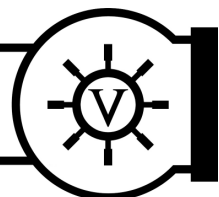


# Gold Star

Mindblower

PONY FICTION VAULT



I was shifting in my bed, hugging my comic books, when Mom started yelling at me to get downstairs or I'd be late for school. I blinked my eyes open, slowly pushed my blankets to the side, and did something between a yawn and a sigh. Muttering a word I'd heard Ms. Cheerilee say once after school, I rubbed crust from the corners of my eyes, swung myself out of bed, and half-sleepwalked to the bathroom.

After rinsing my mouth and lazily combing my light blue feathers, I walked down the stairwell, sliding against the wall for support. I didn't really *need* to, but I was in what mom calls the "Tuesday mood" where you just don't wanna do *anything*.

Sometimes, though, I kinda felt that way every day of the week.

Mom wailed for me again, though, derailing my train of thought. "I'm *coming*," I shouted back, my as-of-yet useless wings fluttering in irritation. Just so Mom got the message, I started pounding my hooves on the hardwood floor whenever I took a step, just so she would know I hadn't passed out in the hallway.

"Not so loud!" she snapped at me as I stepped into the kitchen. Light was peering in through the mostly shuttered windows, and I shivered as the chilly outside air started to seep indoors. *I thought Mom said we were going to do something about this cold.*

My unhappiness evaporated, though, when the toaster dinged. I sensed crisp bread thrust into open air, and I leapt up instinctively, successfully catching my prey between my jaws. This, however, provoked another of Mom's seemingly endless supply of reprimands.

"Don't play with your food," she said as she pushed an egg around on a hot skillet. Blue rollers hung loosely off her light brown mane, and though she was yelling at me earlier, I could tell from her expression that she was in a Tuesday mood, too.

I shrugged, mumbling a halfhearted apology through my mouthful. When I spit out my slice onto a plate and went to get some butter, but when I opened the fridge, I saw that the tray was scraped clean.

"Where's the butter?" I asked incredulously.

"There isn't any. Not in the whole town," she added just as I was about to suggest we just go buy some.

I sat down at our little three-chair table and crunched my bland, dry toast unhappily. "Mom, are we poor?"

Mom scraped her eggs onto a plate, breathing out and closing her eyes. “Times are tough, Chip.”

“You *always* say that,” I replied.

“Times have been tough for a while,” she said simply. “We just have to do our best and keep working through it,” she added, glancing at the flag that hung on our window, plastered to the inside of the glass. It had a single blue star in the center of the white cloth, and it had been there as long as I could remember.

I would have been satisfied with that, were I a year younger. Now, it just sounded like she was making excuses. I pushed my plate away toward the center of the table, only a few inches. “M’not hungry,” I mumbled, getting up and turning my back to Mom as I walked sulkily toward the front door.

“Chip...” Mom trailed off, not sure what to say.

I flicked my tail at her in response. “We’ll never get a gold star while Dad’s away.”

I grabbed my backpack and was out the door before she could answer.

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It was supposed to be a warm day, even though it was late fall. I could tell that the ground was starting to get warmer as the sun steadily rose above the horizon, but I didn’t really have time to think about it because of how late I was to school. I picked up my pace to the schoolhouse, feeling the sun’s rays beat down on me as I scurried to my destination.

On the way, I saw out of the corner of my eye that a lot of ponies were clamoring around outside Sugarcube Corner as Mayor Mare and somepony else I couldn’t place my hoof on tried to calm them all down. The stallion I didn’t know looked like one of my Dad’s friends. He and Dad both wore the same clothes.

I didn’t look at it too long, though. I raced across the posters littering the ground and arrived just as Ms. Cheerilee was calling my name.

“Chip Mint...” she said, looking up from the little chart on her desk as I snuck to my seat in the back of the class. I don’t think she noticed I just got into her class, and, for that matter, neither did anypony else. Maybe they were all in a Tuesday mood, too.

For me, that was the only really important part of the school day. When Ms. Cheerilee scribbled down a mark next to my name so that the records would show I had served my time in what many of the advanced students call “Habilitation Therapy,” my job, as far as I was concerned, was done.

As for learning, well, it depended on whether or not I had stayed up past my bedtime reading Captain Equestria comics. In today’s case, I was so worn out from seeing the Stallion in Gold kick Enemy flank that, when I rested my head on my desk to catch a breather after practically flying to class, the gears in my head slowed their turning to a crawl.

Meanwhile, Ms. Cheerilee was blabbering on about something that happened yesterday. I couldn’t really tell because I was completely out of it, but I think she said she had lost something. Then she got into the actual lesson and I zoned out for real this time.

I was snapped back to reality when a sheet of paper landed on my desk, poking me in the nose. I nearly stumbled out of my chair, wondering if Ms. Cheerilee was distributing homework, when I realized she was giving us all a quiz, instead. I looked up at her, expecting her to punish or embarrass me for falling asleep in her classroom, but she just looked dazed. Like her heart wasn’t in it that day.

I shrugged and started looking at the problems.

*1. Three pegasi are carrying five incendiary charges north for two hours. On departure, they, combined, weigh one hundred and fifty kilograms. When they return, they weigh only one hundred and twenty-five kilograms. How much does each charge weigh?*

I pulled a blank, like I usually do when it comes to pop quizzes. I stood up, the paper in my mouth, and walked up to my teacher’s desk.

It took about half a minute for Ms. Cheerilee to notice I needed help. “Yes?” she asked with an uncharacteristic lack of energy.

“What’s an ‘incendiary charge?’” I asked out of curiosity.

At first she looked like she misheard, but then she blinked and said, “Oh! You must have the *advanced* class’s quiz. I’m sorry, it must have been mixed in by mistake.”

She took my quiz and started to open a drawer and retrieve the right form, but I still wanted her to answer my question. “So what’s an incendiary charge?” I repeated.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” Ms. Cheerilee said in a hushed tone, shuffling through her papers. “It doesn’t relate to the quiz. Did you know, you’ll be learning *all* about division next year! Won’t that be exciting?”

I began to get frustrated. “But what *are* they?” I asked for the third and final time.

Ms. Cheerilee forced a smile. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. Now sit down take your quiz,” she added sternly.

I wasn’t really happy with that answer, but I had the right quiz at least, so I sat down and worked through the addition and subtraction. The numbers fought battles in my head. In one of Dad’s letters to me, he told me to think of addition as reinforcements arriving and subtraction as Equestria and the Enemy duking it out on the front. The two groups go head-to-head, and only a few of the victors remain. It made math easy enough, at least. I had to be careful, though, to make sure that Equestria always had the bigger number.

After that was over, I gave Ms. Cheerilee my test and rested my eyes once more. Hours passed before a student accidentally bumped my hoof with her own, jolting me awake. I heard my classmates shuffling out the door. Class must have ended. I yawned, stretched, and got out of my seat and out of the classroom. It was one of my quickest school days yet.

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After that, I started my usual walk toward Sweet Apple Acres to meet with Rumble. I saw a lot of ponies hanging gold stars on the inside of their windows. Mom told me that families who got gold stars got sugar and flour and candles as gifts from the princesses. I guess a lot of the ponies in Ponyville started working really hard all of a sudden.

Usually Rumble and I would just hang out or do odd jobs so that we could pay for the newest issues of Captain Equestria. There was always somepony that needed something done. Today was different, though. When I saw Rumble, he was watching the three fillies that were one class level below us.

It had rained yesterday, so the ground near the outskirts of the Acres was moist and soggy. I heard squishing and splashing sounds under my hooves as I awkwardly trekked toward my friend.

“What’re we doing out here?” I asked.

Rumble pointed. “Them.”

I squinted; the trio was about thirty meters away from us at the base of a hill. Their names, if memory served, were Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle. They were barely recognizable. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom looked hopelessly dirty, digging with their hooves and some spades a long and deep hole in the ground. Scootaloo, on the other hoof, was draped in a heavy coat and shouting orders.

I raised an eyebrow. "What in Equestria are they doing?"

Rumble shrugged. "Weird stuff. C'mon, the Cakes are going to pay us to move the latest shipment of sugar. Should be easy, and it pays enough for a week of comics."

"...Nah," I said, my insatiable curiosity taking hold of me once more. "You can go if you want. I wanna see what they're doing."

"You know they're crazy, right?" Rumble asked me.

"Yeah, but it's Tuesday. I'm not in the mood to break my back over sugar," I said with a shrug. "You comin' with me or not?"

Rumble rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I'm not really in the mood, either, really."

After we came to this decision, we slogged through the mushy grass and field to the three fillies. Our wings were fluttering slightly, trying to separate our bodies from the cold mud that was the ground, but it was an exercise in futility. After a few minutes of slogging, though, we eventually made it down the hill, practically sliding to the base of it, and greeted the trio.

"You aren't authorized to be here!" Scootaloo barked. She seemed to have smeared mud on her cheeks, Celestia knows why. Her face was taut with imagined fury, and her voice was hoarse and squeaky, as if she had been yelling all day.

"Uhm, what's up?" I asked.

"I ask the questions around here, bub!" Scootaloo snapped at me. She turned back to her two friends, who were both panting and leaning on the edge of their hole. I absently noticed there was another, similarly shaped hole a few meters away from the one they were currently digging. After noticing that no mud was being flung in-between the two pits by the tireless fillies, though, Scootaloo turned to them and yelled, "You think this is *nap* time?"

"No, ma'am!" Sweetie Belle exclaimed, hurriedly returning to her digging.

Apple Bloom sighed wearily. “Scootaloo, we’ve been at this all *day*. Can’t we take a break?”

“You get a break when I *say* you get a break, and *I* say you get a break after you finish the second trench!” Scootaloo snapped back. She erupted into a fit of coughing, kneeling for a moment and trying to catch her breath.

“Are you okay, Scootaloo?” Rumble asked, concerned.

“I’m *fine*,” Scootaloo insisted, snapping to her hooves once more, though she seemed slightly wobbly. She approached Rumble, staring at him beadily. “Did the General send you two as reinforcements?”

I glanced at Rumble. He shrugged. “Uh... yeah?” I guessed.

“Great,” Scootaloo rasped. She blinked. “I mean, that means that you two are to address me as *Major* or *ma’am*, got it, Privates?”

Rumble sniggered at Scootaloo’s mention of privates, but I simply nodded. “Okay, uh, ma’am.”

“Now get digging!” Scootaloo ordered, pointing to the trench.

“Uh... why?” Rumble asked.

Scootaloo narrowed her eyes, getting right up in Rumble’s face. “Would you give your life for your country?”

“...Yeah?” Rumble answered, scratching the back of his neck anxiously.

Scootaloo thrust her hoof back toward what she called a trench. “Then you can dig a hole for it!”

We glanced at each other. “Uh... Actually, no,” Rumble said.

Scootaloo’s eye twitched. “*What* was that, Private?”

“No, I mean, we’re not actually reinforcements,” Rumble added. “We’re, like, the Enemy.”

Scootaloo’s eyes widened. “You are?”

Rumble looked at me. Then he looked at Scootaloo. “Yeah, we kinda are.”

Scootaloo grinned. There was something off about her grin, though, something that I didn’t really like. “Then get in the other trench,” she said. “We’re gonna play a game.”

Both Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom stopped digging.

“What kind of game?” I asked.

“Simple,” Scootaloo said, pausing to cough. She wiped her nose on her heavy coat, and I realized that she must have been roasting in it, especially in today’s heat. “You get in those trenches. We get in ours. Whoever gets out first, loses.”

“Whadda we get if we win?” Rumble asked.

“You’re the Enemy,” Scootaloo said. “You never win.”

Rumble laughed. “Okay then. Whatever. See you in the trenches.” We trotted over to our pit and both got inside, hearing Scootaloo scream declarations of war for the whole town to hear.

“Why’d you do that?” I asked Rumble.

“Duh. I don’t wanna dig holes all day. That’d be almost as bad as hauling sugar,” he replied, cozying up against the slick walls of the meter and a half-deep hole. “Still. Scootaloo obviously has a screw loose or something.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. She was fine yesterday, though. I wonder what happened to drive her nuts.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said, pausing as some mud landed with a loud smack on the other side of our trench. We heard Scootaloo screaming for something called artillery to fire.

“Soo...” I trailed off, growing slightly bored. “How does it feel to be the Enemy?”

Rumble laughed. “Weird. Y’know, aren’t those three the Enemy, too? Just, y’know, of us?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.” Another mud bomb splattered next to me, spraying dirt into my face, and I laughed. “They should just send for Captain Equestria and get it over with.”



“That way, we can all be home for Hearth’s Warming!” Rumble joked, and we both laughed, remembering last year’s posters.

About a half hour passed, with the two of us growing increasingly, insufferably bored. The artillery rounds never really stopped, but eventually the interval between them increased, so what this ‘game’ of Scootaloo’s amounted to was sitting in silence, bored, until the next mud pie hit the ground.

“Hey, Rumble,” I said, tracing a figure in the mud with my hoof. “You know what an incendiary charge is?”

He shrugged. “Eh. I think we learn about those next year.”

Unsatisfied, I turned onto my side and dozed off for a little while longer. The mud was too cold, though, and the ground too wet to sleep comfortably.

Rumble threw up his hooves. “That’s it. I give up. This is pointless.” He climbed out of the trench.

“What are you *doing*?” Scootaloo squeaked, scrambling out of her own trench as she saw Rumble cantering away.

“Your game is stupid and boring,” he snarled in response. “We just sit here and do *nothing*. Sorry, but that’s not really my thing.”

“You’d just give up and leave your country? And do *nothing* to stop the Enemy?” Scootaloo exclaimed in a barely comprehensible, high-pitched rasp. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom glanced at each other nervously.

“If just sitting around waiting to starve to death is your master plan, then *yes*,” Rumble snapped, strutting past her and flicking her face angrily with his tail. “Call me when there’s some actual *action*.”

“Ponies *die* for your country!” Scootaloo shouted.

“Yeah, so? I don’t know ‘em,” Rumble retorted, not turning to face Scootaloo.

I was about to follow him when I saw Scootaloo pick up a stone in her hoof, trembling with rage. “So you want action, huh...?” she mumbled, her voice shaky, her rage uncontrolled. She reared back and threw the stone at Rumble with all her might. “*Here’s your action!*”

“Rumble, look out!” I yelled at the last minute.

Rumble turned around in surprise, able to see the stone flying toward him for half a second before it smashed into his nose.

He fell to the ground, his back legs bucking and his forelegs wrapped around his snout. I heard his muffled, agonized screams leak through his limbs, and despite his writhing, I saw a trickle of red seep down to his chin.

For a moment, we were all paralyzed.

“Oh Celestia,” Apple Bloom said, more exasperated than panicked. She turned to Sweetie Belle. “Go get Applejack, wouldja?”

Sweetie Belle nodded, leapt up out of her trench, and galloped toward the center of the Acres, much to Scootaloo’s dismay.

“Don’t break rank!” she commanded. “Don’t break *rank!*” Seeing that the pursuit was worthless, she then turned to me, the crusted dirt on her cheeks being suddenly rehydrated by the water leaking from her eyes. “*You!*” she shouted, even over Rumble’s yells. “If you hadn’t told him to turn around—”

“Oh, so now you’re blaming this on *me?*” I asked incredulously. “No. Not gonna happen. *You* threw the stone!”

“He was abandoning his country!” Scootaloo argued, looking as if she were about to explode.

Too angry to censor myself, I got right up in her face and shouted as loud as I possibly could, “*What country?!*”

Scootaloo’s lower lip trembled. Not able to contain herself any longer, she burst into hysterical tears, alternating between sobbing and choking on her own phlegm before breaking away into a gallop even faster than Sweetie Belle’s. She didn’t look like she knew where she was going, but then again, she didn’t look like she particularly cared, her hind legs bucking at me as she vanished into the distance.

Rumble, in the meantime, had calmed down, although he probably wasn’t going to talk to anyone through a mouthful of blood.

“Scoot broke his snout,” Apple Bloom explained, peeling both his hooves off his face one at a time to reveal the crushed and crimson mess below. “Applejack’ll be here soon to take him to the hospital. You’d better go and tell his parents.”

“Any idea what made Scootaloo so weird today?” I asked.

Apple Bloom sighed. “Just look at her window.”

• • •

On my way home after letting Rumble’s mom and dad what had happened, I stopped by Scootaloo’s house. I knocked on the door, but no pony answered, so I just checked her window like Apple Bloom suggested. And on it I saw not one, but two gold stars.

No wonder. Scootaloo must be so stressed from working so hard that it went to her head.

I left her a note saying I was sorry on her porch and began my short trot back to Mom. When I got to my street, though, I saw one of Dad’s friends walking in the opposite direction. I greeted him, and he tipped his hat to me, but he looked sad. He was probably in a Tuesday mood, too.

When I went in through the door, I saw Mom huddled on the dining room couch, hugging herself. An open letter was on the coffee table.

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

Usually Mom would ask me how my day was, and I would’ve told her about Scootaloo and Rumble, about the ponies outside Sugarcube Corner, and I would’ve asked her what incendiary charges were. But Mom didn’t ask me how my day was.

Instead, she beckoned me closer, wrapped me in her forelegs, and pulled me into a tight hug. “I love you so much,” she whispered.

I was about to remark at how weird everypony seemed to be acting today when I saw our window.

“Hey, look,” I said, pointing at the glass. “We have a gold star!”