protect her. She tilted up a wing, spinning in place as a second head’s maw opened wide, and folded in her wings.

There was a flash of light where the alicorn used to be. The head of the gaping hydra exploded with a wet sound, the crumpled, and blood-soaked form of the purple alicorn falling to the ground.

I gaped. The alicorn had sacrificed itself and teleported inside the monster’s skull! Quickly, I blindfolded myself again, thankful that my head was too small for such a grotesque tactic.

{{WELCOME BACK, MY GUESTS!}} the chorus of voices drowned out my thoughts. **{{MY CHILDREN WILL GUIDE YOU, THAT YOU MAY BASK IN THE PRESENCE OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS!}}**

My head began to throb.

I felt the *Sky Bandit* touch down. I waited. According to my notes, Calamity would tell me when I could take the blindfold off. I heard

him releasing himself from the harness. I listened as his hoofsteps drew near. He stopped just outside the door. And we waited.

{{WHY DO YOU LOITER?}}

Don't you know? I thought at her.

"Okay, Li'lpip." Calamity said. I lifted the blindfold. There were two dark-green alicorns standing on the path ahead, and I could see dozens gathered around the Maripony ruins. Just standing there. Staring at us. Mindlessly.

No, one-mindedly. I shuddered.

"Ah'm not gonna be here when y'all are finished," Calamity told me, his extreme dislike of this plan clear with every word. My eyes opened wide. I knew I was going in alone, but I hadn't realized my ride was leaving without me. What the hell? How was I supposed to...

My pegasus friend pointed towards a section of the rubble. "There's yer ride out." I followed his hoof and spotted a bit of pink hidden in the wreckage. The *Griffinchaser II*. I had wondered what had become of that after we left Old Olneigh.

{{THE GODDESS GROWS IMPATIENT!}}

Yeah, yeah. I'm on my way, I thought. *I've got what you've asked for. Just hold your alicorns.*

There was only one set of instructions left in my notes:

Keep your Eyes-Forward Sparkle up, stall and wait for the signal.



This time, the Goddess' alicorns had not led me to the observation room, but right into the heart of the Goddess herself. I levitated myself above the dusty lake of I.M.P. and stared up between the vats at the floating face of the Goddess.

Lights on my E.F.S. compass indicated the two green alicorns flanking me, and then a vague, untargetable haze that seemed to fill the rest of

the room. The haze was brightest when I swiveled my head towards the vat that Trixie had fallen into so many decades ago.

I found myself dreading this. Even as I spoke with her, telling the Goddess what I had found, I knew that I was just delaying the inevitable. The Black Book was in my saddle bags, cold against my flank. And I had brought it here. On purpose. I was about to let it fall into the hooves of the absolute worst “pony” who could ever gain it. On purpose.

There was no amount of heroic acts or lives saved that would make up for this evil.

{{WEATHER CONTROL? THAT IS ALL? THE GODDESS EXPECTED... MORE FROM RED EYE. WHAT MANNER OF THREAT IS THAT?}}

“You’re the one that assumed what he was after in the Ministry of Awesome was a threat to you,” I reminded the Trixie-thing, speaking aloud because just thinking at the floating lightshow pony head was just a little too creepy.

{{THEN CLEARLY THIS SINGLE PONY PROJECT IS A THREAT! AND JUST A VERY CLEVER ONE THAT WILL TAKE THE GODDESS A MOMENT TO COMPREHEND. BUT JUST A MOMENT! AH YES... }}

I stared, trying not to let my disbelief project too strongly.

{{OR MAYBE IT WAS NOT THIS SINGLE PEGASUS PROJECT THAT HE WAS AFTER! TELL ME EVERYTHING YOU SAW IN THE MINISTRY OF AWESOME!}}

Well, stalling wasn’t going to be hard.

{{STALL? WHY DO YOU STALL? FOALISH LITTLE PONY! THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO THAT IS OF CONCERN OR CONSEQUENCE TO THE MIGHTY GODDESS!}}

Standing there, staring at the amorphous nothing before me, I began to suspect she was right. How the hell was I supposed to stop the Goddess. Shoot her? A lot? Unless I picked up bullets of Goddess-killing, that

just wasn't going to do a damn thing. And she had every spell of the alicorns. Probably every spell of Trixie, Twilight Sparkle, Mosaic and Gestalt... if not every unicorn she had consumed. She could think me dead.

This was hopeless.

{{YES! YOUR SILLY LITTLE PLAN AGAINST THE GODDESS IS HOPELESS! THE GODDESS IS NOT IMPRESSED! YOU... wait, who?}}

What?

{{WHO?}}

What, are you an owl now? I suddenly thought of Wordsworth.

{{YOU THOUGHT OF NAMES. THINK THE NAMES AGAIN!}}

Oh. Oops? There was no way I could have foreseen the Star Orb when making this plan. Did I just trip up on something?

Stall. *Well, here goes nothing...*

I thought of the orbs, remembering them as best I could. Every detail. Focusing most heavily on the Star Orb.



I spent what felt like hours replaying Canterlot in my head. Even when I sensed the approach of others, more alicorns I assumed, I did not stop. I went over each memory orb multiple times, but kept coming back to the Star Orb. Whenever I did, the Goddess grew quiet in my mind. I think the memory stunned her.

Finally, she demanded I stop.

{{Enough of that memory! It... it is not important!}}

I suspected deeply that it was the most important memory ever.

But I didn't have time to investigate my suspicions. The location identifier started flashing on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. But it wasn't telling me where I was. How could it? I'd been in the same place for

hours. In fact, it wasn't telling me anything. Just flashing, getting my attention.

This must be the signal. But... what do I do now?

Then it told me.

> **RUN!**

> **XENITH HAS PLANTED THE BALEFIRE BOMB BENEATH MARIPONY.**

> **YOUR FRIENDS ARE SAFELY AWAY.**

> **YOU HAVE THIRTY-EIGHT MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.**

> **RUN!**

What, what, what, WHAT!??

The balefire bomb is here!? How did it get here? How did Xenith get past all the hellhounds? I knew she was sneaky, but that was beyond the pale! How could I have asked her to take that risk? And I was supposed to get out of range on the damn pedal-machine? That's insane! What was I doing standing here? Why the hell would I have gone into this place? Why would I have...

Even as I panicked, the pieces of my plan fell into place.

Of course I had needed to be unnaturally persuasive. What could have been more difficult, more worthy of resorting to Party-Time Mint-als, than talking Red Eye into giving me the bomb? No wonder he started pulling out after that. He was taking the bomb to the camp. Tenpony Tower hadn't been under a megaspell threat in over a week! I'd made Homage safe before I'd even left.

What we need is still here, Xenith had said. I remembered how small the Balefire Bomb looked in Pinkie Bell's barn. Small enough a little filly could move it around, if with difficulty.

I remembered going to speak with Gawd, but I'd cut out the memory of what had happened in Shattered Hoof.

Blackwing! I remembered saying, *I was hoping to see you. I have something I need to ask you for, and I hoped we could come to an arrangement.*

I remembered all the times I had lost track of Xenith in battle. How she'd managed to follow me without the Twilight Society catching her.

Xenith had Blackwing's zebra stealth cloak! And zebra stealth cloaks even mute scent.

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-SEVEN MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

But why would I have...

Don't watch any of these until after you/I get the Black Book and take it to Maripony. I'd written that to myself. Then told Calamity to allow me to view those two orbs we had picked up from the merchant just before we went to Shattered Hoof.

The argument between Applejack and Rarity flashed through my head:

Ya said ya were gonna get rid o' that cursed thing!

I said I would burn It. And I tried. But as you can see, It doesn't burn. I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.

Well... ya still shoulda gotten rid o' it!

How? I doubt anything short of a megaspell could destroy It. And I certainly don't want to dispose of The Book where It could find Its way into the wrong hooves.

I didn't bring the Black Book here to give it to the Goddess. I brought it here to destroy it once and for all! Crush two eggs under one hoof.

The little pony in my mind was prancing nervously, trying to shout down my thoughts with the scream of "Bomb! BOMB! Get AWAY from the BOMB!"

{{THE ZEBRA!}}

Crap!

I floated the Black Book out of my saddlebags and tossed it into the taint. It splashed, then bobbed, the twisted and profane black leather floating with the debris.

No! Think of all the great things you could do!

I backpedaled, my brain finally working. I needed to get out of here now!

You could save Twilight Sparkle!

My eyes were still locked on the Book. But the little pony in my head was screaming. There was no time for that anymore!

Thump. I backed into somepony. My panic skyrocketed, my heart skipping a beat, and my levitation magic imploded, dropping me into the mucky lake of taint.

I spun around to see who was blocking my exit.

Three ponies in Enclave Armor stood blocking the doorway. In front of them, a stately dusk-colored pegasus flew forward, dressed in sophisticated grey barding with a sleek military elegance.

“Greetings, Goddess,” the pegasus called out, staring up at Trixie’s light show, seeming unfazed. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Harbinger, and I am here on behalf of the Enclave.”

It’s an Enclave experiment all right, Calamity had said about the science project we had found in Old Olneigh. *Under orders of Harbinger, one of the Enclave High Council.*

The Goddess had more important things on her mind...

{{CHILDREN! FLEE!!!}}

...as did I. I desperately searched for a way around them. I could try floating them, but they had wings. I wouldn’t be able to hold them in place just by lifting their hooves off the ground. I could try to fight my way through, but these were Enclave. It could be like fighting three or four Calamitys, and I would so thoroughly lose. Even if I won, my injuries would assure I didn’t get out in time.

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-SIX MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

"There is no need to flee," Harbinger assured the Goddess calmly. "We mean you no harm. In fact, I have come to offer you an alliance between the Enclave and the Goddess."

I froze, my jaw dropping. "Wait... *what?!*" For the briefest moment, I forgot about the bomb, turning to stare at the pegasus.

The Goddess was ultimately genocidal. Her plans for Equestria meant the end of all ponies. And worse, the end of all individuality. She was a horror. And the Enclave wanted to *ally* with her?

{{FLY, MY CHILDREN!! SAVE YOURSELVES!!}}

Okay, and part of me was a little bit impressed with the Goddess. Trixie knew she was about to die, and her final act was to save the alicorns. Damn.

"We have recently become aware of what the pony named Red Eye is doing," Harbinger stated. "We know he opposes you and has plans to overthrow you. His intentions with the towers pose a clear and imminent danger to the Enclave and its citizens. His intentions are nothing short of an act of war."

Oh this was not happening! I pranced anxiously in the taint, looking around for an alternate escape route. Oh Goddesses, even if I found one, there wouldn't be enough time for me to get away!

"But the Enclave military is..." Harbinger permitted himself a chuckle, "... let us just say 'formidable'. Should we combine our efforts, I have no doubt that we can deal with Red Eye and eliminate the threat he poses in its entirety. Swiftly."

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

Oh no! NonononononononoNO! This is bad! Need to find a way out NOW!

"And with the threat of Red Eye and his plots wiped away," Harbinger concluded, smiling the earnest grin of a politician, "You can rule all of

Equestria below unchallenged. We will remain above, unthreatened. And we will all know peace in our time.”

The observation room! It was designed to protect against a megaspell detonation. It had saved Twilight Sparkle before!

Of course, it had also trapped her inside. But I’d worry about that later.

Breaking into full gallop, I telekinetically launched myself to one of the remaining catwalks and ran for the observation room.

“What’s she doing?” Harbinger asked. “Ambrosia, after her!” One of the black-carapaced pegasi took to the air, giving chase.

My heart was pounding in my chest. An odd itch was creeping through the insides of my legs, spreading out.

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-FOUR MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

I dashed into the observation room, looking around frantically. Last time, this place sealed up in reaction to the balefire bomb’s explosion. But this time, it would go off right under Maripony. In the time it took the shutters to close, I’d be dead from heat alone!

But I knew Twilight Sparkle wouldn’t create a safe room with such a fatal flaw. There had to be some way of manually telling the safe room to seal.

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-THREE MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

“Hold!” Ambrosia ordered as she landed outside, folding her wings and trotting through the door. I paid her no attention, searching with mounting panic.

“I said hold!” the armored Enclave mare demanded. “As in freeze right where you’re fucking standing or I’ll turn you into a glowing pile of soup!”

“Bomb!” I shouted at her in frustration, scanning all the controls and monitors for anything that might trigger the room’s lockdown.

“What bomb?” she barked. “What are you talking about? And I said freeze!” I heard the magical energy weapons built into her armor begin to power up.

Relief washed over me as I spotted the removable panel. I froze, looking towards Ambrosia, smiling as my horn glowed. Behind me, the screws on each corner of the panel rotated and fell out. The panel dropped to the floor with a clunk.

The sound caught the Enclave soldier’s attention. When she looked towards the panel so did I.

There was a nice, big, red button marked PUSH TO INITIATE SAFE ROOM PROTOCOL. I gave it a hard buck.

“What did you do?” Ambrosia cried out as the door closed and the armored plate came down. She spun, watching massive, armored shutters lower over the windows. “What did you just do?”

> YOU HAVE THIRTY-TWO MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.



“Good morning, children! This is DJ Pon3, coming at ya over the airwaves. And guess what’s riding hot on my tail? That’s right: the news!”

“That bright light and roll of thunder that a lot of you reported from the vicinity of Splendid Valley just over forty hours ago? The one a lot of you said was like a megaspell going off? Turns out it was a megaspell going off. Right in the heart of Splendid Valley.

“Now I don’t have a lot of details. But I can confirm that a whole mess of alicorns fled the valley less than half an hour before the detonation. And I can now confirm reports that our Wasteland Heroine was on the Ponyville side of Splendid Valley earlier that day. Now I don’t know yet if there’s any connection, but if I was a betting pony, I’d say our Bringer of Light had her hoof in what happened out there.

“Not really the light I was talkin’ about, Stable Dweller. Our prayers go out to you. I hope you’re okay. If you... or anypony has any further information... please let me know. Right away.

“As for reports of odd behavior from the alicorns in the wake of this occurrence, or claims of seeing odd black ponies flying through the sky, I can only...”

BZZZZzzzzzzzzzzckht!

“Greetings, citizens of the Equestrian Wasteland.

“This is the Grand Pegasus Enclave. We have commandeered this broadcast to deliver an important message to all ponies:

“Do not be afraid. We are here to save you!”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (2) - Exposure to Taint has altered your physiology. You do not take immediate damage from radiation. In fact, you gain extra healing while being exposed to it. However, radiation continues to build up in your system as normal.

