“Please… eat something. For me?”

“Oh, just let me die already.”

“Hff… would you want to hear yourself talking like that?” Dishes clatter. “You have to hang on. You owe it to yourself. It can’t take over your life… at least not today.”

A scratchy-throated sigh, like nails on steel. The sound of a butter knife clanking on a plate. “It’s going to. I’ll end up like all the others. Some, like, number on a chart, some name on a wall somewhere that kids will pretend to care about. This isn’t how I want to go out. I was supposed to matter, you know?” Slow chewing, quiet swallowing.

“…You matter to me.”

The clock ticks. Steam begins to sputter out of a teapot.

“…This is horse apples. I’m not some porcelain doll to take care of. Just ‘cause I’m not as fast as I used to be…”

“I loved you even before all the big grand gestures. You don’t have to worry about the future… you’ve got me… all of us, right now.”

The sound of a dish shattering on the ground.

“You don’t GET IT!” A deep breath, rattling and pained. “I could be- I SHOULD be stopping this. I know where it’s coming from, I-I might be responsible for it coming here. This is MY problem. How exactly am I supposed to watch while your friends are dying?”

“They’re your friends too. You’re inspiring them… you’re their reason to keep going. You ARE solving the problem. And they’re going to win, because they’re heroes. Er… heroines.” A nervous, folksy chuckle.

“…Promise me one thing. Don’t let them know I died like a stupid squashed fly that’s still twitching on a rolled-up paper.”

“If I said that about you, you’d slap me.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Short, sarcastic laughter… “HA!”

“Heheheee… come on, I’ll sweep that up and get you a cup of tea. It’s going to be fine.”

“I guess.”

The Tower of Ferrous seemed to appear overnight, like an obscene middle finger to the entirety of Equestria. It started with ponies noticing pieces missing from their tools and houses- iron, steel, nickel, anything magnetic. Something else had disappeared from Canterlot’s vaults- something very precious, something very dangerous. Whatever metals the tower was built from had merged and reformed as something impossible. Cold Iron wasn’t supposed to be “made”; it just existed, unchanging since the beginning of time. It’s a finite resource, there should never be more.

And it shouldn’t be spreading.

Princess Twilight Sparkle was glad her castle existed in a sleepy woodsy area, far from the cities eaten by the infection. Grass and trees clattered and creaked, leaves converted to sharp-edged iron plates. Light rain pattered on metal roof tiles, running into the metal gutters of metal roads. Twilight wondered how deep the transformation bled under the ground, but had no way of searching. She cursed the ancient, lifeless metal for blocking her magic.

“Um… Twilight? Are you sure you’ll be okay? We haven’t seen Celestia in a while…” Fluttershy easily kept pace with the princess, even while hefting two flaxen saddlebags.

“She’s evacuating Canterlot right now. If she wasn’t, even more ponies would turn into…”

“All’s y’alls be quiet. ‘M trying to not buckle under a LOT of pressure, here, ‘n talking about things being even worse is NOT helping.” Applejack rode on a pair of simple Gossamer Wings, a spell Twilight had long since perfected and emptied of dramatically ironic flaws. Maintaining three enchantments at once was nothing to her, not now. “My cousins live in Canterlot, and if they end up all statue’d, this whole excursion was pointless.“

“Pfft, is there anywhere on this continent you DON’T have cousins?” Their extra guest stuck her tongue out and flapped harder.

“And you ain’t helping either, Gilda. Everypony, why did we bring Gilda?”

Something bright streaked across Twilight’s vision. She ignored it for the moment. “Because Gilda was willing to come. If she wants to take the risk, why should we stop her?”

“Yeah!” Gilda looked proud for a moment, then softened. “Though… I shouldn’t have said that, Applejack. I’m sorry, I… we’re all in danger of losing something. Friends, family… lovers…. and you know what? It ticks me off!” She let out a sharp caw.

Rarity blinked. “Did you just apologize to somepony?”

Gilda seemed surprised as well. “Hey, ponies can change. So can I!” She smirked behind her beak, looking as toothy as a bird can get.

More bright streaks. Twilight gritted her blunt pony teeth. “They’re coming. Everypony brace yourself.”

The princess reached into her allies’ saddlebags, levitating their contents. Great plates of unadorned stone sailed around each of them, hinged on magically bound bromide and held together by not much more than willpower. It was obviously armor once it settled down, but it didn’t have that same sense of glory that a Canterlot Guard’s golden helmets suggested. They seemed even more like statues than…

THEM. They were once birds, but now they squealed and ground iron feathers together in an improbable mockery of flight. With unmoving eyes like rivets, the flock changed direction and collided with the ponies.

The clangs were deafening! Cold Iron is hard, but limited by its own mundane nature. While no magic could pierce Cold Iron, enchantments focused inward could resist it endlessly. Stone-plain, inert stone- was one of the few substances that resisted the transformation. When it refused to break, all bets were off.

“They’re so silly!” Pinkie Pie laughed to herself as birds pinged harmlessly off of her head.

“Yes, but they’re going to keep coming. We’re almost there!” Twilight looked down, and wished she didn’t.

The Tower of Ferrous extended four… five stories above the treetops. Every square inch of its surface was polished into mirrors, reflecting nothing but gunmetal gray wastelands. The Tower was uncannily plain and smooth, suggesting no culture, no history. Down at the surface, innumerable beings swarmed. Cats, dogs, toads, and yes… ponies. One of them was only partially converted, a yellow stallion shouting for help even as his metal legs carried him to the Tower. A blank-faced iron unicorn wiped one hoof over his back, and his screams were silenced under the gray.

“Mares?” Twilight nodded slowly, and the rest followed. “I’m going right to the top with Fluttershy and Pinkie. The rest of you start from the bottom. We’ll find the Pale Starstone somewhere in there, and we’ll turn it off. Ready? BREAK!”

“How did it happen?”

Rustling bedsheets, feathers rubbing against cloth. “Why’s it matter?”

“The metal is… inside of you. Everypony else I’ve seen was converted from the outside-in. I don’t see a trace on you.”

“Hehe, guess I was always special. I think I inhaled it? Yeah, that sounds about right. I was flying over an infected village, trying to figure out what was going on, and went too low, I guess. All that metal grinding together, ‘s making kind of a... an ash cloud.”

Glasses off, wiping off smudges. “I think it’s called a ‘laharl’. Or is that when it’s wet?”

“Whatever. Went down my throat, got speckled all over my lungs and stomach. And that’s why I sound like a fifty-year-old Appleoosa coal miner.” A short, pained exhalation.

“But you’re not too bad right now. You’re not getting dragged towards the tower…”

“Oh, I am. I can FEEL it. If I look uncomfortable, it’s ‘cause my organs are a giant lodestone right now. It’s not enough to move anyone tough as me, but…” Rolling over, groaning. “You know. And it’s spreading. Breathing… sucks even more.”

“I… guess. I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was that bad.” Feet shuffling against carpet. “Hey, actually, I think I DO know. You, uh… said you wanted everypony to remember you as a hero, right?”

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s a stupid idea that’s only gonna end in tears.”

The sound of a leg bumping into an end table. “No, I perfected it! I can make it work! I have to… for you. Applying a little magic to the griffon technology will make it perpetual. You know how those mind-machine interfaces work-“

“Just because I knew griffons doesn’t mean I know how their… computer stuff… works! I’ve only used one a few times, and not the experimental ones. And how are you even going to fit vacuum tubes into something my size, anyways?”

“Magic, of course.“ Laughter. No response. “Believe in me, okay? This is probably going to be my last creation. I have to make it count.”

Tsk, tsk. “Let me guess. For me?”

“For you.”

Princess Twilight Sparkle was getting jaded by all these apocalypses. She was also trying to push aside the dread in her divine gut, because there was no putting a positive spin on this one. The Cold Iron wasn’t responding to any of her treatments, not even the more common potions she had lying around. The affected ponies didn’t seem to be dead, but they were… listless. Entranced? There was no telling how much of the original pony was left.

The three of them punched through the gated windows and landed heavily. Their stone shells looked like furniture meant for that room- a simple observatory, walls embossed with scenes Twilight didn’t recognize.

“Twilight? I don’t want to interrupt, but…” Fluttershy discarded her empty bags, long since reduced to iron foil. “The Starstone isn’t here.”

Twilight sighed, thin streams of steam escaping her flowstone mask. “We’ve been bamboozled, everypony. Of COURSE they hide the artifact anywhere but the most obvious place. For all we know, Gilda got to it in the lobby. Ugh, I wish this place wasn’t jamming my telepathy.”

“At least it’s kinda cool here. I mean it’s hot in the armor, but it looks really spooky!” Pinkie noisily stomped along the far wall. “Look, they have a bunch of drawings of the Second Age! My Grandmama always used to tell me these GREAT stories about how a smart pony destroyed the Forest Eater, and popped the Ocean Drinker, and outsmarted the Cloud Eraser…”

“Pinkie, those fairy tales are propaganda, you know that, right?” Twilight shook her head slowly, stone grinding against magically suspended liquid. “Technology like the Griffon Confederacies use isn’t inherently evil. It is clearly not meant to be used by ponies-“ she waved one hoof in the air- “But that’s a matter of whom it was designed for, and pony magic is just as efficient at simple manufacturing anyways. It’s not meant to exclude or compete with us, any more than our magic is meant to compete with a griffon’s blank aura.”

“What about that technology? I don’t think it likes us.” Fluttershy timidly pointed at the ambulatory statue trotting up the stairs. With no noise other than the clang of his hooves, the expressionless equine charged at them!

Almost as soon as it started, it stopped. A charged net of stone tiles and odd brown liquid held it to the ground, refusing to break despite any straining.

“See Twi? I TOLD you that Ring Toss should be an official sport!” Pinkie laughed to herself. “We have more nets, right?”

“A few dozen. Make them count, and force your way past anything not worth restraining. Remember, these aren’t monsters, they’re fellow Equestrians. We’re after the STONE.” The other two nodded vigorously.

The Tower of Ferrous was senseless, pointless. Their floors contained kitchens and pantries, washrooms and linen closets, bedrooms and lounges, all of which meant nothing to the Cold Iron inhabitatants. The trappings were only more iron anyways, a mockery of life. They fought past ponies, kelpies, kirin, rabbits- Fluttershy closed her eyes for that one- buffalo, zebras, mules, boars, dogs, cats, blink dogs, baku, and a few monkeys.

The most disturbing part, Twilight thought to herself, was how silent they were. The servants of the Tower had no words to speak, no malice. Many of them barely cared enough to stand in the ponies’ way, instead shaping more scrap iron into furniture or simply… standing. There was no joy in those halls, only more silence.

“Guyyys, what about this door!?” Pinkie Pie turned around and bucked open a conspicuous double door, no more than six floors below the top.

Inside… IT waited. The Pale Starstone, an oddly humble rock. It did not glow nor hover, but its very presence felt like cold steel pressed against their necks. And behind the humble Starstone’s pedestal waited a humble mistress.

“You… didn’t smash any of them. You’re smarter than the last generation’s heroes. You get to live in my world, rather than be torn apart by it.”

A griffon… no, not anymore. She was metal, but not the shapeless iron of her creations. A feather-light frame of marbled white, streaked with pulsing blue veins. A face like a goddess, or the mask of one. She spoke, her mouth unmoving, her voice coming not from her but from around her. “I suppose you’re after the Pale Starstone?”

Princess Twilight Sparkle narrowed her eyes behind lead-crystal lenses. “And WE suppose you’re going to tell us you won’t turn anypony back.”

“Any… pony?” The metallic griffon balked. “How… patriotic your language has become. And no, I’m going to say I can’t turn them back. Cold Iron is a single element. The Starstone turns complex molecules into single elements- try to turn one of your obviously culturally superior ponies back,” she said while making a flippant gesture with one talon, “And the most you’ll make is a pile of carbon dust, or a puff of oxygen. They’re better like this, anyways.”

“No. They. Are. NOT.” Fluttershy trotted forwards, steps echoing like jackhammers. “You stole their will! I don’t know what that science stuff meant, but I know you took ponies… animals from all over Equestria… and made them into machines! And that’s not how friendship works, you not very nice lady!” She seemed to be boiling inside her armor. “If you don’t know how to turn them back, you’d better find out how!”

“Okay, first of all my name is Greta. Thank you for asking. And yes, yes I AM enforcing a single homogenous culture of eusocial machine-minds. I don’t see how that’s any different from the self-righteous white-washing of your own leader. The Princess? Says she is the sun? How… how long was I sealed in there anyways? Is she still ruling you ponies?”

Pinkie nodded like a bobblehead doll.

“Then what’s with the shrimpy Princess over here? Celestia, did you shrink in the wash? And get dyed purple?”

Twilight folded her wings. “I’m Twilight, Princess of… we’re getting off topic! Give it up, Greta, we have the Elements of Harmony-“

“Tools of oppression. I know what you think about griffons. You’d make us eat tofu and sing lullabies and drink tea while giggling at rainbows, to the last chick. For all I know, you already have! It’s year, uh-“

“Year one thousand and five,” said an impatient Fluttershy.

“-And your calendar is… leap days… Mother of All, that many centuries and you’re still living in thatched-roof houses on the SURFACE? Be glad I’m raising you from barbarism.” Greta spread her wings wide- then was buried under a stone net. Pinkie tilted her head at how easy that was.

Twilight leaned closer. “We already overwhelmed your army, Greta. And we’re taking the Starstone. Come on, Fluttershy. Uh, Fluttershy?”

“E-eep…”

Fluttershy didn’t want to see what was happening, but couldn’t anyways. Her armor’s visor was turning to iron, after all. All she could hear was the creaking of metal, both inside and outside.

Greta let out a quiet caw. “Let me guess… silicon, oxygen… lead? Lead glass is shielded against magic, but this isn’t your magic, Princess. So, so narrow minded. You might want to get that off of her before she blinks, and her eyelashes touch it.”

A violet aura covered the back of the pegasus’s neck, and the her helmet clattered to the floor. The ponies could hear machines moving above, below, even one climbing outside the tower’s walls.

“Now, notice that I have not attacked you yet. I don’t want to. I don’t even want to convert you, you’re barely worth my time. So, unless the winged one wants to join me, you can consider yourself excommunicated.”

Pinkie blinked. “Exca-what?”

“BANISHED. Vamoose. Get out or I throw you out.”

A slow blush covered Fluttershy’s face. “Twi, don’t worry about-“

“We can run and come up with another plan. It’s not worth it.” Twilight sighed once more. “Let’s go-“

A clawed metal fist punched through the wall and tore a panel away. The other four heroes arrived just in time to see the uninvited guest…

A cough, a wheeze, and a beaked grin. “You thought I was dead, didn’t you?” Gilda stuck out a metal-speckled tongue and sneered, kneading her tainted iron paws into the floor.

Greta stared in disbelief. “What… a griffon… what?”

Rainbow Dash trotted through the door behind everypony else. “Hey, what gives? Why is Gilda- but she’s- this doesn’t make sense!” She looked behind herself just to confirm her fears. A second, armored, untainted Gilda backed up slowly.

“I can explain,” said the other Gilda. “You see… um, Gilda? Why… what are you holding?”

“I’m holding a PROPER ending.”

A length of pipe, a clock, a lighter, and some tape. There were few other things it could be.

The other Gilda dove forwards! “Don’t! You don’t have to!”

“In the words of my generation? UP YO-“

Several things happened at once. The back wall of the Tower of Ferrous burst out, girders and rebar falling away like the damp scraps of a popped balloon. Applejack swept Fluttershy up in both hooves and dragged her out of the blast range. The other Gilda was thrown backwards, stone armor shattering under pressure. Greta found no refuge under her net, nor in her armor, now better described as scrap.

And the Pale Starstone was suddenly much less pale, turned cherry red by the heat. It melted down to a pile of iron slag, no longer eternally untouched and no longer unique.

“I figured out what the mind-machine interfaces were missing, Gilda. Griffons have so many creative ideas… but everything is a weapon, to the Confederacy.”

“You’re saying that like it isn’t true.” Pained smile on her beak. “I may not look like it, but I paid attention in chemistry class. MANEUER can be a weapon, literally dirt.”

“Yes… and that’s not a bad thing, all the time… the problem comes when they look at it like every problem is a military problem. They’d rather move than adapt, and when they adapt they try to hammer it in until it fits.”

“I know. ‘Square pegs, round holes’, ponies say it all the time about us. What are you doing putting on a spandex suit, though? Is ballet part of the solution? It better not be.”

Raucous, hearty laughter, followed by a high-pitched zipper. “No, that’s just the underpants for this rig. It IS pretty comfy, but it’s not the point. The Confederacy was always trying to put brains into immobile servers… or spider tanks… or glider planes. And they’d always go insane!”

“Which is why they dropped those projects. We don’t need ‘em anyways. Just like you shouldn’t need that mechanical rig for the wings. Can’t you just magic your way into flying anyways?”

Snapping buckles. “That would be cheating… magic doesn’t like to cheat. Just like you can’t plug a brain right into a computer. There has to be a body that the brain is comfortable with.” An unscrewing cap, and a slow dribble of glue. “I hope you don’t mind the smell.”

“Far past minding here. But does it have to be like this? Permanent, one-way?”

“Well… you can’t turn back either, can you? They don’t have to know… Rainbow Dash doesn’t have to know. Gilda gets to be a hero.”

“You’d lie to her for the rest of your life?”

“If it meant they would respect you… yes.”

“I… don’t know what to think about that. Those foam paws are pretty cute, though.”

“Yeah, just like your paws are pretty cute!” Two sticky, slathering sounds, followed by two more. “And I love the talons. Do you think ponies ever get jealous of your fingers and thumbs?”

“Maybe?” Sharp coughs. “It looks like a step up so far, but you know me, I love me. Wait a minute- you’re saying you’re comfortable with MY body?”

“Because I love you, that’s why. It’s not what I grew up with… but I can make it work.” The stretching and creaking of a tight mask, like a rubber balaclava. Shuffling squeaking noises as a horn is tucked away.

“So the magic is adjusting your body to fit. Again, WHY the underwear? Why not just the big outer shell?”

“It’s the transition, Gilda…” The clack of a wooden beak. “Adding these steps is what makes the magic stick and… it’s tough to explain but… making the change gradual makes it make sense to me. Could… could you pull my tail through this little sleeve?”

Subtle, whispering sliding. “Woah, my cat tail really does look smaller on you. You even got the tuft on the end right!”

“Some parts of me are bigger, some are smaller, and some are… gone…” a second, deeper zipping sound. “This will be the last time you see me. I’m going to be you, once I get in here. Mind, body…”

“Soul? Don’t lose yourself. I hang out with you BECAUSE you’re a giant nerd, not, you know, a second me.” A deep, rumbling zip back up.

“I’ll remember our time together… it’s been a great few years, Gilda.”

Washed in a red aura, a tangle of fabric, petrochemicals and steel melted into soft feathers, fur and muscle.

“Mhnnn…”

“Are you hurt?”

“Of… of course I’m not hurt! Do I look like a dweeb to you?”

A caw, and a laugh. “Nah, I guess you don’t. This is insane, but so’s anything I do, so I guess you’re in character?”

A rush of air from opening, newly-minted wings. “Gilda’s gonna kick some butt, at least one more time. I’ll be sure to tell you about it! Later, don’t go anywhere!”

Clattering window shutters, beating wings.

A sigh. “I’m not gonna keep that promise, dude. You know that.” Bedsheets tossed aside, talons and paws hitting carpet.

An awkward silence fills the air. “Are we supposed to be like, OKAY with this?”

“It had to be done Dashie! I knew if she was dying… she’d try something like this. I was trying to STOP this!”

“I would have appreciated if ‘that’ didn’t happen.” Greta staggered out from under her scrapped suit. Her fur and feathers were gone, not from the blast but from age. “You managed to re-invent what I had made, centuries ago. You know, the technology your Princess suppressed. How does it feel to be a heretic, pony?”

“I’m not a pony. I’m Gilda now.” A blush creeped through her downy face. “I have to be… no turning back. And Celestia will understand! This isn’t your weapon, Greta. There’s no reason to seal away something that won’t hurt anypony.”

“And I suppose you’ll seal me?”

“Seal? Hmph. I don’t reckon any of us have a second barrel o’ dynamite?”

“Applejack… PONIES!” The new Gilda raised one talon. “If she says she can improve the world, and we can act as a conscience for her… there’s no reason she’d have to be locked up again… I helped Gilda, what’s one more griffon?”

“One problem. You know the one of a kind atomic conversion device I was using to build my creations? BROKEN, by your exploding turncoat chick friend. I can’t even control the subjects anymore, they’re going to have to adapt to their new lives on their own. Smooth move, choco-lax.”

“First of all? “ She slapped Greta with more than minimal force. “Respect the dead. Second, if you’re the genius you are… and I’m the genius she said I am? We can figure out a way. No Starstone, no cheats.”

Greta stood up slowly, hobbling on once-mighty legs. “I… suppose.”

Rainbow Dash grumbled to herself. “Close enough. Close… enough.”

The Princess dropped her armor. “We should get started then! There will be plenty of supplies in my castle. Applejack, get your truck. We have a reformed enemy of the state to move.”

Princess Twilight Sparkle liked to think she was jaded, and at least she wasn’t iron. But what would two new griffons do for Ponyville?

“Enjoying your new body, ‘Gilda’?”

“Yipe! P-princess Cel… where are we?”

“I can appear in dreams too, young one. Or perhaps not so young… I see you have taken on a second identity.”

“Hehe… yeah… about that…”

“Using forbidden sympathetic magic that I specifically had locked up in the vaults to prevent life takeovers such as this one.”

“I had… actually stumbled into the formula myself… mechanical bits are sort of my passion.”

“A very interesting choice of identity, ‘Gilda’. The original Gilda… she died attacking another griffon, didn’t she?”

“Do-don’t remind me… I did this so she wouldn’t have to make a sacrifice. I…”

“And griffons are very, hmm, passionate about maintaining their cultural identity. So a griffon suicide-bombing another griffon would…”

“Make them angry?”

“Make them accuse Equestria of brainwashing her, very likely. It could even result in ANOTHER pointless war. And as Princess, I don’t particularly want a war.”

“S-so…”

“You can keep the new face, ‘Gilda’. I’m more than glad to see her alive. Just do all of Equestria a favor and NEVER BREAK CHARACTER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“So… bright… of course I’ll do it! That was my original plan! Just don’t burn my butt, turn it off!”

“Pardon me, dreamscapes tend to reflect emotion rather than intent. Worry not, my new griffon. I trust you entirely. Oh, and one more thing, ‘Gilda’… I’ve got my eye on you.”

“And I’VE got MY EYE on YOU! Heh…”

“Oah hohohahaha… indeed.”